

# A Testament to Revolution?

## Elite Reproduction and Partible Inheritance

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**1** Motivation and Background

**2** Literature Review

**3** Digitisation

**4** The Dataset

**5** Preliminary Results

**1** Motivation and Background

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*laws regulating inheritance [are key to the perpetuation of noble wealth].[...] [T]o serve the purpose of avoiding the dispersion of patrimonies, some sort of impartible inheritance system is required.*

Alfani (2023, p. 76)

## Nobility uses the Civil Code as scapegoat:

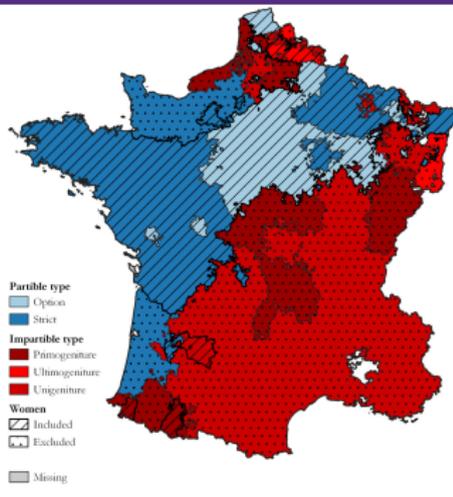
### Robert-Tancredè de Hauteville's lament about the Civil Code in 1862:

*One cannot ignore the unfortunate results produced daily by its application. Not only does it have as a consequence this **unlimited parceling out of landed property** which puts such regrettable obstacles to agricultural progress but, even more, this perpetual turnover of estates tends to **weaken without ceasing the bonds of the family**, to efface its traditions, and to thus shake the very bases on which it rests.*

Higgs (1987, p. 57)

# Introduction of Partition of Inheritance

A tapestry of local inheritance customs (Gay et al., 2024)...

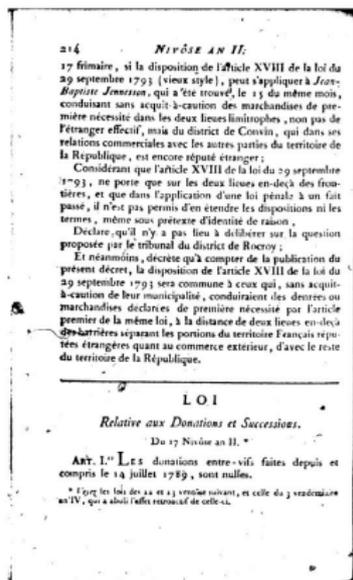


...is replaced by equal partition.

Basis for an identification strategy?

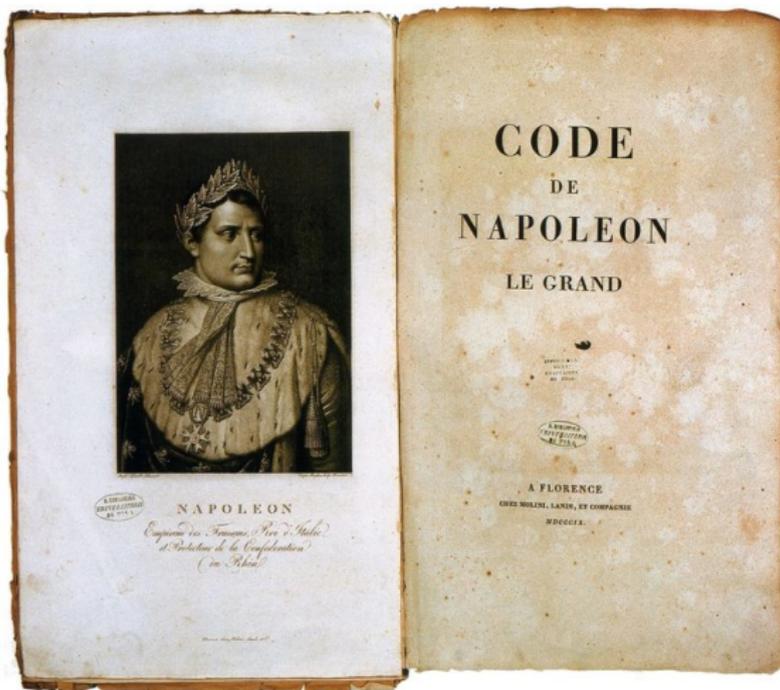
Sources

# Loi de Nivôse, An II (1793) introduces Strict Equal Partition



- Compliance was limited due to limited state capacity. (Green, 2022)  
Compliance with *Loi de Nivôse, An II*
- Used in the Diff-in-Diff/RDD in Gay et al. (2023)

# Code Napoléon (1804) upholds Partition and Enforces Stricter Compliance



Compliance with the Napoleonic Code    Differences between the *Loi de Nivôse*, *An II* and the *Code Napoléon*

# A Data Source Exists - The *Tables des Successions et Absences*

The image shows an open historical ledger book with two pages of handwritten data. The left page is titled "TABLE des" and the right page is titled "Successions et Absences". Both pages contain columns for names, professions, and dates, with handwritten entries in cursive script. The right page also includes a small table with columns for "INSTRUMENTS" and "MONTANT DE BIENS".



