

The Making of France

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Abstract

This paper studies nation-building in a fragmented society. We document the political economy of mass education, the adoption of a common language, and the construction of a national identity in France. Using a regression discontinuity design, we show that state-sponsored education led to linguistic homogenization. To understand why nation-building was successful, we study heterogeneity and find that knowledge elites and the demand for education were instrumental.

JEL codes: P00, H52, I25, N33, Z13, D72

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1 INTRODUCTION

The transition from fragmented states to cohesive nations, with the construction of imagined communities and common identities, represents a critical juncture in human history. During the nineteenth century, policies of homogenization and assimilation dramatically advanced social cohesion and political stability, with the emergence of modern nation-states, at the expense of diversity (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Tilly, 1975).

We study mass education as an instrument of indoctrination in the making of France, the canonical example of nation-building since Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976). At the time of the French Revolution, French, one of more than forty-six dialects and languages spoken historically, was foreign to the vast majority of the population. Today, it is the common language and was central to the construction of a national identity.

Using a regression discontinuity design exploiting the discontinuous implementation of state-sponsored education during the July Monarchy (1830–1848), we establish that the opening of public schools and the adoption of a state-designed curriculum brought about the adoption of the French language and the construction of a shared national identity and political ideology. We first document the institutional foundations of mass education, showing that a reform that shifted power away

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from entrenched elite families led to the discontinuous provision of public education when it was introduced, reflecting the support of industrial and knowledge elites for education reforms (Galor and Moav, 2006; Galor, Moav and Vollrath, 2009; Lindgren, Pettersson-Lidbom and Tyrefors, 2021; Squicciarini and Voigtländer, 2016). Then, drawing on a detailed survey of the languages spoken across municipalities in the late nineteenth century, we show that state-sponsored education fostered the adoption of the French language and explore heterogeneity to understand the mechanisms of homogenization.

The July Monarchy laid the foundations of mass education with the *Loi du 21 mars 1831 sur l'organisation municipale* (henceforth Municipal Law of 1831) and the *Loi du 28 juin 1833 sur l'instruction primaire* (henceforth Guizot Law of 1833). Together, these July Monarchy Laws created a critical juncture that allowed the implementation of state-sponsored education and nation-building. The Municipal Law introduced democratization, granting voting rights in local elections in all municipalities and shifting power away from dynasties resistant to mass education in municipalities above 500 inhabitants, by imposing extensive restrictions on family ties in municipal councils and increasing council size (Agulhon, 1970; Tudesq, 1972). The Guizot Law mandated the building of primary schools and major changes to the curriculum and teacher training—instruction in the national language and history and the creation and distribution of state-approved textbooks aimed at spreading French and a common history (Furet and Ozouf, 1977; Rosanvallon, 1985).

Using crowdsourced data on mayors since the French Revolution, we show that the discontinuous restrictions on family ties introduced by the Municipal Law weakened the dominance of entrenched *Ancien Régime* political dynasties. Because the implementation and funding of the Guizot Law depended on municipal councils, we argue that the declining influence of dynasties gave rise to its discontinuous implementation—a discontinuity discussed in the history literature (e.g. Chevallier, Groperrin and Maillet, 1968; Furet and Ozouf, 1977) and used in recent economics papers (Lopez-Peceno, 2025; Montalbo, 2021b). Using a wide range of new data from extensive archival research in primary sources, we show that councils above the threshold became significantly less resistant to mass education: these municipalities were more likely to vote funding for the Guizot Law when it was passed, and its implementation was discontinuous across multiple dimensions—the opening of public, secular schools, municipal ownership, the adoption of the national curriculum, and the recruitment of state-approved teachers. In turn, the provision of state-sponsored education translated into the adoption of French at the threshold, especially in the south.

Our results are robust to a wide range of standard robustness checks and alternative specifications, and we find no effects in a large number of placebo tests in which we vary the population threshold, the year of population measurement, and the reference town for French language. To assess the validity of our design, we first show balance at the threshold across geographic, institutional, cultural, and economic factors measured before the July Monarchy. We also find no evidence of discontinuities in the provision of public goods other than state-sponsored education—consistent with the Municipal Law having the largest effect on elite power during the July Monarchy, when the Guizot Law was implemented, but not later. Finally, throughout the paper, we systematically replicate our estimates using placebo thresholds and years of measurement of the population, across outcomes, datasets, specifications, and samples, across hundreds of placebo regressions. We only find sharp and significant discontinuities at the 500-inhabitant threshold, and only at the time of

the July Monarchy Laws.

We next discuss the interpretation of our results and provide suggestive evidence on why nation-building was successful. First, we show that state-sponsored education spread the language of the elites, that is, the language spoken near Paris and in the Loire Valley—in particular, Touraine and Anjou—identifying empirically these regions as the cradle of French and supporting the validity of our empirical strategy. We then show, using measures of lexical similarity and phonetic distance, that it predominantly led to the adoption of French vocabulary rather than pronunciation. Finally, we show that linguistic homogenization only took hold where enlightened local elites were present and where the returns to education were high and its benefits outweighed the costs, suggesting that successful nation-building required newly empowered knowledge elites, who supported education whether for economic or ideological reasons, or both, and could only occur during the transition from stagnation to growth, as societies demanded education.

Finally, we document persistent impacts on national identity and ideology, which we argue reflect the comprehensiveness of the nation-building policy. Using data on the birth places of Resistance heroes and Nazi collaborators during World War II, as well as on votes against the regionalization of political authority in the 1969 French constitutional referendum, we find that nation-building increased the salience of national identity and preferences for centralization.

We add to a broad interdisciplinary literature on nations and nationalism, across economics, history, political science, sociology, and philosophy, building on foundational works such as Anderson (1983); Gellner (1983); Hobsbawm (1990); Smith (1991); Tilly (1975); Weber (1976), as well as recent studies examining the roles of conflict (Aghion et al., 2019; Alesina, Reich and Riboni, 2020; Dell and Querubin, 2018), intergroup contact (Cáceres-Delpiano et al., 2021), leadership (Assouad, 2021), media (Castiello, 2025; Hara, 2022), military conscription (Ronconi and Ramos-Toro, 2023), population resettlement (Bazzi et al., 2019), propaganda (Blouin and Mukand, 2019; Kersting and Wolf, 2021; Li, 2022), shared experiences (Depetris-Chauvin, Durante and Campante, 2020), and welfare policies (Caprettini and Voth, 2022).¹ Our contribution is to empirically document the role of state-sponsored education—one of the most powerful instruments of national indoctrination—in shaping language, identity, and ideology—using new data to document linguistic assimilation.

Second, we build on research on mass education as a tool of assimilation, indoctrination, and social control (Paglayan, 2024), examining the role of school building (Bazzi, Hilmy and Marx, 2025; Izumi and Park, 2023), language of instruction (Clots-Figueras and Masella, 2013; Fouka, 2020; You, 2018), curriculum (Cantoni et al., 2017; Chen, Lin and Yang, 2023), or central spending (Cinnirella and Schueler, 2018). Instead, we document the implementation and enforcement of a nation-building policy that reshaped state-sponsored education across all these dimensions. While many document backlash against policies of forced assimilation (Bazzi, Hilmy and Marx, 2025; Carvalho, Koyama and Williams, 2024; Dehdari and Gehring, 2022; Fouka, 2020; Marciante, 2023), we instead document successful assimilation.² Our contribution is to demonstrate that the success of the policy was shaped by local supply and demand conditions—not modernization, as argued by

¹Rohner and Zhuravskaya (2023) provide an extensive overview of this literature.

²Fouka (2022) offers an extensive review of assimilation policies. Additionally, there are a number of papers on the causes and consequences of assimilation (Abramitzky, Boustan and Eriksson, 2020; Bleakley and Chin, 2010) and on the salience of identity (Ahlerup and Olsson, 2012; Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Blasi et al., 2019; Blouin and Dyer, 2021; Cervellati, Chiovelli and Esposito, 2019; Dickens, 2021; Galor, Özak and Sarid, 2018; Ginsburgh and Weber, 2020; Michalopoulos, 2012).

Anderson (1983); Gellner (1983), but knowledge elites and rising returns to human capital.

Finally, we add to a large literature on institutions as critical junctures in development (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000, 2006, 2012; Acemoglu, Gallego and Robinson, 2014; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2001; North, 1990; North and Weingast, 1989), and especially on state-building after the French Revolution (Acemoglu et al., 2011; Chambru, Henry and Marx, 2022; Degraeve, Lopez-Peceno and Rozenas, 2025; Jha and Wilkinson, 2023; Rosenberger and Ottinger, 2023). Our contribution is to document nation-building beyond state-building and to show the importance of local elites and enforcement capacity for the expansion of mass education, with the discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law (Chevallier, Groperrin and Maillet, 1968; Furet and Ozouf, 1977; Lopez-Peceno, 2025; Montalbo, 2021b). Our results align with evidence across different contexts that political dynasties undermine public goods provision unless weakened by institutional change or turnover (Bazzi et al., 2025; Cruz, Labonne and Querubin, 2020; Ferraz, Finan and Martinez-Bravo, 2024; Mirza, Malik and Platteau, 2025), while industrial or knowledge elites, in contrast to landed elites, support education reforms (Galor, Moav and Vollrath, 2009; Lindgren, Pettersson-Lidbom and Tyrefors, 2021) for ideological reasons (Squicciarini and Voigtländer, 2016) and because of the complementarity between physical and human capital (Galor and Moav, 2006).³

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents historical background on language and nation-building. Section 3 describes the data, and Section 4 presents the empirical strategy and institutional background on the July Monarchy Laws. Section 5 documents the political economy of mass education; Section 6 studies the effects of state-sponsored education on linguistic homogenization and explores mechanisms; and Section 7 examines persistent effects of nation-building.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

More than forty different languages or dialects were spoken historically in France, and French was a foreign language to most until the twentieth century.⁴ The two main language families were the *langues d'oïl*, including French, spoken in the north, and the *lenga d'òc* (*langues d'oc*, or Occitan), spoken in the south. French language originated as a dialect of the *langues d'oïl*, descending in part from the Françien dialect around Paris (Lodge, 1993, 2002), and gradually became the language of the elites during the Medieval period.⁵ Occitan shares its closest linguistic relationship with Catalan (Hammarström et al., 2023), sometimes regarded as a dialect of it (Friend, 2012). As a distinct branch of Western Romance, it was largely unintelligible to speakers of the *langues d'oïl* (Lodge, 1993, p. 194). Although nearly extinct today, Occitan holds enormous historical importance dating back to at least the tenth century. Italian poet Dante Alighieri considered *oc* (Occitan) one of the only three major families of vernacular Romance languages, along with *oïl* (French) and *sì* (Italian):

³Our findings also support the argument of Besley et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of local conditions for the implementation of centralized policies.

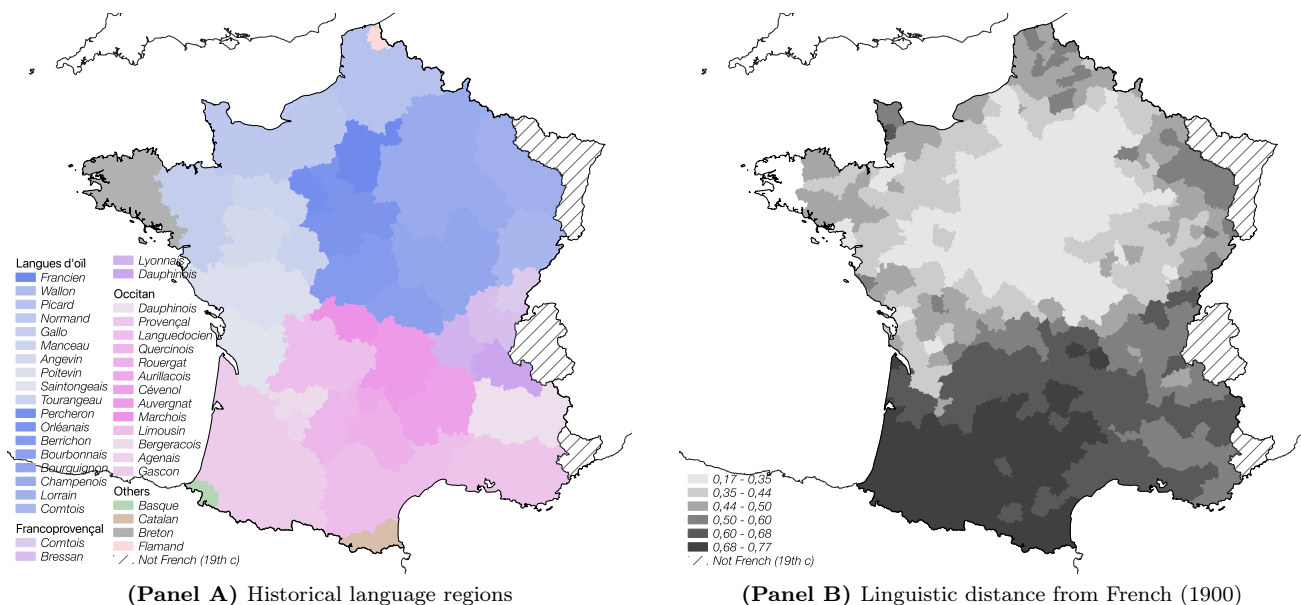
⁴The founder of the *Annales* school, Lucien Febvre, famously asserted that “France’s name is diversity” (Febvre, 1946, p. 271). Fernand Braudel, one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century, amended this statement, contending instead that “France is diversity, since this is no mere appearance or label, but corresponds to concrete reality: it is the dazzling triumph of the plural, of the heterogeneous, of the never-quite-the-same, of the never-quite-what-you-find-elsewhere” (Braudel, 1986, p. 38), arguing that “France is diverse to the point of absurdity” (p. 37) and that “France is not one, but many” (p. 43). This is not only language: France is also characterized by the coexistence of diverse family structures (Todd, 1990; Todd and Le Bras, 1981) along with the presence of both common law and civil law systems (le Bris, 2019). Ch. 1. of Braudel (1986) provides a thoughtful discussion of the diversity of norms and cultures in France.

⁵Yet, local dialects around Paris could differ from the French taught in school (Simoni-Aurembou, 1999), and even elite pronunciation was far from uniform (Martinet, 1945; Mettas, 1979).

“some now say *oc*, some *oïl*, and some *sì*, when they answer in the affirmative”, “the language of *oc* argues in its own favour that eloquent writers in the vernacular first composed poems in this sweeter and more perfect language” (Alighieri, 1305, p. 19). Because it was the language of troubadours, Occitan largely contributed to the emergence of European poetry and culture (Kay, 2013; Lafont, 2004).⁶ Several other dialects and languages, including Alsatian, Basque, Breton, Catalan, Flemish, or Francoprovençal, were spoken elsewhere (Figure 1, Panel A).⁷

Figure 1: Historical language regions and linguistic distance from French in 1900

Note: This figure displays the spatial distribution of historical languages and dialects (Panel A) and linguistic distance from French in 1900 (Panel B). Linguistic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. Observations are at the municipality level, but, to ease readability, we generate Thiessen polygons around each town surveyed in the Atlas to plot our measure. Sources: [Carte linguistique de la France \(Archives Nationales\)](#) for historical language regions, Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) and authors’ calculations for linguistic distance from French.



The earliest effort to promote the adoption of the French language is the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts of August 10, 1539, calling for the use of French in all legal documents including parish records, notarized contracts, and legislation. The ordinance made French the language of the government and of local administrations, and it relegated all other dialects and languages to the status of spoken only. Nevertheless, the main target of the ordinance was the use of Latin, widespread among elites and in official documents. The impact of the Protestant Reformation on vernacular-

⁶Occitan is the only foreign language used in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which established the Florentine dialect as the standard Italian language. On the emergence of European poetry and culture, French linguist Lafont (2004) writes “The Europe of poets was born Occitan. After this, the French kept it stifled for centuries under the cloak of occupation by way of their weapons and their language” while Kay (2013) mentions the “centrality of the troubadours to the development of European culture and, indeed, of European sensibilities” (p. 2). Note also that the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded in 1904 to Occitan poet Frédéric Mistral, the only laureate to have been honored for work in a language not officially recognized by any state. Appendix Figure A3 displays his poem “Mirèio”, in Provençal, a dialect of Occitan, and its translation into French. Appendix Figure A4 displays street names in Provençal and Alsatien.

⁷Note that there is no formal distinction separating a dialect from a language (Ginsburgh and Weber, 2020); rather, “a language is a dialect with an army and navy” (Weinreich, 1945).

ization is documented in Binzel, Link and Ramachandran (2023). According to Lodge (1993), local languages were virtually unaffected: “They naturally used the King’s French in their administrative documents. However, it took a further three centuries for even the ‘best families’ of the town and the surrounding countryside to adopt the King’s French in everyday speech” (p. 125).

At the time of the French Revolution, French was still a foreign language to the rural population, the vast majority of the overall population, and was only spoken by the elites, in the cities and in the region around Paris. In *Report on the necessity and means to annihilate dialects and to universalize the use of the French language*, Grégoire (1794) argues that “we are still, for language, the Tower of Babel”; and estimates that only three million French, out of twenty-nine million, could speak fluently the French language.⁸ In 1838, Stendhal, the writer of one of the most important and influential novels in French literature, wrote “All nuances are constantly disappearing in France. In fifty years, there may not be any Provençals or Provençal language” (Stendhal, 1838, p. 323; own translation). French was not widely adopted until the early twentieth century, with mass state-sponsored education and the development of railways (Lodge, 1993; Weber, 1976). Today, it is the only recognized official language (Article 2 of the French Constitution), while most other languages and dialects spoken historically are endangered (Moseley, 2010).