1 Motivation and Background

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# Literature Review - Data

## French Wealth Data

- Seminal work by Daumard (1973, 1980, 2014)
- From the *Enquête Henri* to the *Enquête TRA* (Bourdieu et al., 2014)
- Extensive data collection on Paris by Piketty et al. (2006, 2014) and Postel-Vinay and Rosenthal (2026)

## Literature Review - Inheritance Customs

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- Empirical studies of the long-term effects of inheritance customs in other countries: Bertocchi and Bozzano (2015), Galasso and Profeta (2018), Bartels et al. (2022).

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- Chapelle et al. are working on a project on long-term effects on land inequality.

## 1 Motivation and Background

## 2 Literature Review

## 3 Digitisation

- Pipeline
- Evaluation

## 4 The Dataset

## 5 Preliminary Results

# The Tables des Successions et Absences

TABLE des Successions et Absences

[17<sup>e</sup> Partie, N<sup>o</sup> 41.]

ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, avant le décès					ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès					ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès					ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès						
N <sup>o</sup>	NOM	PARENTÉ	DÉCÈS	LIEU	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, avant le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès	
																					ÉTAT DES BIENS DE LA FAMILLE, après le décès
1	Suzanne	veuve	Paris	1785																	
2	Yvette	veuve	Paris	1785																	
3	Genevieve	veuve	Paris	1785																	
4	Isabelle	veuve	Paris	1785																	
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Contains information on:

Data Availability

Choice of 1870 as cutoff

Different Forms of Wealth

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## Contains information on:

- Name
- Some indicators of wealth at death
- Occupation
- Date of death and age at death
- Information on inheritors or legatees

Data Availability

Choice of 1870 as cutoff

Different Forms of Wealth

## Limitations of the Data

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- Complete digitization of the *RMD* is not feasible. *TSA*'s tabular format allows for automated digitization.
- **Limitation:** Taxes on real estate were filed with the bureau of the location of real estate. Taxes on movable wealth were filed at the legal residence.

## 1 Motivation and Background

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- Pipeline

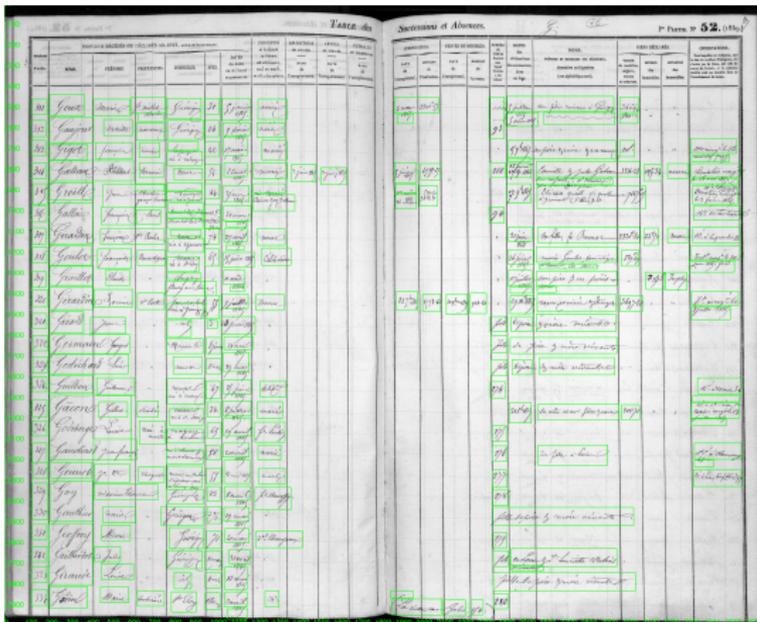
- Evaluation

## 4 The Dataset

## 5 Preliminary Results

# First Step: Text Line Detection

We use a fine-tuned version of Doc-UFCN (Boillet et al., 2021) to detect text lines:



Complete Pipeline



## Second Step: Handwritten Text Recognition

### Handwritten Text Recognition

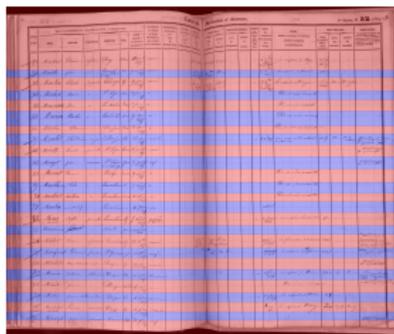
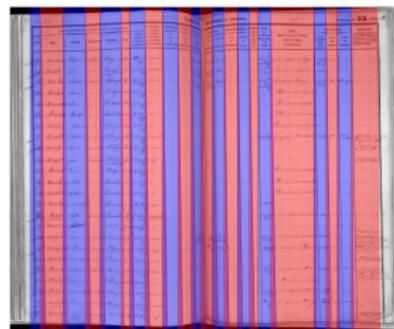
- We use TrOCR (Li et al., 2023), a pre-trained transformer-based OCR model.