3 THE DATA

3.1 *Atlas Linguistique de la France*

Raw data. We gather data on the language spoken around 1900 in 577 municipalities from the *Atlas Linguistique de la France* (henceforth the Linguistic Atlas of France, or Atlas).⁹ The Atlas was published in nine volumes from 1902 to 1910 (Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902-1910) and relies on a survey carried out by linguist Jules Gilliéron from 1897 to 1901 (henceforth “1900”) to study Romance languages in rural parts of the country, where the vast majority of the population lived and did not speak French. For four years, Gilliéron’s assistant Edmond Edmont traveled across the country and asked locals for the standard, common pronunciation of 1,920 words or expressions in their municipality. The survey captures the actual spoken language at the time, including vocabulary and pronunciation, and paints a particularly detailed picture of the words used by ordinary people in their daily life. Importantly, the Atlas aimed to document the common language spoken in the surveyed municipality—the local population’s “average” language, as described by Gilliéron and Edmont (1902, p. 8)—rather than recording the language spoken by individual respondents.¹⁰ Later linguistic atlases follow the same principle, including the *Atlas lingüístico y etnográfico de Colombia*

⁸Revolutionary governments considered dialects a threat and tried to implement forced homogenization through compulsory schooling (Perrot, 1997). In particular, Talleyrand (1791) and Condorcet (1792) proposed universal education and a system of public primary schools. For example, de Talleyrand-Périgord (1791) writes that “the language of the Constitution and of the laws will be taught to all; and this crowd of corrupted dialects, the last remnant of feudalism, will be forced to disappear.” Yet, none of these projects was carried out to its term.

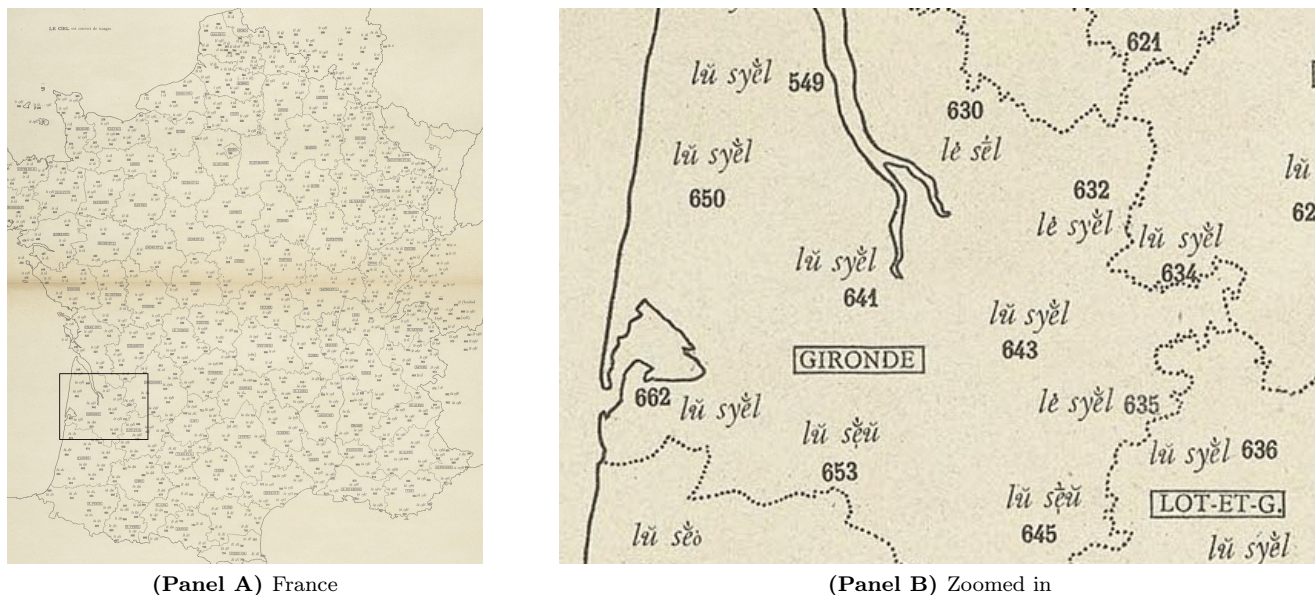
⁹The Atlas also contains information on sixty-two additional towns in neighboring countries, including Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. We did not digitize the data for these towns.

¹⁰For example, Gilliéron and Edmont (1902) argue that “Whether one takes as the basis of a community’s language the entire population (and establishes an average), or whether, as we have generally done, only a sample is taken, consulting only one of its representatives, is inconsequential” (p. 8; own translation). To capture the common language spoken in a municipality by asking only one or at most a couple persons, Edmont mostly asked bilingual informants about the average, or median, language spoken by the population in their municipality (Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902; Le Dù, Le Berre and Brun-Trigaud, 2005). Consistent with this, Appendix Tables A55 and A56 find that individual-level characteristics were irrelevant.

(Flórez, 1983, p. 46). Finally, to ensure that the Atlas reflected the spoken form used in everyday life rather than archaic or remembered dialects, only spontaneous replies were recorded (Baiwir, 2019; Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902).¹¹

Figure 2: Map of *ciel* (“sky”)

Note: This figure displays a map from the Linguistic Atlas of 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 digitized the word “sky.”



To assess selection into the sample, Appendix Table A2 displays summary statistics for observable variables of interest both in the sample of full municipalities in France and in the Atlas only. We do not find any particularly relevant differences, except that municipalities in the Atlas are located closer to roads and railways, but with worse market access. In fact, Gilliéron and Edmont (1902) argue that they “never searched for the places that could have stood out in any way” (p. 4). Most of the municipalities in the Atlas were selected before the start of the survey with the sole purpose of covering places “at approximately equal distances from each other” (Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902, p. 4). For a more comprehensive view, Appendix Figure A5 displays the spatial distribution of the municipalities surveyed in the Atlas, including those around the threshold; and Appendix Figure A6 shows that the distance to the closest town in the Atlas was twenty-five kilometers on average, with very little variance.

The inclusion of a large number of words in the survey allows for a direct, word-by-word compari-

¹¹ According to linguists, the Atlas provides a broadly accurate picture of the languages spoken in these municipalities around 1900 (Le Dù, Le Berre and Brun-Trigaud, 2005). Nauton (1956) also writes that the data are “to a very large extent valid” (p. 48; own translation), but notes minor inaccuracies—confusion between vowel length and accent, and some Gallicisms (Frenchised forms)—as some respondents were younger or more French-speaking. He also points out that in the first wave of observations in eastern France the tonic accent was not systematically recorded until town 156. Similarly, Boutière (1936); Chaurand (1999) mention respondents giving multiple words, including Frenchised ones, or being prompted for clarification with suggestions in French. In the data, these cases are exceptional—fewer than 3 percent of entries list multiple words—and mostly reflect local variants rather than suggested replies or bilingualism. In Appendix A1.3, we show that these biases do not impact our results.

son between languages. The words were mostly chosen before the survey was carried out. Additionally, Gilliéron carefully thought about how to not bias the survey and mostly included standard, common words (Le Dù, Le Berre and Brun-Trigaud, 2005).¹² To capture the complexity of the languages surveyed, the Atlas relied on the *alphabet Rousselot-Gilliéron*, a system of phonetic transcription developed at the time. The pronunciations of the words are displayed in maps—one map for each word or expression.¹³ Appendix A1.1 details how we digitized the phonetic representations in the Atlas.

We display the pronunciation of *ciel* (“sky,” the 285th map in the Atlas) in Figure 2. Panel A maps the pronunciation of the word across space in France. In Panel B, which covers an area of roughly 100 × 80 miles, we zoom in to the department of Gironde, in the historical region of Aquitaine in the southwest of France and at the frontier between the historical Occitan and *langues d’oïl* regions. The map paints a particularly detailed picture of the languages spoken at the time, consistent with contemporary sources: “The Third Republic found a France in which French was a foreign language for half the citizens” (Weber, 1976, p. 70). We observe substantial heterogeneity in the Atlas, with both persistent historical differences as well as recent variations resulting from the diffusion of the French language.¹⁴ While some of the variation is only phonological, it also arises from different structures, vocabularies, or languages. Some municipalities had adopted the French word *ciel*, while others were still using Occitan words *cel* or *ceu*. The change from *ceu* to *ciel* involves both vocabulary change and vowel breaking (diphthongization) from “e” to “ie” as well as a change of the final letter of the word.

Timing of the survey. The timing of the linguistic survey is ideal for studying the effect of state-sponsored education during Guizot and to abstract from potential confounding factors resulting from the Freycinet Plan and Ferry Laws—the two other important drivers of homogenization 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.

Measure of linguistic distance. We rely on the Atlas to measure linguistic distance across pairs of municipalities. 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 the Atlas. The measure is then normalized to the unit interval by dividing by the greater number of letters between the two words. We provide more details on our measure in Appendix A1.1.¹⁵

We first digitize the maps showing the pronunciation of fifty representative words in the Atlas, such as “cat,” “dog,” “fruit,” “hand,” “mouth,” “night,” “rain,” “sun,” “trees,” and “water,” as shown in Appendix Table A1. These words were chosen from the comprehensive list established by Swadesh (1952), representing words prevalent across languages and cultures and aligning with a recognized

¹²Also included but more marginal were ancient words, words of recent origin, and words used only in some dialects.

¹³The scanned maps are publicly available on the website lig-tdcge.imag.fr/cartodialect5.

¹⁴Appendix Figure A7 displays a similar map of *étoile* (“star”). The words used instead of *étoile* were mostly *estello* and *estella*, from Provençal—a dialect of Occitan.

¹⁵Levenshtein distance was first introduced in dialectology by Kessler (1995) to study Irish dialects, and is used by Adsera and Pytlikova (2015); Dickens (2018, 2021) in more recent research by economists.

“standardized universal list of meanings” (Ginsburgh and Weber, 2020, p. 367). We take the average Levenshtein distance over these fifty words to measure linguistic distance from French.¹⁶ Since the Atlas does not provide any information on the standard French language, we use the language spoken in the town closest to Paris in the Atlas (Le Plessis-Robinson) as the reference point for French.¹⁷ We refer to our main measure as the linguistic distance from French in 1900.

Figure 1, Panel B, 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 tracks closely the historical language regions, displayed in Panel A, further suggesting that it captures recent changes but also deep-rooted historical differences.¹⁸ In Section 6, we also show the robustness of our results to using alternative measures of linguistic distance (in particular, lexical similarity, phonetic distance, and weighted and relative identity value) and to relying on the entire corpus of words from the Atlas, using data from the Salzburg dialectometry team (Goebl et al., 2019).¹⁹

3.2 Additional data

The provision of mass education. To study the provision of mass education under the July Monarchy, we collected new data from departmental and national archives (Archives Nationales, F17, 9417, 9418), on votes for the Guizot Law, school openings, municipal ownership, curriculum, and teacher approvals, and use crowdsourced data on French mayors since the Revolution (Section 5.1). Because each department maintains its own archives and these materials had never been systematically explored, we focused on seven departments, including Ardèche (Archives Départementales de l’Ardèche, 1R, 1269; Archives Départementales de l’Ardèche, 1T, 390, 52, 711), Gard (Archives Départementales du Gard, 1R, 435, 436; Archives Départementales du Gard, 1T, 100, 77, 792), and Vaucluse (Archives Départementales de Vaucluse, 1R, 125; Archives Départementales de Vaucluse, 1T, 436) in historically Occitan-speaking regions, and Aube (Archives Départementales de l’Aube, 3R, 272; Archives Départementales de l’Aube, T, 218, 46, 47, 98), Ile-et-Vilaine (Archives Départementales de l’Ile-et-Vilaine, 11T, 26, 27), Marne (Archives Départementales de la Marne, 1T, 69, 941), and Oise (Archives Départementales de l’Oise, 1Tp, 130, 2228, 2298) in historically

¹⁶We also measure linguistic distance across the total of 166,176 pairs of municipalities, but we focus in the paper on the linguistic distance from French.

¹⁷In Section 6.5, we turn to alternative towns of reference for robustness and placebo, allowing us to empirically locate the regions of origin of the French language.

¹⁸The only other measure of linguistic distance in France not using the Atlas is cladistic distance, a measure of the theoretical, structural distance between languages families in large delineated areas (Desmet, Ortuño-Ortín and Wacziarg, 2012; Desmet, Ortuño-Ortín and Weber, 2009; Fearon, 2003; Fearon and Laitin, 1999; Laitin, 2000). In France, Spolaore and Wacziarg (2021) compute cladistic distance from the *Oïl* language family using the classification and trees in the *Ethnologue* (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2021). Appendix Figure A8 displays their measure for the regions where Occitan, Francoprovençal, Basque, Breton, and Flemish were spoken historically. However, this approach suffers from limitations: it gives no sense of what the timing is since cladistic distance is only a geographical attribute of the regions in which these languages were spoken historically; we don’t observe variations between dialects or within dialects; finally, the spatial distribution of speakers and their usage of dialects or languages is unknown.

¹⁹Goebl (2002, 2003, 2006, 2011) provide two distance metrics, Relative Identity Value (RIW) and Weighted Identity Value (GIW). However, while our measure is purely automated, theirs initially rely on a qualitative analysis by linguists before the data is fed into an algorithm computing distance (Goebl, 1984, 2011; Séguy, 1973). Goebl (2011) provides the following description: “the original data from a given linguistic atlas are analyzed by trained geolinguists according to traditional linguistic criteria (phonetics, morphology, vocabulary, etc.). This results in a great number of disjunctive (qualitative) units called *taxates*” (p. 437). Then, the distance measure is computed using “the percentage of pairwise (qualitative) matchings of the elements (types, *taxates*) of two measuring point profiles” (Goebl et al., 2019)—with the GIW measure giving a greater weight than RIW to rare features. We find a robust correlation exceeding 0.96 between our measure of average Levenshtein distance across 50 words from the Swadesh list and their measures across 1,681 words.

Oil-speaking regions. Although we selected these departments based only on promising archival inventories and accessibility within 300 kilometers of Paris or Marseille to ensure broad linguistic and geographic coverage, we could not always find data on each dimension of interest in all departments in the sample. Appendix Table A3 compares municipalities in the archival samples—one sample for each outcome—to the rest of France, along pre-Guizot school density, income, language, and *Encyclopédie* subscriptions. The sample, if anything, is biased towards departments in the *langues d’oil* region with more school density before Guizot. However, it is broadly representative after excluding Marne, near Paris, which ranked among the top eight departments in school density in 1829, with more than one school per 500 inhabitants. Although this unusually high density could have helped us separate curriculum from school openings, we found no curriculum records for Marne. Therefore, we exclude it from our baseline regressions, but always include it when studying heterogeneity. Finally, in Ardèche, we uncovered a detailed school survey in 1839-40 providing a wide range of additional outcomes.

The persistent effects of nation-building. We rely on a set of municipality-level measures, including data on participation in the French Resistance and on collaboration with the Nazis during World War II, as well as on the vote in the 1969 constitutional referendum on regionalization; and aggregated data on migration and trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

3.3 Additional details on the sample

Throughout the paper, we focus on the parts of mainland France—excluding Corsica, Savoy, Nice, and Alsace—that were not annexed at any point in the nineteenth century, and restrict the sample to rural municipalities, where 80.7 percent of the French population lived in 1836. In the medium- and long-run results, we further restrict the sample to municipalities that have not been split or been merged since the French Revolution, and show robustness to using the full sample of municipalities.

4 EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

This section introduces our empirical strategy. We exploit a regression discontinuity at the 500-inhabitant threshold introduced by the July Monarchy Laws to identify the effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic homogenization. We provide historical background and anecdotal evidence on the laws and document balance at the threshold across geo-climatic, institutional, cultural, and economic characteristics measured before the reforms.

4.1 The July Monarchy Laws

Municipal Law (1831). The Municipal Law of 1831 introduced voting rights and local elections for the first time, together with a discontinuous shift in elite power in municipalities above 500 inhabitants. In municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, mayors were appointed by prefects from among elected councilors (Article 3). Councilors served six-year terms, with half the council renewed every three years (Article 17). Suffrage was censitary, restricted to the wealthiest

male taxpayers, and the size of the franchise declined non-linearly with population (Degrave, Lopez-Peceno and Rozenas, 2025).²⁰ In municipalities above 500 inhabitants, relatives—fathers, sons, brothers, and in-laws—were prohibited from serving simultaneously on the same council (Article 20), while the number of councilors increased from 10 to 12 (Article 9).

Before the law, familial domination, clientelism, and nepotism were widespread in small villages, especially during the Bourbon Restoration (1815–1830), as the monarchy was reestablished and *Ancien Régime* elites returned to power (Agulhon, 1970). In 1828, the Minister of Commerce wrote to François Guizot that municipal elites were wholly disconnected from popular will: “the vast majority of our mayors were appointed in 1825 in opposition to the wishes of the country” (Tudesq, 1982, p. 272). After the law, until the late twentieth century, restrictions on family ties applied only above the 500-inhabitant threshold, allowing dynastic control to persist in smaller communes. According to Guionnet (1998), “the fundamental role of family ties was already evident in the structure of municipal councils (...) at least in communes where no legal restriction was imposed regarding kinship between councilors, that is, in communes with 500 inhabitants or fewer” (p. 777; own translation). On December 29, 1834, the Prefect of Côte-d’Or wrote to the Minister of the Interior: “in many rural communes, elections have exclusively called to the council the relatives or friends of influential families” (Guionnet, 1998, p. 777; own translation). And in the 1960s, in Grand-Failly, a municipality of fewer than 500 inhabitants in Meurthe-et-Moselle, locals still referred to the council as “the council of families” (Karnoouh, 1973, p. 44).

In contrast, municipalities above the threshold saw new elites come to power. These political turnovers are well-documented in both contemporary accounts and case studies. As Tudesq (1983) explains, during the July Monarchy, “the landed aristocracy (often legitimist) had been replaced by bourgeois notables” (p. 14; own translation). Guionnet (1996) similarly describes “the eagerness of voters from the lower classes to remove from the council the citizens belonging to the upper classes” (p. 559; own translation). In Vayres, a commune of 1,600 inhabitants in the department of Gironde, “five mayors succeeded one another between 1811 and 1852. While the same small landowner had been a mayor from 1811 to 1830, four new mayors followed between 1830 and 1852” (Tudesq, 1983, p. 10; own translation).

Guizot Law (1833). The Guizot Law of 1833 introduced mass state-sponsored education in France (Furet and Ozouf, 1977; Prost, 1968).²¹ For the first time, every municipality was mandated to establish a primary school for boys, whether public or private (Articles 3 and 9); follow a state-designed national curriculum—including instruction in and of the French language, moral and religious education, and national history and geography—using state-produced and distributed textbooks (Article 1); hire teachers trained in newly established departmental normal schools (Article 11); submit to oversight by nationally recruited school inspectors and by committees at the commune, arrondissement, and department levels, responsible for supervising teachers, distributing textbooks, and enforcing the law (Articles 17–23); and extend similar provisions to girls’ primary

²⁰For example, in municipalities between 300 and 1,000 inhabitants, 10 percent of the total population—about 30 percent of adult males—could vote.

²¹When François Guizot became Minister of Public Instruction in 1832, the majority of the French population was illiterate (Furet and Ozouf, 1977). A 1833 survey in twenty-two departments found that schools operated only part of the year, on irregular schedules, and often lacked trained teachers (Montalbo, 2021a). The curriculum emphasized religious and moral education (Day, 1983; Meyers, 1976), and most teachers were clergy—or, as Weber (1976) notes, “a retired soldier, a rural constable, the local barber, innkeeper, or grocer, or simply a half-educated peasant’s son” (p. 305).

schools, though without making them mandatory for communes (Ordinance of June 23, 1836).

The law had a particularly large and immediate impact at the national level during the July Monarchy, and in particular between 1834 and 1837, as the Ordinance of July 16, 1833 gave municipalities six years to construct or purchase a school building.²² As Paglayan (2024) argues, the Guizot Law was designed to instill discipline and loyalty among the uneducated masses, a goal Guizot himself emphasized in his memoirs, describing it as an effort to shape minds and influence beliefs.²³ The goal was not only to discipline the masses, but also to educate and assimilate them. A close advisor of Guizot described each school as “a colony of French language in a conquered land” (Lorain, 1837, p. 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, p. 102). Appendix A2.1 provides further details on how the state centralized control over curriculum and teacher training, while Section 5 offers empirical evidence.

Although the law formally applied to every municipality, most historians and secondary sources since Furet and Ozouf (1977) and Chevallier, Groperrin and Maillet (1968) mention a legal threshold or that it applied discontinuously in municipalities above 500 inhabitants. This threshold is also cited in numerous inventories and descriptions of departmental archives (e.g. Aube; Vendée; Isère; Loire; Bouches-du-Rhône; Cantal; Cher; Finistère; Gard), as well as in the Archives Nationales and on the website of the French Government. Exploiting this threshold, Montalbo (2021b) and Lopez-Peceno (2025) find significant effects on taxes per capita in the nineteenth century and resistance against the French coup of 1851. Yet, we find no such threshold in the text of the law or in subsequent decree. Appendix A2.2 further documents this long-standing historiographical puzzle.

The discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law. We argue that the discontinuous change in elite power introduced by the Municipal Law weakened the dominance of entrenched elites reluctant to support mass education, leading to the discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law, consistent with evidence across various contexts that political dynasties and landed elites undermine public goods provision (Bazzi et al., 2025; Cruz, Labonne and Querubin, 2020; Ferraz, Finan and Martinez-Bravo, 2024; Galor and Moav, 2006; Galor, Moav and Vollrath, 2009; Lindgren, Pettersson-Lidbom and Tyrefors, 2021; Mirza, Malik and Platteau, 2025; Squicciarini and Voigtländer, 2016) and with accounts of the discontinuous application of the Guizot Law.²⁴

The incomplete enforcement of the Guizot Law was already noted at the time. In a speech to the National Assembly on May 8, 1834, Guizot noted that “there are 21,000 municipalities in France that do not feel the need for primary instruction or that do not dare to do what it takes to satisfy this need” (Guizot, 1863, p. 244; own translation). Since the Guizot Law was implemented and funded

²²Although the Ferry Laws of 1881–82 are often credited as the birth of mass education in France, it was the Guizot Law of 1833 that marked the true turning point. While education was not yet free, compulsory, or fully secular, the institutional framework it introduced laid the foundations of the modern French public education system. The number of primary schools increased nearly twofold in less than a decade, from one school for every thousand inhabitants to one for every six hundred, and universal literacy was achieved in the aftermath of the law (Appendix Figure A9). Most of this growth occurred between 1834 and 1837, during the initial wave of compliance. In 1829, only 1.3 million children attended primary schools in France; by 1872, this number had risen to more than 4.6 million (Appendix Figure A10, Panel A). Public schools came to account for more than 90 percent of schools on the eve of the Ferry Laws (Panel B), and students who could not afford tuition had to be fully funded (Panel C).

²³See also Rosanvallon (1985) on Guizot’s political philosophy.

²⁴Consistent with this hypothesis, Montalbo (2021b) shows that these municipalities continued to raise more taxes per capita in the late nineteenth century. This is also consistent with the model of Angelucci, Meraglia and Voigtländer (2025), where rulers delegate authority away from landed elites when local economic potential is high and preferences are aligned.

locally, its enforcement rested on municipal willingness: “if a commune bears the expense of a fine school building (...), the zeal of the members of the municipal council is aroused” (Manuel général, 1834, p. 254).²⁵

While entrenched landed elites sought to preserve traditional hierarchies and had little interest in mass education—a portable resource with little value to landowners but central to the merchant bourgeoisie—the new elites that came into power were far more willing to support it. In Labégude, Ardèche, whose mayor at the time of the Guizot Law, Étienne André Ladreyt, was already in office before the Municipal Law, a school inspector wrote in 1839 that “there is no communal teacher in this locality, due to the mayor’s opposition to enlightenment” (Archives Départementales de l’Ardèche, 1T, 711, own translation).²⁶ By contrast, Mazières-en-Gâtine, with 800 inhabitants at the time, was “the only (commune) of the whole canton which ‘warmly welcomed the school’” (Thabault, 1945, p. 55).

Since populations less inclined to support education may have elected worse political elites, the discontinuity introduced by the Municipal Law provides a source of exogenous variation at the 500-inhabitant threshold at the time of the vote and implementation of the Guizot Law. In many smaller communes, entrenched elites with little interest in expanding education remained in power: “On May 20, 1835, the prefect of Aube reported the existence of 300 communes with fewer than 500 inhabitants out of the 446 in his department: The voters appoint themselves members of the municipal council; they are rarely able to read or write; they are all relatives or allies” (Tudesq, 1982, p. 218; own translation).

4.2 Regression discontinuity design

Identification strategy We exploit the 500-inhabitant threshold in a regression discontinuity (RD) design to study the effects of state-sponsored education on the homogenization of language and the construction of a national identity. Our empirical specification takes the following form:

$$(1) \quad y_i = \alpha + \tau \times \mathbb{1}(\text{population}_i \geq 500) + f(\text{population}_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where y_i is the linguistic distance from French in 1900 in municipality i ($y_{i,1900}$) or some other variable capturing national identity; $\mathbb{1}(\text{population}_i \geq 500)$ is a deterministic and discontinuous function of population that equals 1 if the population of town i was above 500 at the time of the July Monarchy Laws, and 0 otherwise. $f(\text{population}_i)$ is a local polynomial at the threshold, controlling for smooth functions of population in town i and allowing for different slopes on different sides of the cutoff to account for the conditional expectation of the outcome. In our baseline regressions, following Montalbo (2021b), we use population in 1836, the year closest to when the Guizot Law took effect and when most schools were built (between 1834 and 1837, as shown in Figure 6 and

²⁵ Although the state or the departments could in principle provide financial assistance to municipalities—there was, however, no systematic legal mechanism to enforce it, and the fact that many municipalities did not implement the provisions of the Guizot Law is a widely known fact.

²⁶ Labégude was created in 1835 from the larger commune of Mercuer. Its first mayor, Étienne André Ladreyt, had held the same office in Mercuer prior to the Municipal Law, as evidenced by civil records in Mercuer in 1830 (Etat civil de Mercuer, Archives départementales de l’Ardèche) and in Labégude from 1836 to 1838 (Etat civil de Labégude, Archives départementales de l’Ardèche).

Appendix Figure A9).²⁷ However, we systematically report results using population measured in 1831, when the Municipal Law took effect—especially for outcomes observed immediately after the passage of the Guizot Law, in 1833—and in placebo years as well. While most Guizot schools were built within a few years of the law’s passage, some municipalities may have crossed the 500-inhabitant threshold during that period. As a result, our estimates based on population in 1836 are likely a lower bound. For this reason, we also systematically report estimates restricting the sample to municipalities that did not cross the threshold between 1831 and 1836.²⁸

Under the assumption of continuity of conditional expectation functions of potential outcomes, τ identifies the causal effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic distance from French in 1900 (Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik, 2020; Imbens and Lemieux, 2008; Lee and Lemieux, 2010). Throughout the paper we place particular emphasis on visual inference, following Korting et al. (2023).²⁹ We report conventional RD estimates of τ , based on a triangular kernel, following Hahn, Todd and Van der Klaauw (2001), and we use the bias-corrected estimator of Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) in robustness. Additionally, we rely on three different ways of specifying the polynomial fit—mean comparison, local linear regression, and quadratic polynomial—and we avoid higher-order polynomials to limit bias and overfitting (Gelman and Imbens, 2019). Finally, we follow Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014); Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) in using mean squared error (MSE) optimal bandwidths, as well as a range of other bandwidths for robustness.

Nature of the treatment. We estimate the local effect of a bundled treatment capturing both the change in elite power brought by the Municipal Law and the discontinuous implementation of state intervention in education under the Guizot Law. We first denote this treatment as the Municipal Law, or more broadly the July Monarchy Laws, when documenting school openings, curriculum standardization, and teacher training. We then refer to it as state-sponsored education.

Balance at the threshold. To assess the validity of our design, we test the main assumption of continuity of the conditional expectation function of potential outcomes, based on population at the time of the Municipal and Guizot Laws, in 1831 and 1836—using data on a wide range of geographic factors (altitude, ruggedness, distance to the coast, distance to waterway, temperature, precipitation), institutional and cultural factors (subscriptions to the *Encyclopédie* during the Enlightenment, distance to the departmental *chef-lieu*, conscripts per capita during the Napoleonic Wars, distance to nearest town above 500 in 1831 or 1836, and whether the municipality completed its first cadastre before the Guizot Law), and economic factors (distance to roads, market access, and presence of industrial establishments), across polynomial degrees and specifications.³⁰

²⁷Municipalities had to buy or build a school within six years of the law being passed (Ordinance of July 16, 1833).

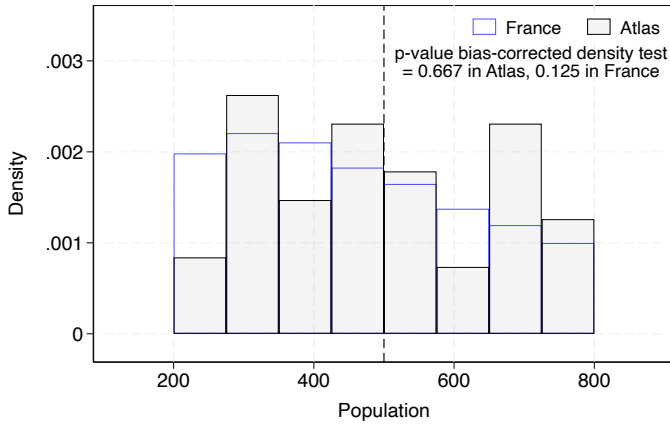
²⁸Note that restricting the sample to municipalities whose population did not change status between 1831 and 1836 may select for municipalities with more economic development above the threshold, and less below. However, we view this as unlikely to bias our estimates, since population changes over such a short period are likely to be largely random, as suggested by Appendix Figure A12 and Appendix Table A5, which we describe in the next sub-sub-section.

²⁹In the main text we show only figures with quadratic polynomials, controlling for distance from Paris as well as department and historical-dialect fixed effects, together with a single table reporting our baseline estimates. The remaining results are reported in Appendix tables, showing robustness across polynomial order, bandwidths, specifications, and placebo population years and thresholds. We use 20 bins as the baseline in our figures. This is above the mimicking-variance optimal number for most figures, consistent with the conservative approach recommended by Korting et al. (2023). We use 10 bins for Ardèche, where the sample size is particularly small.

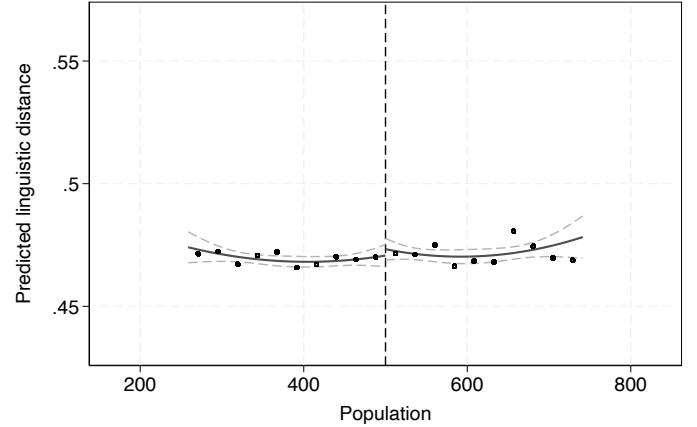
³⁰Appendix Figure A5 shows, however, that municipalities around the threshold are underrepresented in the south, where linguistic distance was historically greatest, suggesting that our estimates are likely biased downward.

Figure 3: Balance and density

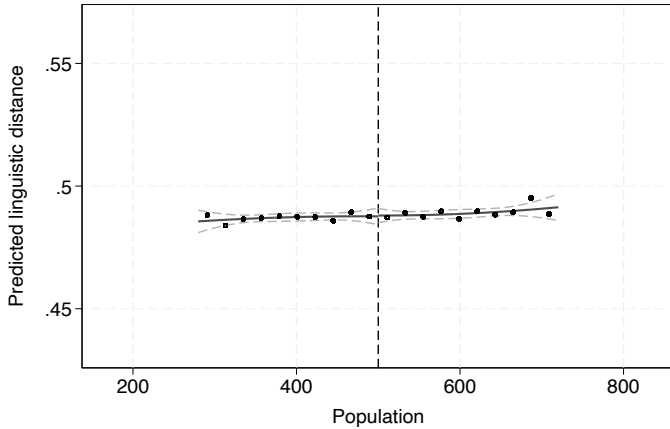
Note: This figure plots tests for density and balance at the threshold. Panel A plots the density of population in rural municipalities in the Linguistic Atlas of France and in all of France, around 500 inhabitants. Then, we plot linguistic distance from French, predicted linearly using the set of geo-climatic (Panel B) and pre-1833 institutional and cultural (Panel C) and economic (Panel D) covariates used in Appendix Table A4, against population at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836 (we use population in 1831 as well in Appendix Table A4). Geo-climatic factors include altitude, ruggedness, distance to coast, distance to waterways and canals, and average temperature and precipitation. Institutional and cultural factors include subscriptions to the *Encyclopédie*, distance to a departmental capital, conscripts per capita in 1802-15, and whether a first cadaster was conducted before 1833. Economic factors include distance to roads in 1790, market access pre-French Revolution, and the presence of industrial establishments in 1839. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 2 and rely on the optimal bandwidth estimated when including all these variables together. In Panel A, the p-value for the bias-corrected density test relies on Cattaneo, Jansson and Ma (2018). Observations are at the municipality level. Sources: Chambru, Henry and Marx (2022) for conscripts, cadaster, market access, and industrial establishments; Nunn and Puga (2012) for ruggedness; Fick and Hijmans (2017) for temperature; Martí-Henneberg (2023) for navigable rivers and canals in 1848; Darnton (1973) for the *Encyclopédie*; Perret, Gribaudo and Barthelemy (2015) for roads in 1790.



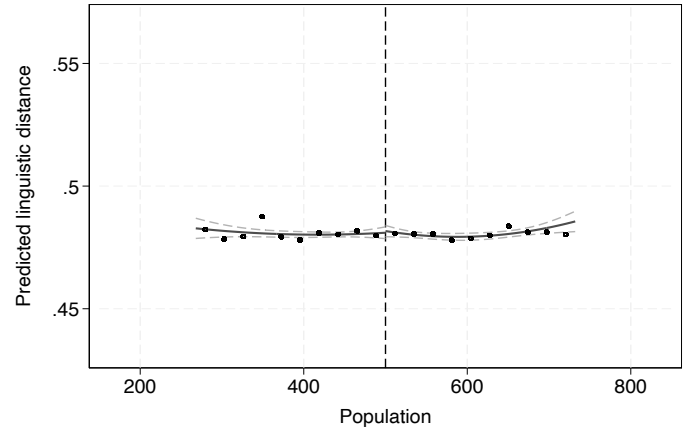
(Panel A) Density test



(Panel B) Balance at the threshold: geography



(Panel C) Balance at the threshold: institution and culture



(Panel D) Balance at the threshold: economic factors

We present the results graphically by projecting these variables linearly onto linguistic distance, grouping them by category—allowing us to aggregate observables into a single conditional expectation function. Figure 3 plots predicted linguistic distance using geographic (Panel B), institutional and cultural (Panel C), and economic (Panel D) factors, conditional on distance from Paris and

department and historical-dialect fixed effects, against population at the time of the Guizot Law. We find no evidence of a discontinuity at the threshold. Similarly, Appendix Figure A11 shows no discontinuity in predicted linguistic distance at the threshold, for the Atlas sample (in-sample predictions) and for the full sample (out-of-sample predictions obtained by projecting the Atlas coefficients onto all municipalities with data on covariates). Appendix Table A4 reports the results for each variable separately, across polynomials and specifications.