Complete Pipeline

## Third Step: Page Segmentation

To segment the page into columns and rows, we use a combination of:

- Doc-UFCN

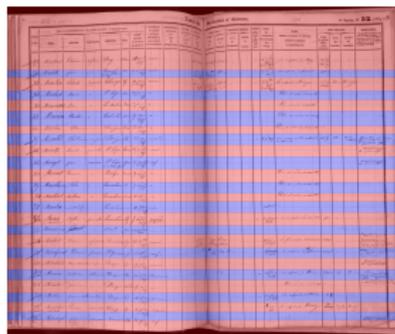
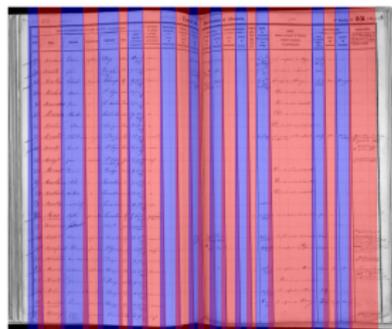


Complete Pipeline

## Third Step: Page Segmentation

To segment the page into columns and rows, we use a combination of:

- Doc-UFCN
- Computer Vision (Hough Line Transform)



Complete Pipeline

1 Motivation and Background

2 Literature Review

3 Digitisation

■ Pipeline

■ Evaluation

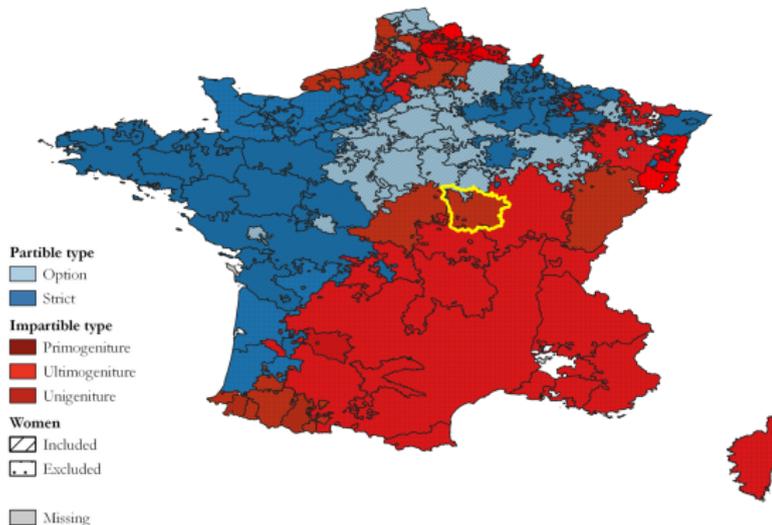
4 The Dataset

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# Nièvre Pilot Study



# Nièvre Pilot Study

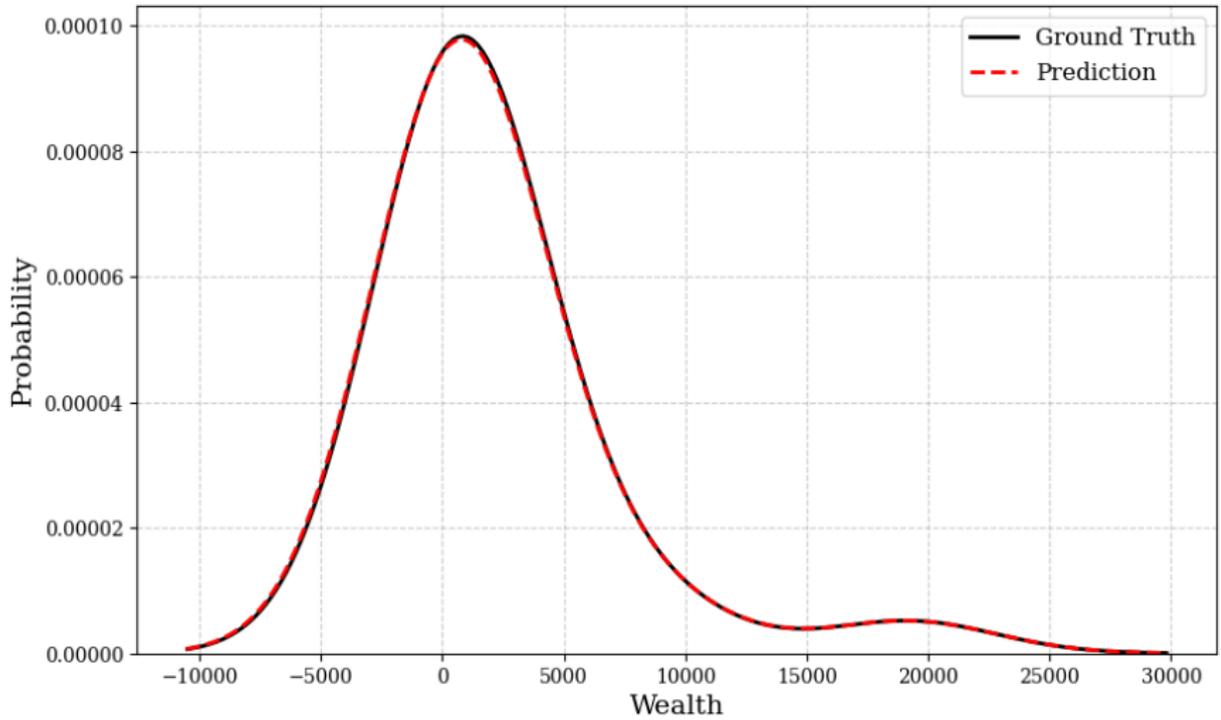


## End-to-End: Median Result

Variable	Ground Truth	Prediction
Age	4 mois	4 mois
Article Number	48	48
Date of Death	17 aout 1866	17 aout 1860
Seals Apposition	Michot	Michot
Declarations Date	17 Xbre	17 10bre
Income from Buildings	143	143
Building Situation	Asnois	asnois.
Furniture Value	361/0	361.5
Wealth Estimation	1230	1230
First Name	Gilbert	Gilbert
Furniture Sale Date	5 8er 1849	5 8e. 1849
Furniture Valuation	258.55	258.55