Finally, additional threats to identification may come from sorting, manipulation, and migration. We argue that these are unlikely. Regarding sorting, Figure 3, Panel A, plots the density of the population of municipalities in France and in the Atlas around the threshold. We do not find any jump in the density at the threshold using the Cattaneo, Jansson and Ma (2020) density test. Regarding manipulation, since 1831, municipalities were required to maintain and annually update a population register, which then had to be submitted to the central administration for verification (Biraben, 1963).³¹ Regarding migration, Appendix Figure A12 shows that municipalities with more than 500 inhabitants in 1836 did not have higher population growth after the Guizot Law than those below the threshold, suggesting the absence of selective migration.³²

5 THE PROVISION OF MASS EDUCATION

This section examines how the July Monarchy shaped the provision of education. We show that the Municipal Law gave rise to the discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law, studying local political dynasties, municipal votes for the Guizot Law, school openings and ownership, curriculum, and teachers, and heterogeneous effects across pre-existing schools and the presence of knowledge elites.

5.1 The political economy of mass education

Municipal Law and political dynasties. To study whether the restrictions on family ties in municipal councils reshaped local political power and weakened political dynasties, we examine the persistence of political dynasties at the local level. While no systematic administrative records exist on the composition of municipal councils or mayors, we scraped a crowdsourced genealogical website compiling the list of mayors in France (FranceGenWeb, 2025). Because mayors were appointed by prefects from among members of the municipal councils, the data reflect only one position within the council, so any effect we identify likely represents a lower bound on the broader shifts in local political power within these councils. The dataset contains information on 248,367 mayors, over 92 percent of whom are recorded after the Revolution. We therefore restrict the analysis to the period from 1793 to 1913, spanning the French Revolution to World War I.

³¹According to Biraben (1963, p. 309), this was incorporated into law in 1836.

³²Different concerns arise from in- and out-migration, and depending on the destination. The main concern is out-migration to other rural municipalities (from below to above the threshold), while migration to cities is less of a concern since it would bias our estimates downwards. To further establish the absence of selective out-migration in the aftermath of the July Monarchy Laws, we use crowdsourced genealogical data from Blanc (2023, 2024) in Appendix Table A5. For individuals born in the aftermath of the July Monarchy, between 1830 and 1875, we find no evidence of emigration to either rural places or to cities at the threshold, confirming the relevance of our empirical strategy. Not only gravity forces would lead, if anything, to out-migration to large cities (which would not be an issue for our design), but municipalities around the threshold are also so small that incentives to do so, even with nation-building, were irrelevant.

Since the data is crowdsourced, records are often incomplete: “Our records are by no means systematic or complete. Some municipalities are fully documented, others only partially, and some not at all. Using this incomplete data would make your research completely inaccurate in terms of the conclusions you might draw from it” (FranceGenWeb, 2025, own translation). In addition, many observations lack a clear start or end year, and there are numerous duplicate entries or names with inconsistent formatting due to typos, accents, or parenthetical qualifiers.

To address these limitations, we apply a systematic cleaning procedure. We first extract and clean four-digit years from the raw date fields and, where a mayor’s end year is missing but the start year of the following mayor in the same municipality is known, we infer the end of the first mayor’s term from the start of the next. Then, we clean names by removing accents and extraneous characters, remove duplicate observations, and discard mayors with terms exceeding 63 years—the longest documented tenure in France ([Public Senat](#)). Finally, we restrict the sample to the 5,498 municipalities with well-documented mayoral tenures, that is with a mayor recorded in at least half of the years both before and after the Municipal Law, and show the robustness of our results to other data quality thresholds based on coverage.

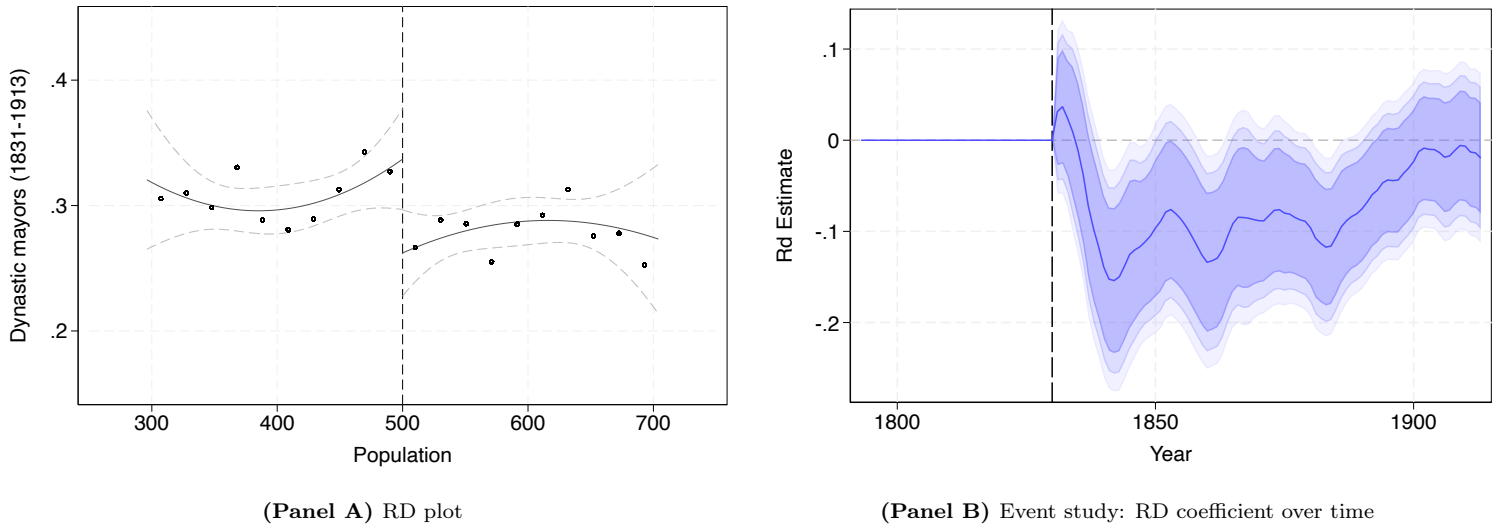
To capture the presence of political dynasties, we classify mayors as dynastic if they share a surname with a pre-1831 mayor in the same municipality. In addition, because this sub-section explores the legacy of the Municipal Law on the weakening of pre-1831 dynasties, and we also observe elite support for (or resistance to) education only in 1833, we rely here on population at the time of the Municipal Law, in 1831, the year closest to (and before) our outcome. However, we systematically use 1831 and 1836 as well as other years in robustness, and show that the effects are especially large when treatment is defined using population in both 1831 and 1836, and in particular when restricting to municipalities that did not cross the threshold during that period.

Figure 4, Panel A, shows that municipalities above the 500-inhabitant threshold at the time of the Municipal Law were significantly less likely to be governed by dynastic mayors after 1831, with a nearly 10 percentage-point drop in the probability of having a dynastic mayor, relative to a baseline of about 30 percent below the threshold. Appendix Table A6 shows that results are consistent across specifications and polynomial orders. The regressions are conducted at the mayor-year level, with standard errors clustered at the municipality level, and include year fixed effects in all specifications, as well as distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects in the specification with the full set of controls.

Interpretation. We next study when and which dynasties were removed from power. To understand when, Figure 4, Panel B, runs separate RD regressions for each year and plots the coefficients over time. The effect is particularly large during the July Monarchy, immediately after the Municipal Law, with municipalities above the threshold having mayors nearly 20 percentage-point less likely to share a family name with pre-1831 mayors. To identify which dynasties were removed from power, we vary the definition of a dynastic mayor. In our baseline, dynasties are defined relative to all mayors between 1793 and 1830. We instead focus on Bourbon mayors only, during the Bourbon Restoration (1815–1830), when *Ancien Régime* elites regained local influence. Appendix Table A7 shows that the decline in dynastic mayors is entirely driven by Bourbon dynasties, suggesting that our estimates capture the weakening of *Ancien Régime* elite families. In the rest of the paper, we also study heterogeneity across *Encyclopédie* subscriptions, to proxy for the presence of knowledge

Figure 4: Municipal Law and political dynasties

Note: This figure displays regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of the change in the size and composition of municipal councils introduced by the Municipal Law of 1831 at the 500-inhabitant threshold on the persistence of political dynasties between 1831 and 1913, accounting for year fixed effects, distance from Paris, and department and historical-dialect fixed effects, and relying on a local-polynomial fit of order 2. Panel A plots the share of dynastic mayors in a municipality during that period, that is mayors who shared a last name with a pre-1831 mayor, against population at the time of the Municipal Law, in 1831. In robustness, we use population in 1836 and in other placebo years, as well as at other placebo thresholds. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of the full set of controls used in Appendix Table A6. We apply a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Panel B plots yearly regression discontinuity design estimates on the probability of having a dynastic mayors in a given year, over time, along with 80, 90, and 95 percent confidence intervals. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 2, include the full set of controls, and rely on the optimal bandwidth from Panel A. Observations are at the mayor-year level, with standard errors clustered at the municipality level. Further details are provided in Appendix Table A6. Source: FranceGenWeb (2025).



elites among the dynasties that gained power.

Robustness. Appendix Table A8 displays the robustness of our results to using alternative data quality thresholds. In the most restrictive case—where we retain only municipalities with a recorded mayor in every year from 1793 to 1913—the estimated effects are even stronger, although the sample size falls from 145,719 to 76,526 mayors recorded in municipalities within 213 inhabitants of the 500-inhabitant threshold. When we include all municipalities irrespective of data quality, the results remain quantitatively large and significant, although somewhat weaker as expected under classical measurement error. Appendix Table A7 also reports a placebo test on whether mayors between 1793 and 1815 were more likely to share a surname with Bourbon mayors, and finds no discontinuity at the threshold.

Municipal Law and elite preferences. We next examine elite preferences at the threshold using municipal council votes on the Guizot Law, drawing on primary sources from the National Archives for the seven departments where we conducted our archival work, covering 2,993 municipalities. In late 1833, after the passage of the law, municipal councils were required to deliberate on its implementation and funding. The results of these deliberations were sent to prefects, who compiled departmental summary tables recording what we refer to as *insufficient votes* for funding the implementation of the Guizot Law, that is whether municipalities voted “insufficient taxes to

cover the mandated expenses” or “refused to vote any new tax despite lacking the means to fund a school from ordinary income”. These votes do not indicate whether a public school was ultimately built or maintained nor whether the mandated curriculum was ever adopted, and likely only capture a lower bound on the law’s implementation, which largely unfolded later. However, they provide a unique snapshot of local elite preferences at the critical moment when the Guizot Law was passed, allowing us to test our hypothesis that the Municipal Law shifted power away from elites resistant to mass education when it was introduced.

Figure 5: Municipal Law and Guizot Law votes

Note: This figure displays regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of the change in the size and composition of municipal councils introduced by the Municipal Law of 1831 at the 500-inhabitant threshold on municipal votes for the Guizot Law in 1833, accounting for distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects. Panel A plots whether municipalities voted “insufficient” taxes to cover the mandated expenses of the Guizot Law, or “refused to vote any new tax despite lacking the means to fund a school from ordinary income”, against population at the time of the Municipal Law, in 1831. In robustness, we use population in 1836 and in other placebo years, as well as at other placebo thresholds. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of the full set of controls used in Appendix Table A11. We apply a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Panel B plots heterogeneous effects across different levels of pre-Guizot school density, across all departments in the sample. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 1, include no controls, and rely on the optimal bandwidth from Table A11. Low school density is defined as less than one school for a thousand inhabitants, while high is between one and two, and very high is more than two. Observations are at the municipality level. Further details are provided in Appendix Table A11. Sources: Archives Nationales, F17 (9417, 9418) for primary sources; Statistique Générale de la France (1829-97) for school density.

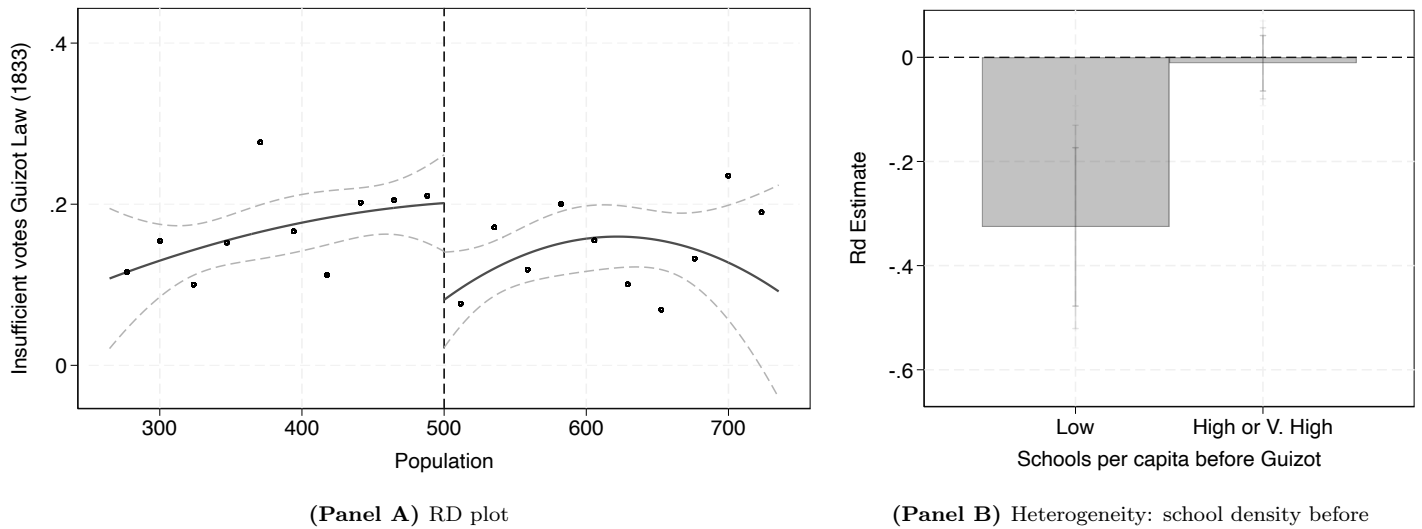


Figure 5, Panel A, shows that municipalities just above the 500-inhabitant threshold at the time of the Municipal Law were significantly less likely to vote insufficiently to meet the requirements of the Guizot Law. Appendix Table A11 reports results across polynomial degrees, both without and with the full set of controls, including distance from Paris as well as department and historical-dialect fixed effects. Across specifications, the effect is meaningfully large, with the probability of insufficient votes roughly cut in half at the threshold, suggesting that the redistribution of political power brought by the Municipal Law shaped which municipalities embraced the Guizot Law, and which, in the words of Guizot, “do not feel the need for primary instruction or do not dare to do what it takes to satisfy this need” (Guizot, 1863, May 8, 1834, speech to the National Assembly; p. 244; own translation). Above the threshold, where restrictions on family ties applied, municipalities

were more likely to comply with the law and raise the necessary funds in 1833, and until the Ferry Laws (Montalbo, 2021b). In smaller municipalities, still dominated by dynasties attached to traditional hierarchies and land, elites resisted, consistent with evidence that dynastic control undermines public-goods provision (Bazzi et al., 2025; Cruz, Labonne and Querubin, 2020; Ferraz, Finan and Martinez-Bravo, 2024; Mirza, Malik and Platteau, 2025) and in particular that landed elites—as were Bourbon families tied to the *Ancien Régime*—oppose education reforms (Galor, Moav and Vollrath, 2009; Lindgren, Pettersson-Lidbom and Tyrefors, 2021) while industrial and knowledge elites support such reforms because of the complementarity between physical and human capital (Galor and Moav, 2006) or for ideological reasons (Squicciarini and Voigtländer, 2016). More broadly, they show how institutional reforms that weaken entrenched elites can spur lasting gains in human capital (Acemoglu, Gallego and Robinson, 2014). In the next sub-section, we examine whether this increased support for education in 1833 translated into more schools being built and the new curriculum being adopted at the threshold in the aftermath of the Guizot Law.

Heterogeneity. Figure 5, Panel B, plots the heterogeneous effects of the Municipal Law across different levels of pre-Guizot school density. The effect of the Municipal Law was particularly strong in departments with fewer than one school per thousand inhabitants before—that is, where school building was most needed. Appendix Table A12 studies heterogeneity with respect to pre-Guizot school density, *Encyclopédie* subscriptions per capita in the period 1776–79 at arrondissement- and department-level, and Occitan-speaking versus *Oil*-speaking regions. The results are stronger in departments with low school density before Guizot, above-median *Encyclopédie* subscriptions, and speaking Occitan, consistent with the broader patterns we document in the paper.

Alternative explanations. We next consider alternative explanations for the discontinuity in the application of the Guizot Law, beyond the Municipal Law. First, Article 9 of the Guizot Law allowed municipalities to partner with one or more neighboring municipalities to provide a shared school. Appendix Table A13 examines whether the discontinuity could be driven by differential participation in such unions at the threshold. We find that municipalities above the threshold were more likely to be part of a union, but the effect is not statistically significant once the full set of controls is included. Second, there might have been a psychological or administrative salience at 500 inhabitants among general councils, prefects, or *conseillers départementaux*, as it was often thought that municipalities of less than 500 inhabitants were too small to have a school.³³ While difficult to test empirically, we find anecdotal evidence for this in the context of shared schools: “It was thought that the departmental councils should be vested with the right to decide on school consolidations, or that such consolidations should be decreed automatically (...) in municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants” (Conseil d’État and Cour de cassation, 1837, p. 75).