Trusteeships	27 arvil 1850	27 avril 1850
Marital Status	ep. Marie	ep. Marie
Inventory Date	26 fevrier	26 Fevrier
Inventory Value	714.9	714.9
Location of Death	Revenue C	Revenier
Heirs' Names	Devoucout, antoine	Devoncous, metoine
Dubious Base Number	225	225
Observations	Sans Droits acquis	Sans Edriot et acquis
Profession	mineur	Mineur
Residences	Alluy	Allay
Surname	Louvrier	Louvrier

Note: Comparison of transcription for each variable, showing the observation with median error.

# Handwritten Text Recognition - Wealth



1 Motivation and Background

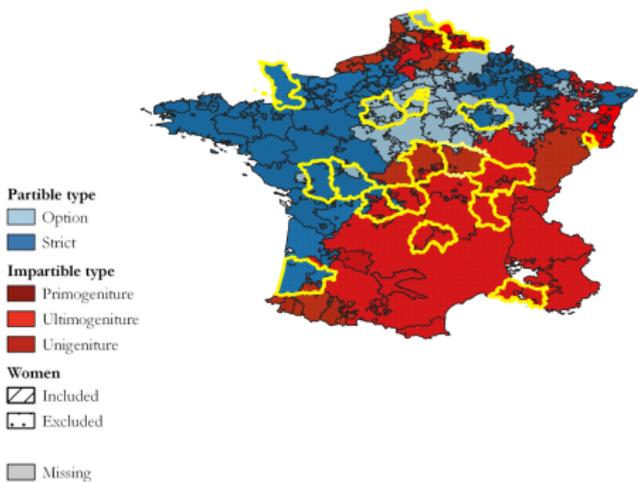
2 Literature Review

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**4 The Dataset**

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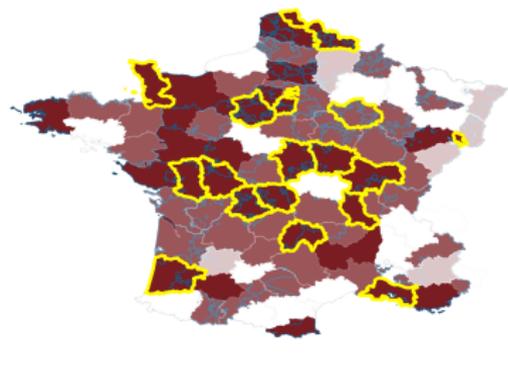
# Digitisation Strategy - Focus on Inheritance Customs



- Aube\*
- Bouches-du-Rhône
- Cantal
- Cher
- Deux-Sèvres
- Essonne
- Eure-et-Loire
- Haute-Vienne
- Landes
- Loire
- Manche
- Nièvre
- Nord
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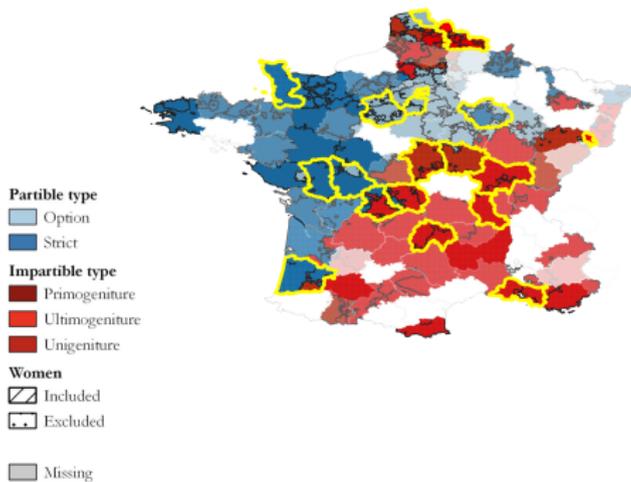
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# Dataset

**We have digitised now digitised a cross-section of the available *TSA* for all the *départements* listed previously:**

- We have digitised all the books that cover a year between 1791-1870 that ends in -2, as well as the year 1870;

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- from **293 *Bureaux d'Enregistrement***;
- covering the period **1791-1870**;
- We match them to inheritance customs on the *bureau*-level using the *Customary Atlas of Ancien Régime France* from Gay et al. (2024).

# Summary of the Data

Table 1: Summary of the Data

Period	Deaths	Non-zero Wealth Obs.	In %	Avg. log wealth	SD log wealth
1790–1800	62,360	13,340	21.4%	7.140	2.162
1800–1809	109,994	27,248	24.8%	7.122	2.079
1810–1819	154,885	39,067	25.2%	7.298	2.073
1820–1829	192,351	44,172	23.0%	7.134	2.045
1830–1839	243,284	48,336	19.9%	6.996	2.046
1840–1849	258,101	48,983	19.0%	7.089	1.971
1850–1859	253,396	53,909	21.3%	7.010	2.010
1860–1870	274,305	52,194	19.0%	6.884	1.780
<b>All periods</b>	<b>1,824,208</b>	<b>382,431</b>	<b>21.0%</b>	<b>7.041</b>	<b>1.987</b>

Survival of Records

# Our Dataset and Existing Datasets 1/2

## Our Data

## Enquête TRA

## Postel-Vinay and Rosenthal (2026)

### Sources

*Tables des Successions et Absences*

Combination of all available sources, notably the *Tables des Successions et Absences* and the *Régistres des Mutations par Décès* for wealth.

### Coverage

- All individuals dying in one of 20 *départements*.

- All individuals with a surname starting with *Tra-*.

- Paris for years ending in -2 or -7.

## Our Dataset and Existing Datasets 2/2

### Our Data

### Enquête TRA

### Postel-Vinay and Rosenthal (2026)

#### Number of Observations

■ > 1,824,208

■ 56,110

■ 27,928

#### Inclusion of Elites

■ Captures both urban and rural elites.

■ Top of the wealth distribution is not captured. Includes only 8 noble families.

■ Includes urban wealth elites but does not capture rural elites.