5.2 The discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law

Public schools. Did increased support for education translate into more schools being opened at the threshold? To answer this question, we rely on two different datasets. We first examine evidence from the Guizot survey, administered by primary-school inspectors in the immediate aftermath of the Guizot Law. The data is publicly available for 8,129 municipalities across 22 departments

³³See, for example, in parliamentary discussions, in *Annales du Sénat et du Corps législatif* (1867, pp. 174-188).

(Montalbo, 2021a). Because of the timing of the survey, conducted mostly in Fall 1833, and to a lesser extent in 1834, it only provides a short-run snapshot that predominantly captures the education system before the law, although it also reflects the very early stages of its implementation. Indeed, we estimate a statistically significant increase in the probability of having a school building at the threshold (Appendix Figure A13).³⁴ While this result is consistent with our argument, the data does not allow us to examine the evolution of school openings beyond the immediate aftermath of the law, to separate pre-existing characteristics from the impact of the law, or to identify municipalities that did not have a school prior to the law.

We address these limitations by studying the implementation of the Guizot Law during the remainder of the July Monarchy (1833–1847), especially among municipalities that did not have a school before. We rely on newly assembled archival data on the opening dates of public schools, collected from primary sources in the departmental archives of Gard, Marne, and Oise—the only departments among the seven we surveyed where such data could be located. In 1879, prefects compiled tables listing the nature and opening date of the universe of schools in their jurisdiction. These records provide a detailed account of the long-run evolution of primary education and allow us to document the opening of public, secular schools during the July Monarchy and at the threshold.

Using this data, Figure 6, Panel A, plots the time series of school opening years and shows a striking jump in the immediate aftermath of the Guizot Law—an aggregate effect an order of magnitude larger than that of any other reform, consistent with the aggregate-level data in Appendix Figure A9. Panel B shows that municipalities with more than 500 inhabitants at the time of the Guizot Law were significantly more likely to open a public school for boys or girls between 1833 and 1847.³⁵ Appendix Table A17 documents these results across specifications and polynomial degrees. Last but not least, Figure 6, Panel C, shows that the results are particularly large in the sample of municipalities that did not have a school before 1833, with a jump at the threshold of 60 percentage-point in the probability of opening a public school for boys or girls.³⁶ This is suggestive evidence of the large impact of the discontinuous implementation of Guizot Law at the extensive margin—in municipalities without a school before its implementation.

Heterogeneity. Appendix Table A18 explores heterogeneity across periods and specifications. While almost all municipalities had education provided in a school of any type, municipalities just above the 500-inhabitant threshold were significantly more likely to open a public school for boys or girls between 1833 and 1837 (early adopters) and between 1838 and 1847 (late adopters), but not before 1833. Appendix Table A19 shows that secular schools and schools for boys are significantly more likely to open during the July Monarchy in municipalities above the threshold, whereas religious schools were not, indicating that the removal of landed elites weakened the Church’s influence

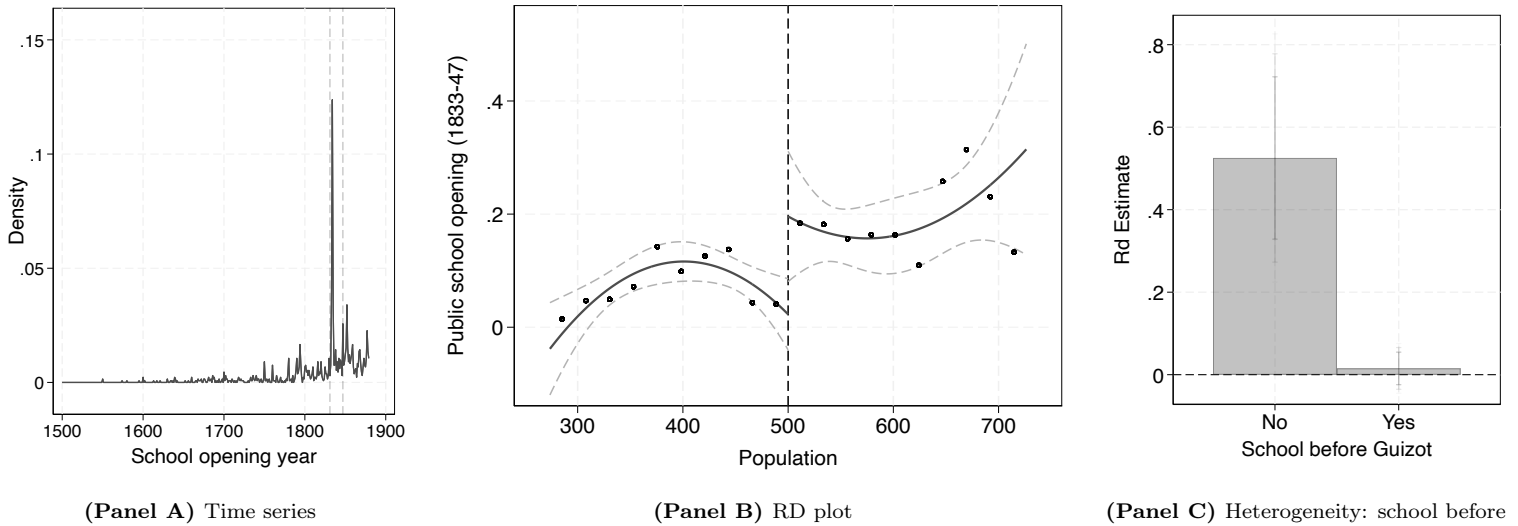
³⁴We find no evidence of discontinuities at the threshold in the provision of education or in measures of curricular content (Appendix Table A16).

³⁵At the department level, using available census data, we also estimate the association between exposure to the Guizot Law—defined as the share of municipalities above the 500-inhabitant threshold—and the growth in the number of schools per capita in the aftermath of the law, controlling for the number of schools before, in 1829, in Appendix Table A50. To account for endogeneity, we instrument the share above the threshold using the share above 500 inhabitants in the narrower samples of municipalities within one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, and four hundred inhabitants of the threshold. The instrument is weaker with smaller bandwidths, but the results consistently show a large effect of exposure to the law on school building, in line with the results in Figure 6.

³⁶We find a similar pattern when examining heterogeneity using pre-Guizot school density as the conditioning variable. The corresponding results are reported in the heterogeneity analysis below. We rely on school density instead in the rest of the section because pre-1833 municipality-level school presence is only available for a subset of the departments in our samples.

Figure 6: July Monarchy Laws and public school openings

Note: This figure displays, in Panel A, the time series of public school opening years, and, in Panel B and C, regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of the change in the size and composition of municipal councils introduced by the Municipal Law of 1831 at the 500-inhabitant threshold at the time of the Guizot Law on public school openings during the July Monarchy, accounting for distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects. In Panel A, vertical dashed line show years 1833 and 1847. Panel B plots whether municipalities opened a public school for boys or girls during the July Monarchy, between 1833 and 1847, against population at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836. In robustness, we use population in 1831 and in other placebo years, as well as at other placebo thresholds. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of the full set of controls used in Appendix Table A17. We apply a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Panel C plots heterogeneous effects for municipalities that had a school before, versus those that did not, across all departments in the sample. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 1, include no controls, and rely on the optimal bandwidth from Table A17. Observations are at the municipality level. Further details are provided in Appendix Table A17. Sources: Archives Départementales de la Marne, 1T (941); Archives Départementales de l'Oise, 1Tp (130); Archives Départementales du Gard, 1T (100).



over primary education. The effect is also large for schools for girls, likely reflecting the Ordinance of June 23, 1836, which extended the provisions of the Guizot Law to girls. Finally, Appendix Table A20 documents heterogeneity across a range of variables. The results from Figure 6, Panel C, also hold when we look at pre-Guizot school density instead of presence of school in the municipality before, or not. In line with the results in the sample of municipalities with no school before 1833, the effect is smaller in Marne, the department in our sample with more than one school per 500 inhabitants before the law. The effect is also significantly larger in departments with above-median *Encyclopédie* subscriptions, and in historically Occitan-speaking municipalities.

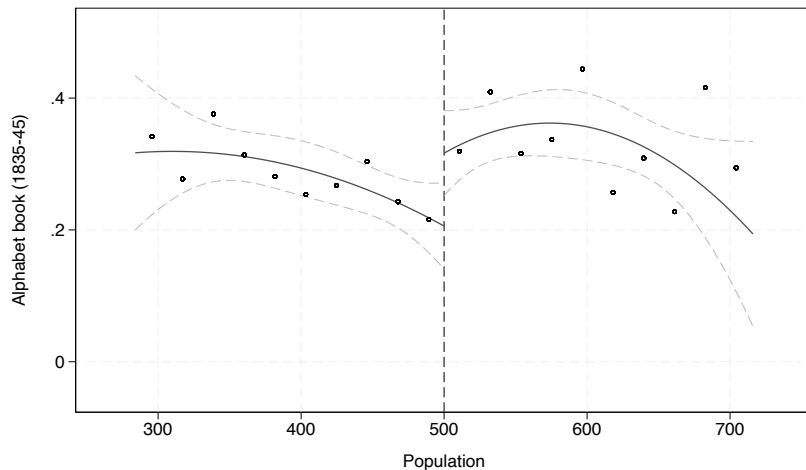
Ownership. To study how municipalities opened public schools in the immediate aftermath of the Guizot Law, we use data on school ownership collected between 1834 and 1837, available for all departments in our sample except Ille-et-Vilaine and Oise. Appendix Table A25 shows, across specifications and polynomial degrees, that municipalities just above the 500-inhabitant threshold were significantly less likely to own the school buildings where education was provided, suggesting that, at least initially, they either rented building from existing schools, or opened schools of lower quality (Manuel général, 1834). Appendix Table A26 shows that the effect gradually weakens over time, with municipalities above the threshold becoming more likely to own their schools in 1838—although the latter finding relies on a small number of observations. This is consistent

with anecdotal evidence from village-level case studies (e.g., Blanc and Wacziarg, 2020), with many newly opened schools initially operating in temporary buildings, and with the Ordinance of July 16, 1833, requiring municipalities to buy or build a school within six years. That municipalities above the threshold found ways to relax the resource constraint, at least in the short run, further suggests that implementation in municipalities above the threshold, where long-entrenched elites had been removed from power, was driven more by political willingness to comply with the law than by initial material capacity.

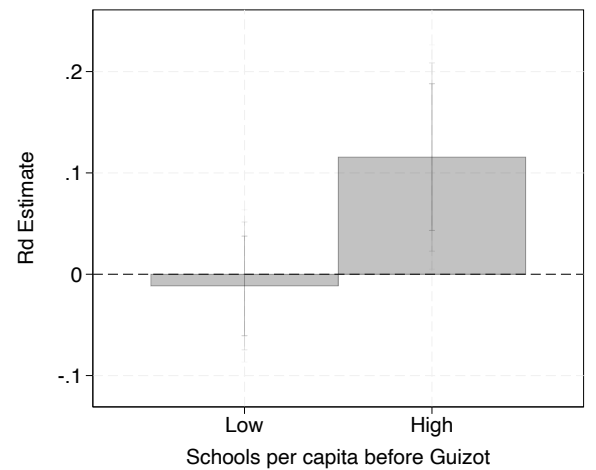
Curriculum. The July Monarchy Laws led to the construction of public schools, but what was taught in them? We next examine school curricula using surveys conducted in 1835 for all departments in our sample, with the exception of Gard, for which we rely on a comparable survey from 1845, and of Marne, where no survey could be located. Collected from primary sources in the departmental archives, these surveys detail the textbooks used, the teaching methods, and the number of students across all schools in each department.

Figure 7: July Monarchy Laws and curriculum

Note: This figure displays regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of the change in the size and composition of municipal councils introduced by the Municipal Law of 1831 at the 500-inhabitant threshold at the time of the Guizot Law on the presence of the *Alphabet*, the approved French language textbook, in the curriculum between 1835 and 1845, accounting for year of observation, distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects. Panel A plots the percentage of schools in a municipality with an *Alphabet et premier livre de lecture* book in its curriculum, against population at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836. In robustness, we use population in 1831 and in other placebo years, as well as at other placebo thresholds. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of the full set of controls used in Appendix Table A31. We apply a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Panel B plots heterogeneous effects across different levels of pre-Guizot school density, across all departments in the sample. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 1, include no controls, and rely on the optimal bandwidth from Table A31. Low school density is defined as less than one school for a thousand inhabitants, while high is between one and two. Observations are at the municipality level. Further details are provided in Appendix Table A31. Sources: Archives Départementales de l'Ardèche, 1T (52) for Ardèche in 1835, Archives Départementales de l'Aube, T (46, 47) for Aube in 1835, Archives Départementales du Gard, 1T (792) for Gard in 1845, Archives Départementales de l'Ille-et-Vilaine, 11T (26) for Ille-et-Vilaine in 1836, Archives Départementales de l'Oise, 1Tp (2228) for Oise in 1835, Archives Départementales de Vaucluse, 1T (436) for Vaucluse in 1835; Statistique Générale de la France (1829-97) for school density.



(Panel A) RD plot



(Panel B) Heterogeneity: school density before

Figure 7, Panel A, shows that, in municipalities with more than 500 inhabitants at the time of the Guizot Law, schools were significantly more likely to have *Alphabet et premier livre de lecture*

books—the approved textbook on French language used in public schools, and the most widely distributed textbook in the curriculum, with one million copies sent to schools within three years of the law’s passage. The *Alphabet* taught standardized French by combining systematic reading instruction with moral lessons, using simple texts to instill conduct, obedience, and morality. It promoted French as the primary language of the nation, relegating other languages spoken within France to a secondary status. Appendix Table A31 reports results across polynomial degrees, both without and with the full set of controls. While municipalities without schools opened public, secular schools above the threshold after the Guizot Law was passed, Figure 7, Panel B, finds that the effect on curriculum is larger in departments that had many schools before Guizot, suggesting that existing schools were able to adopt the new curriculum more rapidly.

Heterogeneity. Appendix Table A32 further investigates heterogeneity. We find a much larger effect in departments with above-median *Encyclopédie* subscriptions per capita and in those with high school density before Guizot. Furthermore, the effect is much weaker in historically Occitan-speaking municipalities, although they experienced the largest expansion of school openings. While assimilation required the *Alphabet*, its delayed adoption in the south suggests that state capacity constraints slowed the enforcement of the standardization effort at the intensive margin.

Additional outcomes. Appendix Table A33 shows no comparable effect for history textbooks or the Bible, consistent with the fact that the Guizot Law mandated religious instruction as well but this did not differ fundamentally from what was already practiced in religious schools, and that, in the immediate aftermath of the law, the main textbook distributed in large numbers was the *Alphabet*, while history textbooks—developed under the Royal Council for Public Instruction, the Society of the History of France, and the Committee for Historic and Scientific Works to promote a standardized national narrative—took longer to design and distribute. Since most of our data are from 1835, these efforts had not yet fully materialized. Furthermore, we also do not find any effect on teaching method, with schools above the threshold not more likely to adopt simultaneous teaching, the main innovation promoted at the time, further suggesting that the law’s application was imperfect or slow. Appendix Table A34 shows a quantitatively large increase in the number of students in municipalities above the threshold during winter, and especially during summer, when schools competed with farm work and attendance often plummeted.

Teachers. The Guizot Law also standardized the training and recruitment of schoolteachers. departments were required to establish a normal school in their capital (Article 11), and public-school teachers had to obtain a *brevet de capacité* (Article 16), an exam emphasizing written French and orthography to ensure linguistic uniformity (Toussaint, 2002). There were only three normal schools in France in 1828, but their number had risen to seventy-two by 1834 (Code de l’instruction primaire, 1834, p. 42). In the first years following the law, however, the supply of trained teachers expanded slowly. Many departments lacked qualified candidates, and prefects often granted provisional authorizations to teachers without a *brevet* or formal training. To study the early rollout of teachers, we use data on those officially approved by the *comités supérieurs* (after nomination by municipal councils) between 1834 and 1837, available for all departments in our sample except Marne and Gard. The presence of such teachers provides a measure of the early spread of state-recognized instruction. Appendix Table A39 shows that schools in municipalities just above the 500-inhabitant threshold were significantly more likely to have an approved teacher in 1834. Ap-

pendix Table A40 shows that the effect weakens until 1837, consistent with departmental authorities increasingly relying on provisional authorizations to accelerate implementation.

Case study. What did schooling look like with the Guizot Law? In 1839–40, inspectors visited every school in Ardèche and recorded information on teacher quality, teaching methods, and students’ skills in reading, writing, and history. We located this data in the departmental archives of only one department in our sample, Ardèche, but it is an instructive case—isolated, historically Occitan-speaking, and with very few schools before Guizot. The inspection therefore offers an important snapshot of the transformative impact of the Guizot Law in its immediate aftermath. Appendix Table A47 shows that there were more public schools above the threshold, but that these schools enrolled weaker students—not only in reading (non-francophone pupils) but also in morality, one of the main concerns of the Guizot Law (Paglayan, 2024).³⁷ Below the threshold, schooling was scarce and selective, so mostly the best, often francophone, children attended. Above the threshold, by contrast, enrollment expanded to include non-francophone children.³⁸ Appendix Figure A14, Panel A, illustrates this graphically. Since the survey was conducted six to seven years after the Guizot Law, our results reflect the selection of weaker or non-francophone pupils who had little prior exposure to French. However, conditional on this selection, writing skills (Panel B) and knowledge of history (Panel C) improve sharply at the threshold.³⁹ These results suggest that linguistic homogenization and indoctrination were already well under way in these schools.