1 Motivation and Background

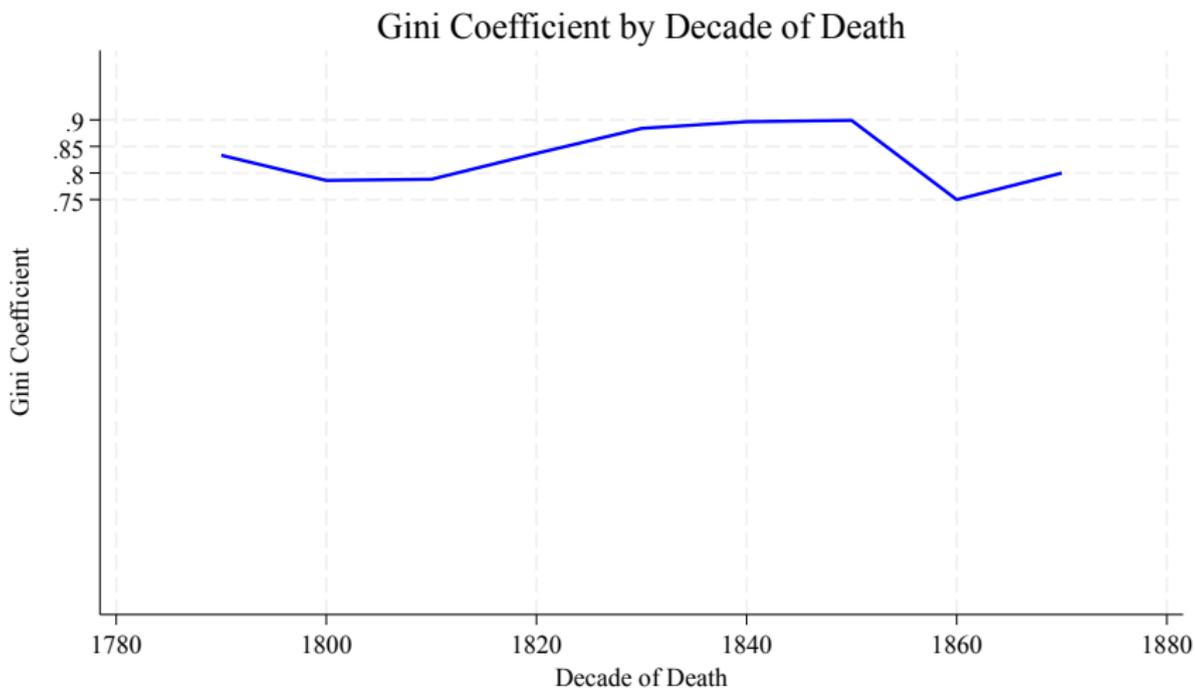
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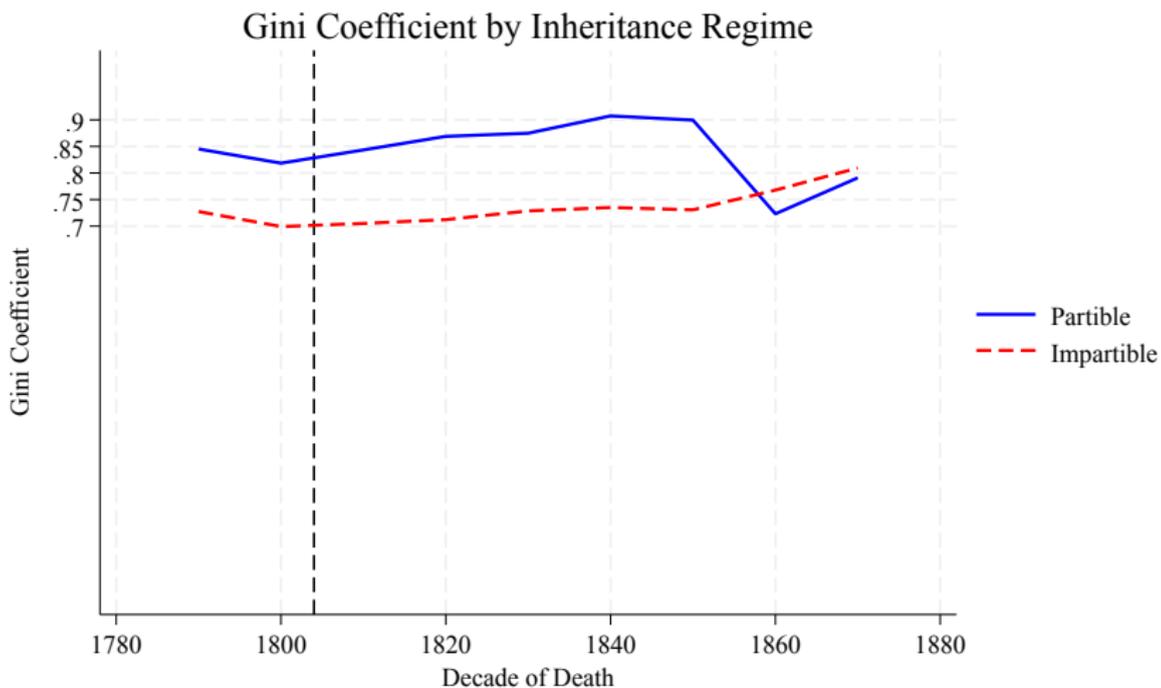
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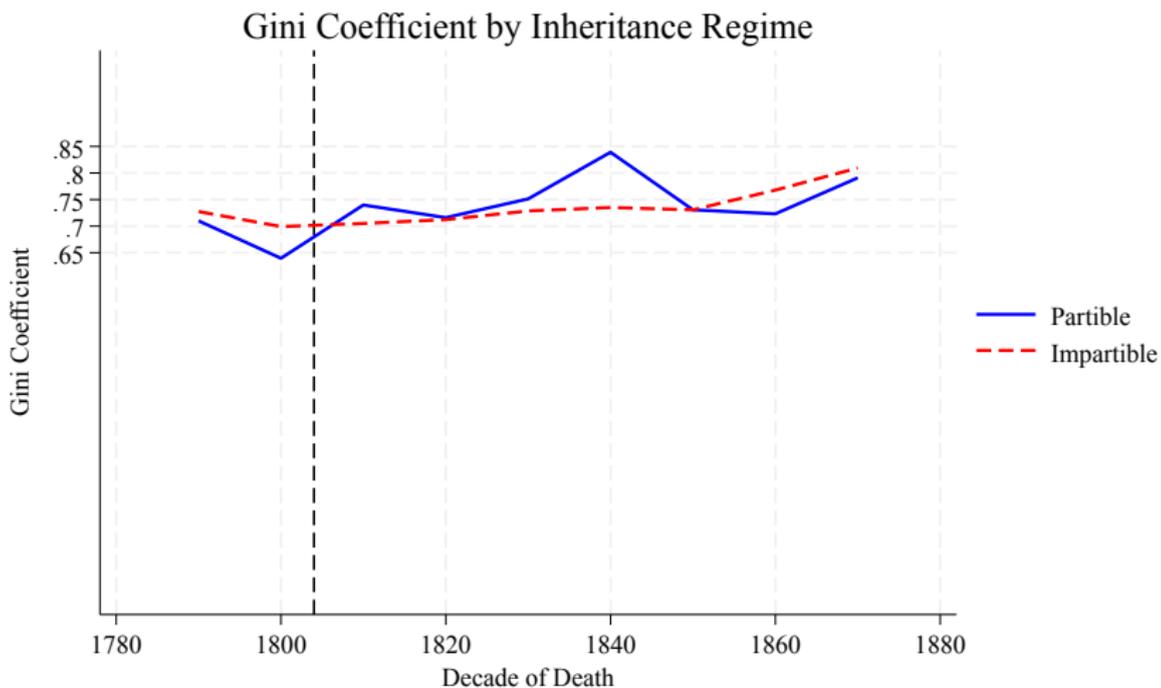
# Handwritten Text Recognition - Wealth



# Disaggregated by Inheritance Regime



# Take out Paris and the Picture Changes



## A Multi-faceted Problem

According to Meade (1964), in a system of partible inheritance, wealth concentration will tend to increase if:

$$s * r \geq n \quad (1)$$

Where  $s$  is the savings rate,  $r$  is the return on capital and  $n$  is population growth.

In an impartible system intergenerational accumulation can also occur if:

$$s * r < n \quad (2)$$

- **Fertility** matters and is not exogenous, as Gay et al. (2023) have shown.

## Next Steps - A Possible Identification Strategy

### Difference in Differences in Reverse

- Introduced by Kim et al. (2019) Kim and Lee (2019)

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- Focus on *départements* on the border.

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- We present **new dataset** that allows...
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- and to zoom in on **smaller, rural geographies**.

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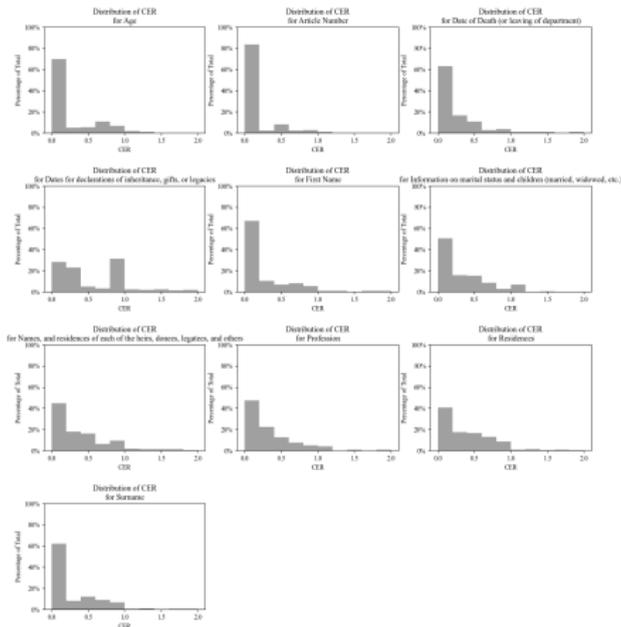
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# Handwritten Text Recognition - End-to-end


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## Evaluation - Handwritten Text Recognition

Table 2: Word Error Rate (WER) and Character Error Rate (CER) for all Pages with Correctly Recognized Rows and Columns

Variable	Mean		Median		Observations
	WER	CER	WER	CER	
Age	0.073	0.048	0.000	0.000	48
Date of Death	0.513	0.165	0.333	0.091	62
Value of furniture, money, annuities and debts	0.864	0.658	1.000	0.667	22
First Name	0.342	0.101	0.000	0.000	60
Heirs, donees, legatees	0.656	0.574	0.750	0.150	49
Observations	0.774	0.493	0.800	0.414	14
Profession	0.569	0.196	0.000	0.000	51
Surname	0.285	0.113	0.000	0.000	65

What does a high CER/WER mean?



## Compliance with the *Code Napoléon*

Daumard (1988) looks at  $\approx 50$  holographic wills from the *Faubourg Saint-Germain* and finds:

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- Overall, Daumard concludes that compliance was remarkably high.