5.3 Placebo thresholds and statistical significance

A central concern in our RD design is whether the estimated effects reflect the discontinuity at the 500-inhabitant threshold introduced by the July Monarchy Laws. To address this, Appendix A2.3 systematically replicates all regressions from this section using placebo thresholds and population measured in different years, across all datasets, specifications, and outcomes: political dynasties, insufficient votes for funding the implementation of the Guizot Law, public school openings and municipal ownership, approval of schoolteachers by *comités supérieurs*, standardization of the curriculum, and writing conditional on selection.

If our estimates capture the institutional break introduced by the July Monarchy Laws, we should observe sharp and consistent effects only at the 500-inhabitant threshold, and only at the time of the July Monarchy Laws. Figure 8 documents exactly this: across more than 400 placebo regressions on the outcomes above, fewer than 9 percent are significant at the 10 percent level in placebo years or at placebo thresholds, compared to over 96 percent at the 500-inhabitant threshold in 1831 or 1836, supporting the interpretation that the discontinuities reflect the legal threshold of the Municipal Law giving rise to the discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law.

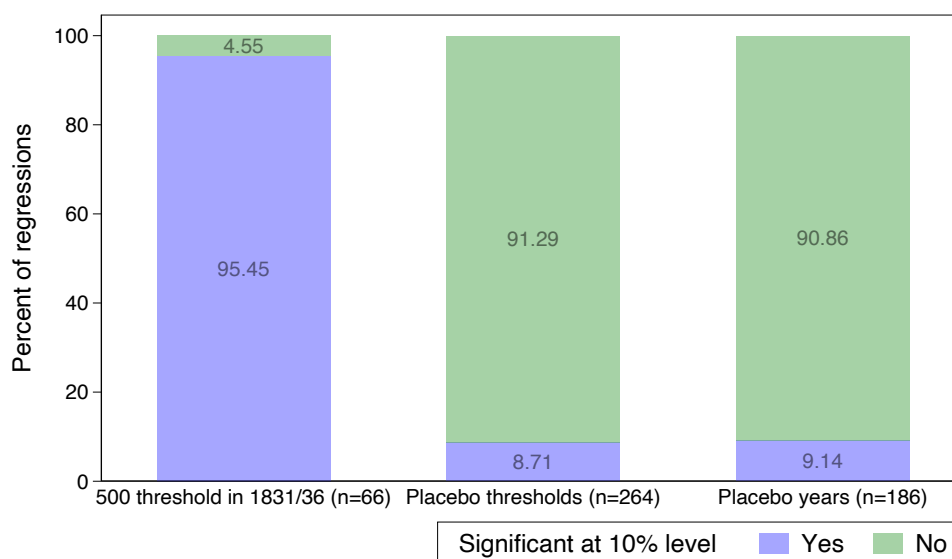
³⁷At the time, “reading skills” mainly meant the ability to read aloud, a task particularly difficult for Occitan-speaking students (Manuel général, 1834, p. 257).

³⁸An important difference with the results in the next section is that the Atlas captured the average, or median, language spoken in a municipality, whereas the school inspection only surveyed students in school.

³⁹Appendix Table A45 presents these results across polynomial degrees, while Appendix Table A46 shows that using “writing minus reading” yields similar estimates to comparing writing skills conditional on whether students are weak or strong readers, but without splitting the sample.

Figure 8: Statistical significance of RD estimates across 500-inhabitant threshold and placebo thresholds and population years, across datasets, outcomes, samples, specifications

Note: This figure reports the share of regressions significant at the 10 percent level when using the 500-inhabitant threshold in 1831 or 1836, placebo thresholds, and placebo years of population measurement, across outcomes (political dynasties, insufficient votes on the Guizot Law, public school openings, municipal ownership, teacher approvals by *comités supérieurs*, use of the *Alphabet* textbook, and linguistic assimilation, each drawn from different datasets and samples), specifications (without controls or with the full set of controls), and polynomial degrees (constant, linear, quadratic), based on the tables listed in the text. The results are from the tables referenced in the text below.



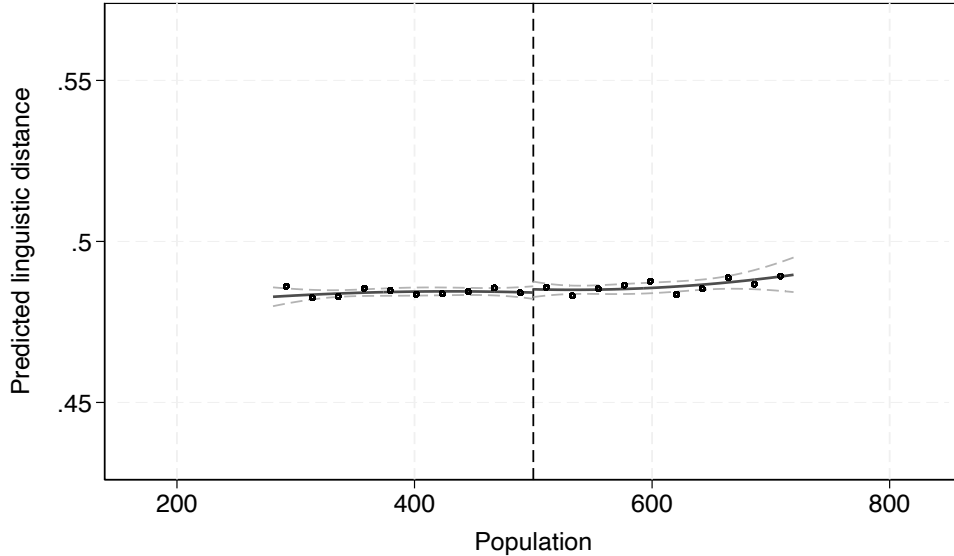
5.4 The smooth implementation of subsequent policies

A possible concern is that the replacement of elites under the Municipal Law might have enabled the discontinuous implementation of other policies that, in turn, could have affected linguistic assimilation. Although a discontinuous increase in state capacity at the threshold is not problematic for our interpretation since state-sponsored education relies on state capacity, it would be an issue if it led to the discontinuous implementation of other policies relevant to linguistic homogenization. For such policy to confound our results, it would need to be (i) important for linguistic assimilation; (ii) implemented during the July Monarchy, when the replacement of elites was especially important; (iii) dependent on municipal councils. The Guizot Law is the only policy that meets all conditions.

Figure 9 (and Appendix Table A4, Panel C) show that there is no evidence of discontinuity in the provision of public goods after the Guizot Law at the 500-inhabitant threshold. Using municipality-level data on whether a first cadaster was completed between 1833 and 1847, the presence of a post office in 1847, distance to postal, departmental, or royal roads in 1848, and railway expansion between 1860 and 1890, to capture the *plan Freycinet* of 1878, we find no jump at the threshold—as in Figure 3, we first report coefficients for each variable individually and then project them on linguistic distance from French and plot predicted linguistic distance against population. The absence of discontinuity suggests that the change in elite power introduced by the Municipal Law only affected the discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law and the provision

Figure 9: July Monarchy Laws and public goods provision after the Guizot Law

Note: This figure plots linguistic distance from French, predicted linearly using the set of post-1833 institutional and cultural covariates used in Appendix Table A4, against population at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836. The set of covariates include whether a first cadaster was completed between 1833 and 1847, the presence of a post office in 1847, distance to postal, departmental, or royal roads in 1848, and railway expansion between 1860 and 1890 (defined as distance to railway in 1890 over distance in 1860). We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 2 and rely on the optimal bandwidth estimated when including all the variables in Figure 3. Observations are at the municipality level. Sources: Chambru, Henry and Marx (2022) for cadaster and civil servants; Marin and Marraud (2016) for post offices; Thévenin, Mimeur and Martí-Henneberg (2023) for railway expansion between 1860 and 1890; Frémin (1848) for roads in 1848.



of state-sponsored education during the July Monarchy, and not the provision of other public goods.

6 THE HOMOGENIZATION OF LANGUAGE

This section examines the medium-run adoption of the French language. We exploit the discontinuous implementation of the Guizot Law to study how state-sponsored education shaped linguistic assimilation. We then analyze the role of local elites, educational demand, and state legitimacy in explaining where nation-building was most successful.

6.1 Correlates of linguistic distance

Appendix Table A51 reports OLS estimates, with standardized coefficients and standard errors clustered at the department level. Linguistic distance increases with geographic distance from Paris and with population, and declines with income. Municipalities in the historical Occitan region are also much more linguistically distant from French than those in the *langues d'oïl* region, suggesting that our measure captures both deep-rooted differences and more recent variation. Most importantly, growth in the number of schools during the July Monarchy is negatively associated with linguistic distance once historical-language regions and income are taken into account, suggesting that the

Guizot Law had a negative impact on linguistic distance. Because these are only correlations, we turn next to our RD design.

6.2 Regression discontinuity results

Table 1 estimates the causal effect of state intervention in education on linguistic distance from French, exploiting the discontinuity in the provision of state-sponsored education introduced by the July Monarchy Laws. We report results both without and with the full set of controls, including distance from Paris and department and dialect fixed effects for departments and dialects with at least five observations in the sample. Columns 1–2 use a constant specification in population and compare average linguistic distance with and without state-sponsored education in a narrow bandwidth around the threshold. Columns 3–4 introduce linear trends and rely on the optimal bandwidth, while Columns 5–6 allow for quadratic functions of population.

Table 1: State-sponsored education and linguistic homogenization

Note: This table displays regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic distance from French in 1900 using the discontinuity introduced by the July Monarchy Laws, without controls and controlling for distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects for departments and dialects with at least five observations in the sample (or region and historical-language fixed effects otherwise). Linguistic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. State-sponsored education is defined as a dummy variable that equals 1 if population at the time of the Guizot law, in 1836, was above 500 inhabitants. In robustness, we use population in 1831 and in other placebo years, as well as at other placebo thresholds. We use local-polynomial fits of orders 0, 1, and 2 (mean, linear, quadratic), a triangular kernel, and mean-squared-error optimal bandwidths for local-polynomial estimation. Observations are at the municipality level. Source: Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) for linguistic distance from French. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

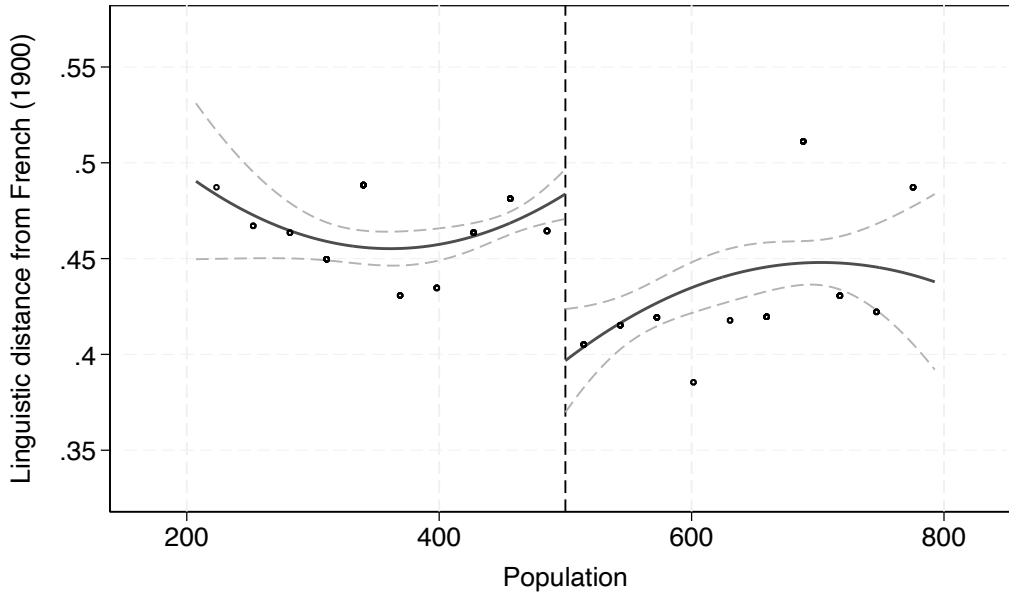
	<i>dep var:</i> Linguistic distance from French (1900)					
	Poly. degree 0		Poly. degree 1		Poly. degree 2	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
State-sponsored education	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.11*** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.04)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.09** (0.04)	-0.10*** (0.03)
Cutoff	500	500	500	500	500	500
Full set of controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Optimal bandwidth	146	77	262	230	314	312
Effective Observations	59	40	116	109	133	133

Across polynomial degrees and specifications, linguistic distance from French falls by about 10 percentage point at the threshold. The effect is economically and statistically significant at the 1 percent level: a one-standard-deviation increase in state intervention in the provision of education reduces linguistic distance by about 20 percent relative to the counterfactual mean, or 30 percent of a standard deviation. It accounts for more than a quarter of the gap between a municipality at the 75th percentile of linguistic distance from French in the Occitan region and one at the 25th percentile in the *Oïl* region, or for more than a third of the median difference across the two regions.

We next plot linguistic distance from French against population, without and with the full set of controls. Appendix Figure A15, Panel A, shows a positive relationship between linguistic distance and population when no controls are included—and it weakens after accounting for the full set of controls, including distance from Paris and department and dialect fixed effects for departments and dialects with at least five observations in the sample (Panel B). This is consistent with pre-existing linguistic differences driving the result, as municipalities near Paris tend to be smaller. However, the relationship remains weakly positive, most likely since the sample size limits our ability to fully account for unobservables. In Figure 10, adding fixed effects for all departments and dialects, including those with very few observations, removes these differences.

Figure 10: State-sponsored education and linguistic homogenization

Note: This figure displays regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of state-sponsored education introduced by the July Monarchy Laws on linguistic distance from French. We plot linguistic distance from French in 1900 against population at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836. In robustness, we use population in 1831 and in other placebo years, as well as at other placebo thresholds. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects. We apply a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Linguistic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. Observations are at the municipality level. Further details are provided in Table 1. Source: Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) for linguistic distance from French.



Proposition 1. *If the effect of treatment in the cross-section is of the same sign as the total change over time at the threshold, then the percentage change relative to the counterfactual, $|\tau|/\alpha$, is a lower bound on the speed (rate) of homogenization over time, $|g|$: $0 \leq |\tau|/\alpha \leq |g|$.*

While we only observe linguistic distance in a single cross-section and lack temporal variation, Proposition 1 shows that our regression discontinuity design allows us to estimate how fast homogenization took place (the rate of change over time), which is a key parameter of interest, under a

single weak assumption.⁴⁰ We provide the proof in Appendix A1.2. The proposition says that, if homogenization took place and state-sponsored education contributed to this process at the threshold, that is if the total change over time and the effect of treatment are of the same sign, then the rate of decrease in linguistic distance over time will be larger than the decrease relative to the counterfactual in the cross-section, which we observe. In other words, the percentage change relative to the counterfactual is a lower bound on the speed of homogenization, or the rate of decrease in linguistic distance from French, from 1833 to 1900, at the threshold.⁴¹ Our results therefore suggest that linguistic distance from French decreased by at least 20 percent from 1833 to 1900.

Finally, we note that we document an assimilation into the French culture instead of a backlash, which contrasts with the findings of Bazzi, Hilmy and Marx (2025); Carvalho, Koyama and Williams (2024); Dehdari and Gehring (2022); Fouka (2020); Marciante (2023). Because the Atlas captured the common language spoken in each municipality, our results are driven by the adoption of French in everyday life, rather than being solely influenced by its forced use at school, which was not compulsory. If they were, the students would speak French at school and the other language outside of school, but our results do not support this. Instead, the use of French reflects the adoption of a national identity. We explore the drivers of successful assimilation in Section 6.6.

6.3 Robustness

We conduct a wide range of robustness checks in Appendix A1.3. Our findings hold across alternative estimation methods, bandwidths, linguistic distance metrics, and word lists; when controlling for individual characteristics, confirming their irrelevance and that the Atlas only captured the *average* language spoken in a municipality; when accounting for bilingualism and reporting biases; and when including municipalities that changed since the Revolution. In all cases, the estimated effects remain of similar magnitude and significance.

6.4 Placebos

Placebo thresholds. A central concern, discussed in Section 5.3, is whether the discontinuity we estimate truly reflects the implementation of state-sponsored education under the July Monarchy. Panel A of Figure 11 reports estimates of τ using placebo population thresholds between 300 and

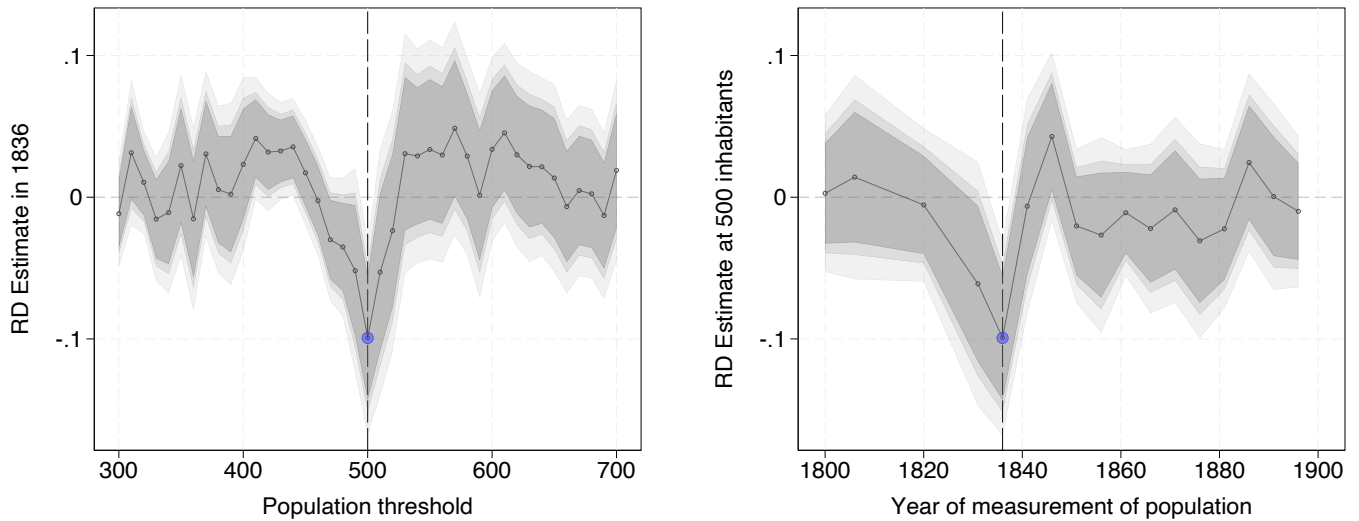
⁴⁰Other papers extend the classical RD framework to incorporate variation over time. In particular, Lemieux and Milligan (2008) observe both the outcome and the treatment in intermediate years and propose a first-difference RD estimator to account for the fact that the treatment changes over time; Cellini, Ferreira and Rothstein (2010) proposes a dynamic RD design that tracks the treatment effect over time, with a dynamic treatment assignment; Grembi, Nannicini and Troiano (2016) implement a difference-in-discontinuities design in the context of treatments for the same threshold at different times. Here, we first note that, because linguistic distance before Guizot should be continuous at the threshold, we can account for unobserved deep-rooted historical differences in the regression discontinuity framework. Appendix A1.2 shows that the effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic distance from French in 1900 ($y_{i,1900}$) is equal to its effect on the change in linguistic distance over time ($y_{i,1900} - y_{i,1833}$). Alternatively, we can also account for linguistic distance before the policy with historical-language or historical-dialect fixed effects, which will account for regional-level variation in the historical use of dialects.

⁴¹Additionally, if there was no change from 1833 to 1900 other than that caused by the Guizot Law, $|\hat{\tau}|/\hat{\alpha}$ would be an unbiased estimator of the speed of homogenization. Although the assumption of absence of secular change other than the policy is strong, historical and anecdotal evidence suggest it may hold in our context since there was no other nation-building policy until much later in the nineteenth century (Weber, 1976). In that case, the estimator can also be interpreted as the effect of state-sponsored education on the rate of homogenization: when there is no homogenization below the threshold, the rate of homogenization at the threshold is also the effect of the treatment on the rate of homogenization. Note that we view this as a suggestive benchmark, but the estimation of $|\tau|/\alpha$ is highly informative about the speed of homogenization over time regardless since it is a lower bound.

700 inhabitants (in steps of 10), based on population measured in 1836. The estimate at 500 inhabitants—the baseline from Figure 10—is shown in blue. Only this threshold yields a large and statistically significant effect on linguistic distance from French, the strongest across all placebo thresholds, indicating that the discontinuity captures the administrative change introduced by the July Monarchy Laws rather than a spurious jump in population size. Appendix Tables A61 and A62 present the corresponding estimates across specifications and polynomial degrees, with both fixed and optimal bandwidths.

Figure 11: State-sponsored education and linguistic homogenization: placebos

Note: This figure reports regression discontinuity estimates of the jump in linguistic distance from French at the 500-inhabitant threshold and at placebo thresholds between 300 and 700 inhabitants, in steps of 10, in 1836 (Panel A). Panel B reports estimates at the 500-inhabitant threshold when population is measured in 1836 and in different, placebo years throughout the nineteenth century. Linguistic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. We plot 90, 95, and 99 percent confidence intervals. For each regression, we apply a local-polynomial fit of order 2 and the mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth from Table 1, and we control for distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects for departments and dialects with at least five observations in the sample (or region and historical-language fixed effects otherwise). Observations are at the municipality level. Source: Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) for linguistic distance from French.



(Panel A) RD estimates in 1836, across placebo thresholds

(Panel B) RD estimates at 500 inhabitants, across placebo years of measurement of population

Placebo years of measurement of population. We also test whether the discontinuity appears when population is measured at different points in time. Because there was a discontinuous shift in elite power during the July Monarchy and state-sponsored education was provided under the Guizot Law, we expect the discontinuity in linguistic distance from French to appear when population is measured in 1836, when most schools were built. Panel B of Figure 11 reports estimates of τ at the 500-inhabitant threshold based on population measured at different, placebo years throughout the nineteenth century. The baseline estimate from Figure 10 is shown in blue. A large and statistically significant discontinuity in linguistic distance from French appears only when population is measured in 1831 and 1836, with the strongest effect at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836. This suggests that our results capture the effect of the Guizot Law rather than that

of any other law. Appendix Table A63 reports these results across specifications and polynomial degrees. While we find small negative jumps at the time of the Municipal Law, in 1831, and the Duruy Law, in 1867, neither is statistically significant at conventional levels. The weak 1831 effect likely reflects early implementation of the Guizot Law, while the absence of effects in 1867 reflects that most municipalities above 500 inhabitants had already opened schools.⁴²

Placebo reference dialects. Finally, in the section below, we vary the reference town for the French language when computing linguistic distance from French, using all towns in the Atlas as potential, placebo origins. This allows us to validate our empirical strategy and interpretation of the results as capturing state-sponsored education and indoctrination by national elites, since we expect treatment to decrease linguistic distance from French, but not distance from other languages.

6.5 Discussion and interpretation

Origins of French: the language of the elites. To understand the diffusion of the French language, we trace out its geographical origins. Instead of changing the population threshold or the year of measurement of the population, we now change the town taken as the reference point for French language when computing linguistic distance from French. This exercise also provides a placebo test, as it allows us to see which languages municipalities at the 500-inhabitant threshold converged towards, and where in France those languages were spoken. Historians have argued that French was the language of the elites and of the region around Paris (Lodge, 1993; Weber, 1976), but systematic evidence is lacking.

We compute linguistic distance across all pairs of municipalities and estimate, for each reference municipality j , the following modified version of Equation 1, where $LD_{i,j}$ is the linguistic distance between i and j (in our baseline regression, we used the closest town to Paris in the Atlas, Le-Plessis-Robinson, as j).⁴³

$$(2) \quad LD_{i,j} = \alpha^j + \tau^j \times \mathbb{1}(\text{population}_i \geq 500) + f^j(\text{population}_i) + \varepsilon_i^j$$

Figure 12 maps our estimates of the effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic distance from each potential and placebo reference towns. We plot each coefficient τ^j at the location of the reference municipality j in the regression.⁴⁴ The largest and most significant effects occur in the Paris Basin and the Loire Valley, especially around Paris, Touraine, and Anjou. At the threshold, state-sponsored education shifted municipalities toward the language spoken in these places, but not towards peripheral languages, validating our empirical strategy and pointing to these regions as the cradle of French. Paris provided the Francien dialect that formed the basis of the standard; the Loire Valley hosted the royal court during the Renaissance and was home to the Touraine dialect, considered closest to the standard; while Anjou, seat of the Angevin dynasty, remained closely tied

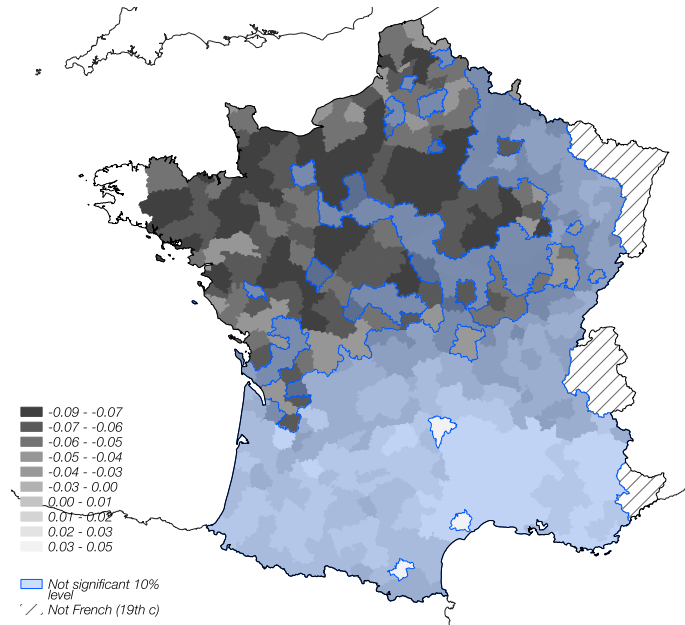
⁴²The Duruy Law of 1866 required municipalities above 500 inhabitants to open a school for girls, but by then most had already opened at least one public school under the Guizot Law.

⁴³Barjamovic et al. (2019) undertake a similar attempt, using a structural-gravity model, to estimate the geographical locations of historical cities based on Assyrian trade links.

⁴⁴Appendix Figure A16 plots the coefficients and t-statistics against distance to Paris. State-sponsored education mainly spread the language spoken within four hundred kilometers of Paris—the historical *langues d'oïl* region.

Figure 12: Tracing out the geographical origins of French (placebo reference dialects)

Note: This figure displays the spatial distribution of the regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic distance across all potential towns of origin. The estimated coefficients are displayed on the map attached to towns of reference, hence showing the effect of state-sponsored education on convergence (divergence) toward (from) the language spoken in each municipality. Coefficients not statistically significant at the 5 percent level are shaded in blue. For each regression, we apply a local-polynomial fit of order 1 and a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Observations are at the municipality level, but, to ease readability, we generate Thiessen polygons around each reference town surveyed in the Linguistic Atlas of France to plot our measure. Source: Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) for linguistic distance from French.



to the monarchy. Our results align with historical evidence that French, the language of the elites, originated in these regions Lodge (1993).

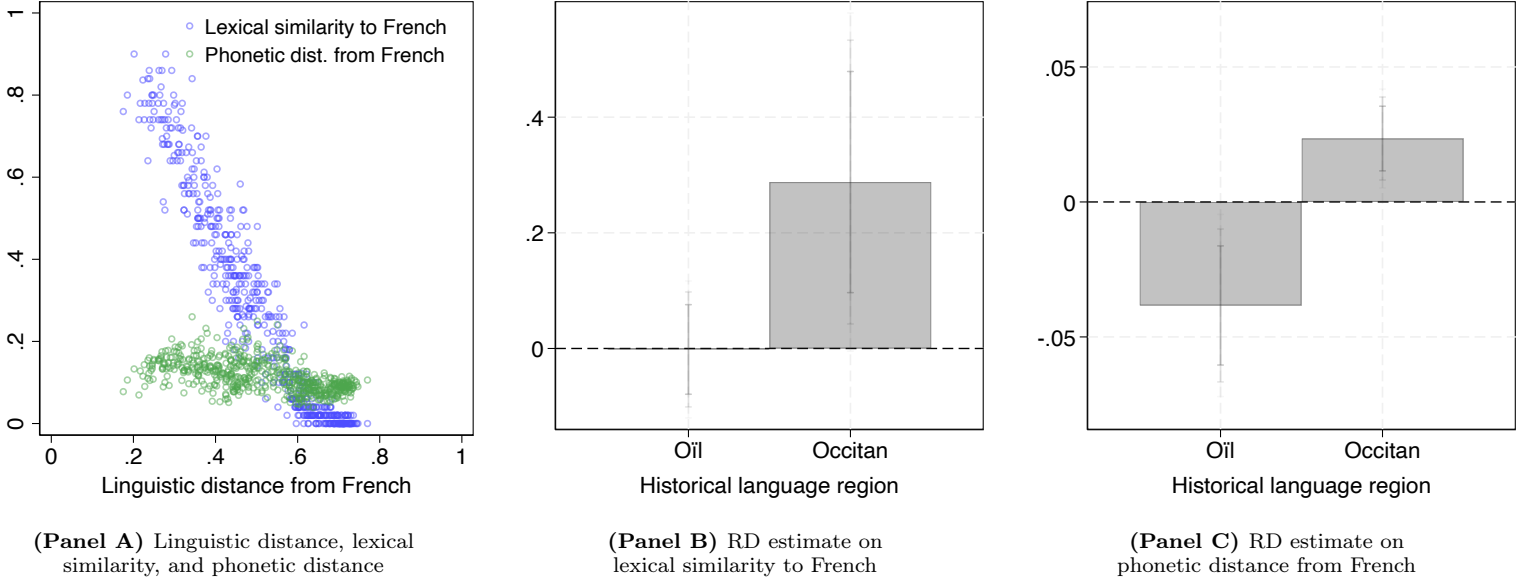
The adoption of the French language. To distinguish whether our findings capture language shift—the adoption of the French vocabulary—or phonetic convergence—the adoption of the French pronunciation—and to identify where each process dominates, we compute measures of linguistic distance based on vocabulary and on pronunciation. We first construct a lexical similarity index, measuring the share of words in each municipality that are French. This captures variation in vocabulary. We then construct a measure of phonetic distance by measuring Levenshtein distance considering exclusively differences in pronunciation for each word.⁴⁵

Figure 13, Panel A, plots lexical similarity to French and phonetic distance from French against our baseline measure of linguistic distance from French. Although most of the variation in linguistic distance arises from lexical similarity, there is variation across historical language regions. For municipalities in the *langues d'oïl* region, a large fraction of the variation in linguistic distance is explained by differences in pronunciation, while lexical differences explain virtually all the variation in linguistic distance in the Occitan region.

⁴⁵Consider the example from Figure 2. Lexical similarity between town 645 and 653 is zero, since both used the Occitan word *seu*. Phonetic distance is one third since the “e” of *seu* is pronounced as a long vowel in town 645 and as a short vowel in town 653 (see Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902, p. 19).

Figure 13: Language shift and phonetic convergence across historical language regions

Note: This figure displays lexical similarity to French and phonetic distance from French against linguistic distance from French (Panel A), and the heterogeneous effect of state-sponsored education on lexical similarity to French (Panel B) and phonetic distance from French (Panel C), using the discontinuity in the provision of state-sponsored education introduced by the July Monarchy Laws, across historical language regions. We plot effect size and 80, 90, and 95 percent confidence intervals. Lexical similarity to French is defined as the share of words spoken in each municipality that are French. Phonetic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from French, considering exclusively differences in pronunciation. Linguistic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. State-sponsored education is defined as a dummy variable that equals 1 if population at the time of the Guizot law, in 1836, was above 500. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 1, include no controls, and rely on the optimal bandwidth from Table 1. Observations are at the municipality level. Sources: Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) for linguistic distance from French; [Carte linguistique de la France \(Archives Nationales\)](#) for historical language regions.



We then report estimates of the effect of state-sponsored education on lexical similarity to French (Panel B) and phonetic distance from French (Panel C) across historical language regions. Lexical similarity to French increases by 30 percentage points at the threshold in municipalities in historically Occitan-speaking areas, while there is no change in the historical *langues d'oïl* region.⁴⁶ In other words, Occitan-speaking municipalities above the threshold use 30 percentage points more French words than those below—this is a strikingly large effect. We find the opposite pattern for phonetic distance, with phonetic convergence in the *langues d'oïl* region. These results are consistent with a process of language shift in the historical Occitan region, and a gradual phonetic convergence of vernacular dialects toward the common language in the historical *langues d'oïl* region (Lodge, 1993, p. 190). Interestingly, we also find evidence of (phonetic) divergence at the threshold in Occitan-speaking areas—which could suggest a backlash. Finally, these results also suggest that our French-wide estimate on linguistic distance from French are biased towards zero, since municipalities in the south are underrepresented around the threshold (Appendix Figure A5).

⁴⁶On average, lexical similarity to French increases by 10 percent at the threshold (about two thirds of municipalities at the threshold are located in the historical *langues d'oïl* region).

6.6 Heterogeneous effects

To understand where and why nation-building was successful, we next explore the heterogeneous effects of state intervention in the provision of education on linguistic distance from French, noting that our findings should be interpreted with caution since we split a small sample.

State capacity and legitimacy. It is reasonable to expect that the government wanted to homogenize regions where state capacity was weak and where the legitimacy and authority of the state were contested.⁴⁷ Appendix Figure A17 shows that state-sponsored education had a significantly larger effect in the historical Occitan region. The effect is not only larger in absolute value, but also relative to the counterfactual: linguistic distance decreases by 0.03 in the historical *langues d’oïl* region and by 0.18 in the historical Occitan region—corresponding to reductions of about 8 and 30 percent, respectively. Hence, the larger effect in the south does not simply reflect a greater initial distance to French, but rather a higher ‘persuasion rate’ (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010). This is surprising since it was the region where the identity cost of adopting French was largest. However this is consistent with our findings in the previous section, on lexical similarity decreasing more in the south, and with the results of Lopez-Peceno (2025), who documents that resistance to Louis-Napoléon’s 1851 self-coup, which established his personal rule as Emperor, was strongest in the south. Indeed, it was also the part of the country where the returns to education and to state-building were the highest, and where the two often went hand in hand: “the mayor and deputies are assisted by a number of municipal functionaries. In small communes their number is very limited; the schoolteacher serves as town hall secretary” (Tudesq, 1972, p. 487; own translation). Appendix Table A64 further documents this across polynomial degrees, and shows that state-sponsored education also had a stronger impact outside the Cinq Grosses Fermes—the region where fiscal capacity was highest before the French Revolution (Johnson, 2019).⁴⁸ These patterns suggest that nation-building was more successful in less integrated regions, where state capacity and national identity were initially weak. To explain this, we next consider supply- and demand-side factors.

Local elites. We expect that local elites were instrumental to the execution and the enforcement of the Guizot Law, given their role in municipal councils. In Section 5.1, we document that the Municipal Law weakened political dynasties. Below, we exploit variation in the presence of knowledge elites to understand their role in homogenization. At the extensive margin, they voted for the implementation of the law. At the intensive margin, local elites were also directly involved in the administration of public schools and in the curriculum: the schoolteachers were supervised by local municipal councils, and district councils (*comités d’arrondissement*) had the authority to influence the curriculum, within the limits of the law, by choosing, from the list of textbooks authorized by the state, the textbooks schoolteachers would use (Choppin, 1986, p. 37).⁴⁹

⁴⁷For example, Alesina, Giuliano and Reich (2021); Paglayan (2024, 2022) argue that the threat of democratization or civil conflict are the strongest determinant of homogenization. The threat was particularly high at the time, following the French Revolution of 1789 and the July Revolution of 1830, and before the February Revolution of 1848. When the legitimacy of the state is contested, the population is more likely to revolt and overthrow a ruler seen as illegitimate.

⁴⁸In addition, we do not find consistent evidence of a stronger effect in places where clergy members took an oath of allegiance to the secular state during the French Revolution (Blanc, 2024; Squicciarini, 2020; Tackett, 1986), suggesting that our results capture the interaction between state- and nation-building, rather than state legitimacy.

⁴⁹We find evidence for their role on the distribution of the *Alphabet* textbook in Appendix Table A32.

Figure 14: Heterogeneous effect of state-sponsored education

Note: This figure displays the heterogeneous effect of state-sponsored education on linguistic distance from French, using the discontinuity in the provision of state-sponsored education introduced by the July Monarchy Laws—at low (below-median) and high (above-median) levels of presence of local elites (Panel A), economic development (Panel B), educational demand (Panel C), and railway expansion (Panel D). For each variable, we define the median as the median for France (not the sample median) and, for each sub-sample, rely on the bandwidth estimated for the full sample, following Calonico et al. (2025). We plot effect size and 80, 90, and 95 percent confidence intervals. Linguistic distance from French is defined as the average Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. State-sponsored education is defined as a dummy variable that equals 1 if population at the time of the Guizot law, in 1836, was above 500. The presence of local elites is proxied by subscriptions to the *Encyclopédie* subscriptions per capita in 1776–79, at the arrondissement level. Economic development is proxied by disposable income per capita in 1864, at the department level. Educational demand is proxied by the rate of increase in the number of students in public schools from 1833 to 1850, at the department level. Railway expansion is defined as the ratio of distance to railway in 1890 to distance to railway in 1860. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 1, include no controls, and rely on the optimal bandwidth from Table 1. We present the results for other polynomial degrees and variables in Appendix Tables A65, A66, and A64. Observations are at the municipality level. Sources: Gilliéron and Edmont (1902-1910) for linguistic distance from French; Darnton (1973) for presence of local elites, Delefortrie and Morice (1959) for income per capita, Statistique Générale de la France (1829-97) for increase in the number of students, and Thévenin, Mimeur and Marti-Henneberg (2023) for railway expansion.

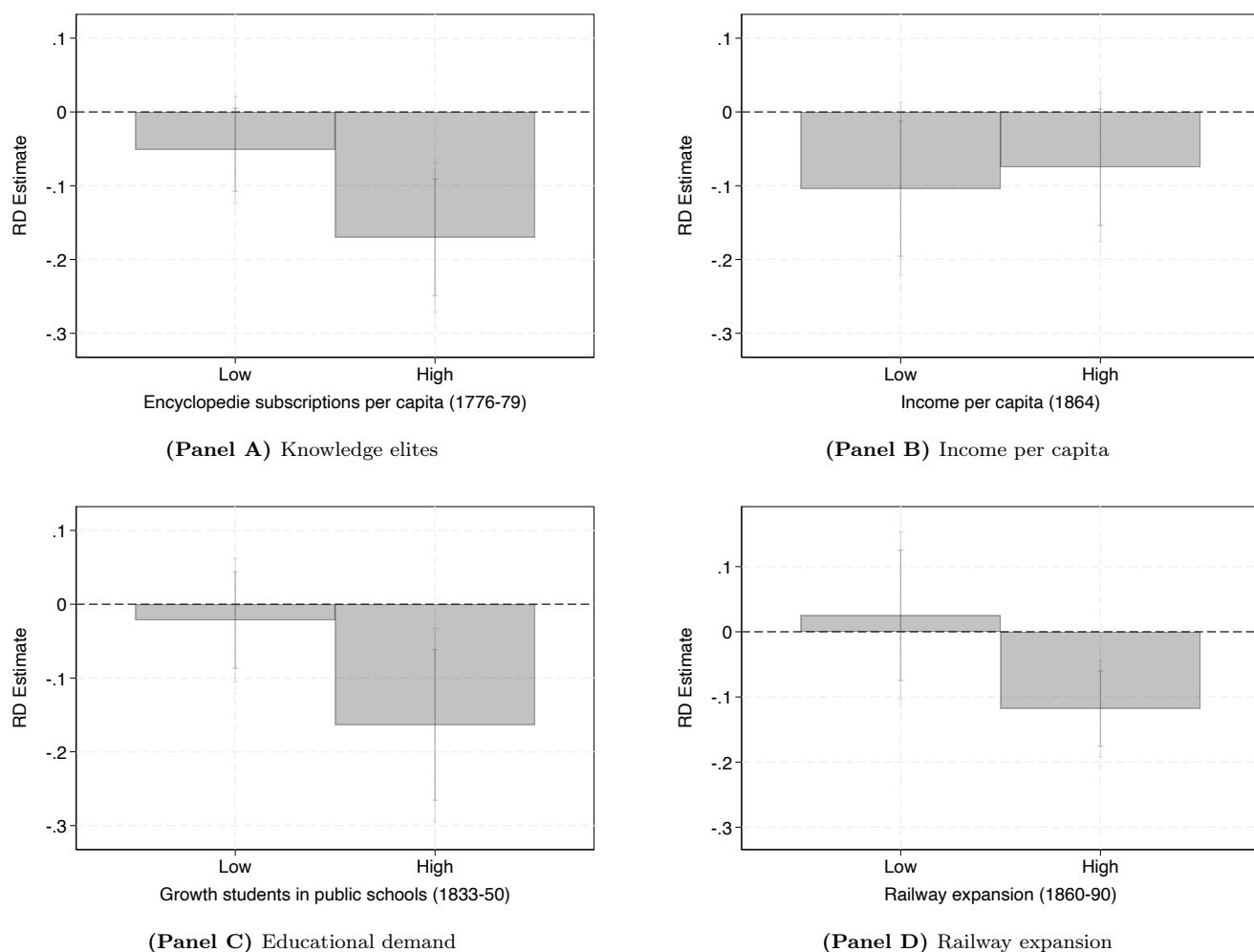


Figure 14, Panel A, shows that the effect of state-sponsored education is larger in municipalities with knowledge elites, as proxied by above-median levels of *Encyclopédie* subscriptions per capita between 1776 and 1779 in the arrondissement of the municipality. Darnton (1973) (p. 1350) discusses the occupations of 137 subscribers in the city of Besançon. The vast majority were political

elites: parliamentarians, members of the military, lawyers, local administrators. Squicciarini and Voigtländer (2016) show that the presence of elites is indeed associated with school building under the Guizot Law. Furet and Ozouf (1977) argue that, for the elites, “school was first and foremost an instrument of control, designed to moralize and discipline the masses” (p. 120). Our results lend credence to this hypothesis. Yet, one could be concerned that we may not be capturing the effect of elites but rather that of income.⁵⁰ Figure 14, Panel B, shows that the effect of state-sponsored education was the same across all levels of income per capita, alleviating this concern.⁵¹

Demand for schooling. While the Guizot Law increased the supply of state-sponsored education, it did not make schooling compulsory, allowing us to understand the role of the demand for education. An open question remains why is it the case that the policy was successful and adopted by local populations, and similarly in many other contexts at the time. Schools did not only provide assimilation but also skills—reading, writing, and arithmetic. Although coercion existed within schools, children were not compelled to attend, which could have contributed to the success of the policy.

Figure 14, Panel C, finds that the effect of state-sponsored education was significantly larger in departments where the number of students in public schools increased the most during the July Monarchy. Where the benefits of schooling outweighed its costs, that is where the individual returns to education and to the adoption of a common language were important enough to drive educational demand up, state-sponsored education led to linguistic homogenization, consistent with the idea that nation-building succeeded during this period, not because of modernization (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983), but because schooling supplied basic skills that became especially valuable as returns to human capital increased.

Because growth in the number of students is an equilibrium outcome, we also show heterogeneous effects of state-sponsored education across different returns to education. Figure 14, Panel D shows that the effect of state-sponsored education was much larger in municipalities that experienced high railway expansion between 1860 and 1890. These results complement Paglayan (2024) by showing that schooling succeeded not through indoctrination alone, but also because it provided useful skills. Appendix Table A66 further documents this across a number of proxies for returns to education (steam-engine horsepower in the textile industry and proximity to coal deposits) using the fact that regions at the technological frontier should have experienced rising returns to human capital during this period, as industrialization increased the demand for education (Ashraf and Galor, 2011; Galor, 2011, 2022; Galor and Weil, 2000).

7 THE PERSISTENT EFFECTS OF NATION-BUILDING

This section examines the long-run effects of nation-building.⁵² We first provide suggestive evidence that the adoption of a common language fostered migration and trade. We then examine persistent

⁵⁰For example, Squicciarini and Voigtländer (2015) document that subscriber density is positively associated with disposable income and various measures of development.

⁵¹Appendix Table A65 presents these results in table format, across polynomial degrees, and further shows that distance to departmental capital is not associated with a larger effect of state-sponsored education, so the results are not driven by mere geographic proximity to political centers.

⁵²As Hobsbawm (1990) puts it, a standard language was “essential to the concept of France” (p. 60).

effects on national identity, showing greater participation in the French Resistance, fewer Nazi collaborators, and stronger support for political centralization in the 1969 referendum.

Migration and Trade. Appendix 3 shows a strong and robust correlation between linguistic distance and both migration and trade across pairs of municipalities, even after accounting for gravity. While we are unable to use the empirical strategy employed throughout the paper—because the data is aggregated and RD designs are not suited to dyadic data—the results suggest that a decrease in linguistic distance increases migration and trade.⁵³

Identity and ideology. Then, we explore the persistent effects of state intervention in the provision of education, together with the adoption of French and likely increases in migration and trade—all of which may explain its persistence—on outcomes capturing the salience of national identity and ideology. We therefore continue to use the term ‘state-sponsored education’, or, alternatively, the ‘nation-building policy’.

Figure 15: State-sponsored education and national identity and ideology

Note: This figure displays regression discontinuity estimates of the effect of state-sponsored education introduced by the July Monarchy Laws measures of the salience of national identity, as measured by Resistance heroes (Panel A), Nazi collaborators during WWII (Panel B), and ideology, as measured by votes for regionalization during the 1969 Referendum (Panel C). We plot whether 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”; or at least one individual born in the municipality joined the Gestapo, the German Intelligence Service, or the Waffen-SS; and the vote share in favor of the 1969 constitutional referendum on regionalization, against population at the time of the Guizot Law, in 1836. We plot 90 percent confidence intervals, and each point shows the average value within a bin, partialled out of distance from Paris and department and historical-dialect fixed effects as well as, in Panels A and B, Vichy-regime and WWI military recruitment bureau fixed effects. We apply a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Observations are at the municipality level. Sources: Site Mémoire des hommes (n.d.) for French Resistance; Cagé et al. (2023) for Nazi collaborators, demarcation line, and recruitment bureaus; and Dehdari and Gehring (2022) and Archives Départementales du Var, 326PRS (79) for the 1969 referendum.

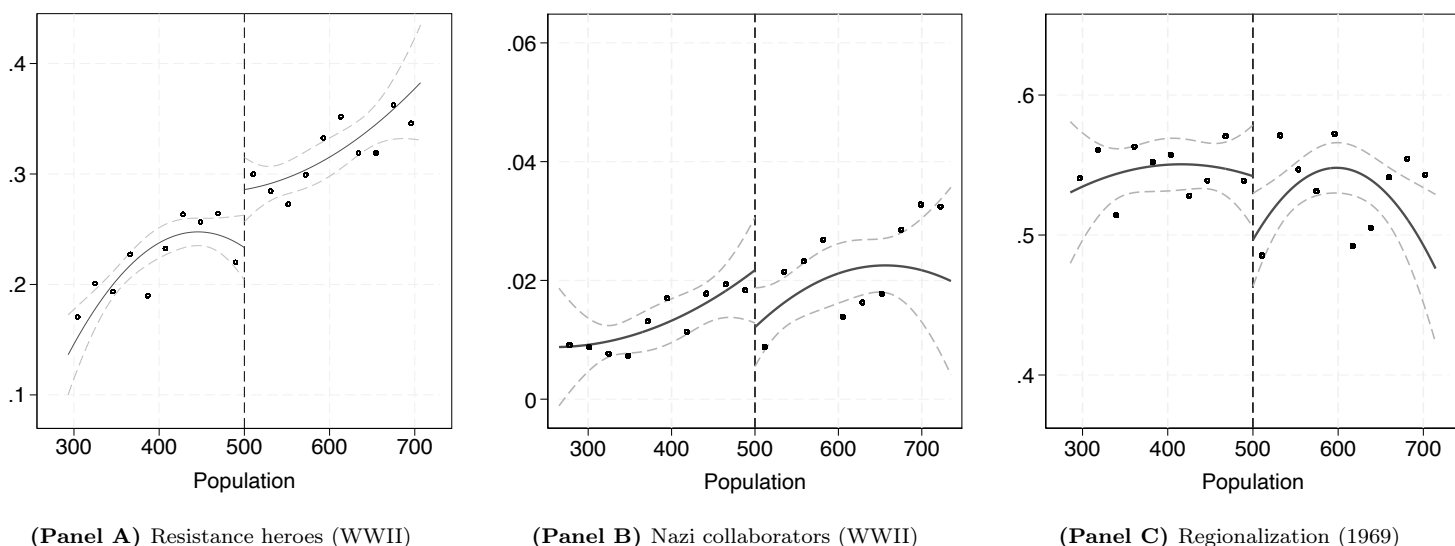


Figure 15, Panel A, shows that nation-building significantly increased the likelihood that individuals born in treated municipalities were heroes of the French Resistance and were awarded a

⁵³We also find that the correlation between linguistic distance and migration weakens over time (results available upon request), consistent with increasing linguistic homogenization.

Médaille de la Résistance for documented “remarkable acts of faith and courage that contributed to the resistance of the French people against the enemy.” We carefully match 42,441 medals to 11,783 of the 33,814 municipalities in our sample and report the results of our estimation for different polynomial degrees, as well as for different transformations of the outcome, including dummies for the extensive margin and inverse hyperbolic sine transformations for the intensive margin, in Appendix Table A68. We also find a positive effect at the intensive margin, but only find a statistically significant effect at the extensive margin across specifications, with or without controlling for geographical distance from Paris and for department, historical-dialect, Vichy-regime (the French government that chose the path of collaboration with the Nazis), and WWI military recruitment bureau fixed effects to account for the legacy of World War I (Cagé et al., 2023) as well as local institutional and cultural factors.

To study extreme forms of national disintegration, Figure 15, Panel B shows, using data from Cagé et al. (2023), suggestive evidence that treated municipalities were also less likely to have been the birthplace of Nazi collaborators who joined the Gestapo, the German Intelligence Service, or the Waffen-SS during World War II.⁵⁴ While at the onset of World War II Pétain was still seen as a hero of Verdun, the Vichy regime’s collaboration with Nazi Germany quickly became explicit: “it was not until October 1940 that Pétain’s collaboration with the Germans took an explicit turn, when a photograph of him shaking hands with Hitler at a meeting at Montoire was widely publicized and distributed” (Cagé et al., 2023, p. 1909). From that point, attachment to a French national identity likely translated into decreased collaboration, as reflected in our data. Appendix Table A69 displays the results at the extensive and at the intensive margin—where they are the most robust and significant, especially when correcting for bias following Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014)—with or without controlling for geographical distance from Paris and for department, historical-dialect, and Vichy-regime fixed effects, to account for local institutional and cultural factors, as well as WWI military recruitment bureau fixed effects.

Finally, to capture political ideology, we use data on votes against the regionalization of political authority in the 1969 referendum, proposing to return significant power and autonomy to regional authorities.⁵⁵ Figure 15, Panel C, and Appendix Table A70 document suggestive evidence that nation-building reduced the vote share in favor of regionalization by about 5 percentage point—the referendum was rejected by 52.4 percent of voters.⁵⁶

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Throughout history, states have relied on mass education as a tool of nation-building and indoctrination. We examine its role in the making of France—one of the most successful cases of nation-

⁵⁴The results are only significant at the 20 percent level, likely due to the fact that fewer than 2 percent of municipalities near the threshold were birthplaces of Nazi collaborators, compared to almost 30 percent for heroes awarded a Medal of the Resistance, which naturally limits precision for such an extreme outcome. However, the results become significant at the 10 percent level when considering the bias-corrected estimator developed by Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014).

⁵⁵Unfortunately, the outcome of the vote is not readily available at the municipality level. Dehdari and Gehring (2022) study this referendum in the context of Alsace-Lorraine and digitize the municipality-level results in that region from a local newspaper that published the results the day after the election. Similarly, we obtain municipality-level results in two departments in Provence from another local newspaper published the day after the election, *Le Petit Varois* (Archives Départementales du Var, 326PRS, 79).

⁵⁶While the results are only significant at the 20 percent level, they become significant at the 10 percent level when considering the bias-corrected estimator developed by Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014).

building. We begin by documenting its institutional foundations, showing that a reform in local political representation shifted power away from long-entrenched elite families and resulted in the discontinuous provision of education as mass education was introduced. Using municipality-level data on spoken languages, we then document how education fostered the adoption of a common language and the construction of a shared national identity.

The success of the policy depended not only on its comprehensiveness but also on local factors—in particular, local enforcement capacity and economic modernization, with rising returns to education. Coercion alone could not forge a nation: lasting unity required both the redistribution of power and the economic incentives to sustain education. These conditions only became salient once societies moved beyond the Malthusian epoch and entered the transition from stagnation to growth, explaining why mass education emerged in the nineteenth century not only as an instrument of economic emancipation, but also as a vehicle of indoctrination and integration.

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