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## Compliance with the *Loi de Nivôse*, An II

Green, 2022, p. 118-119 Green (2022)

*"In their travels in the Midi, some prefects found that **many families were simply ignoring the new egalitarian inheritance laws**. Instead of being outraged by the disobedience, though, they depicted the patrilineal households as emblems of the ideal family structure, in which children, wife, and servants were still governed by a strict and powerful father."*

Green, 2022, p. 124-125 Green (2022)

*"[T]hese views influenced how departmental prefects approached the families they encountered in the Midi, many of whom maintained the old unequal inheritance customs. Indeed, families in the Pyrénées and the Massif Central **largely ignored the articles of the law of 17 Nivôse**. When prefects met these families, instead of being outraged by their disobedience, they described the endurance of the tradition with a combination of nostalgia and scientific justification."*

# Differences between the *Loi de Nivôse, An II* and the *Code Napoléon*

## *Loi de Nivôse, An II*

## Code Napoléon

### Testamentary Freedoms

- Rigid egalitarianism, no testamentary freedoms
- Testamentary freedoms regarding the *quantité disponible*

### *Reserve Héritaire*

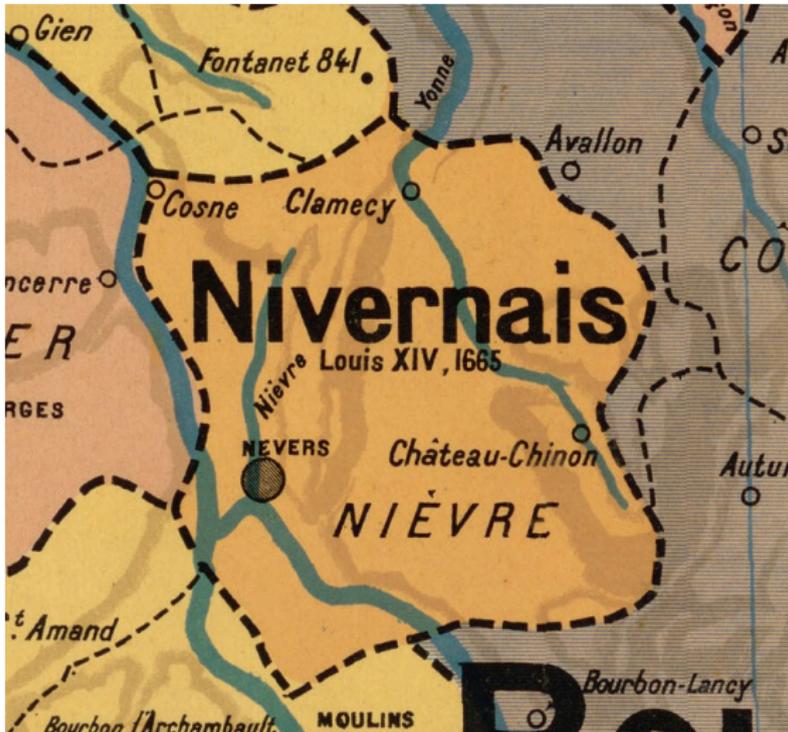
- Entire estate is divided equally among children
- Only some portion of the estate had to be equally divided

### Inclusion of Women

- Women are not discriminated against
- *Code Napoléon* is patriarchal in principle, but not regarding inheritance

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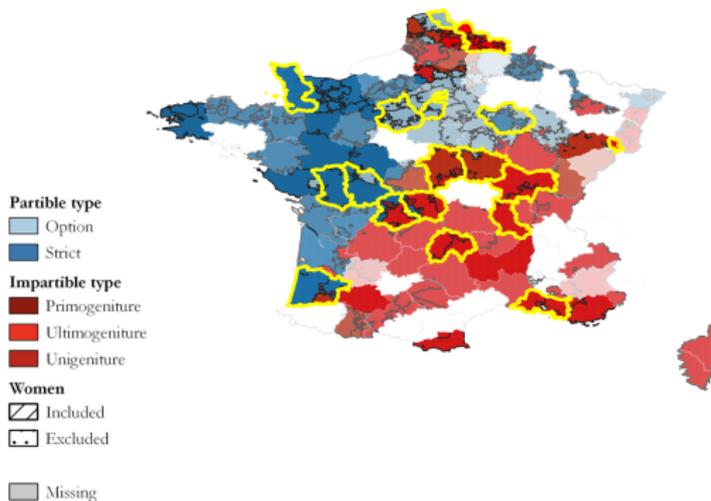
# The Nivernais on the Carte Vidal-Lablache - Provinces en 1789



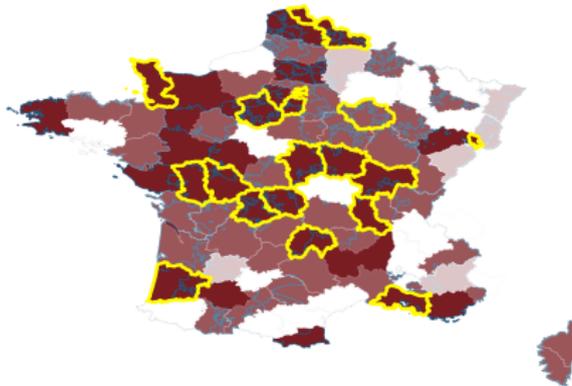
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# Data Availability


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# Data Availability

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# Share of TSA indicating the amount of wealth of the deceased (TRA)

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# Customs of *Ancien Régime* France

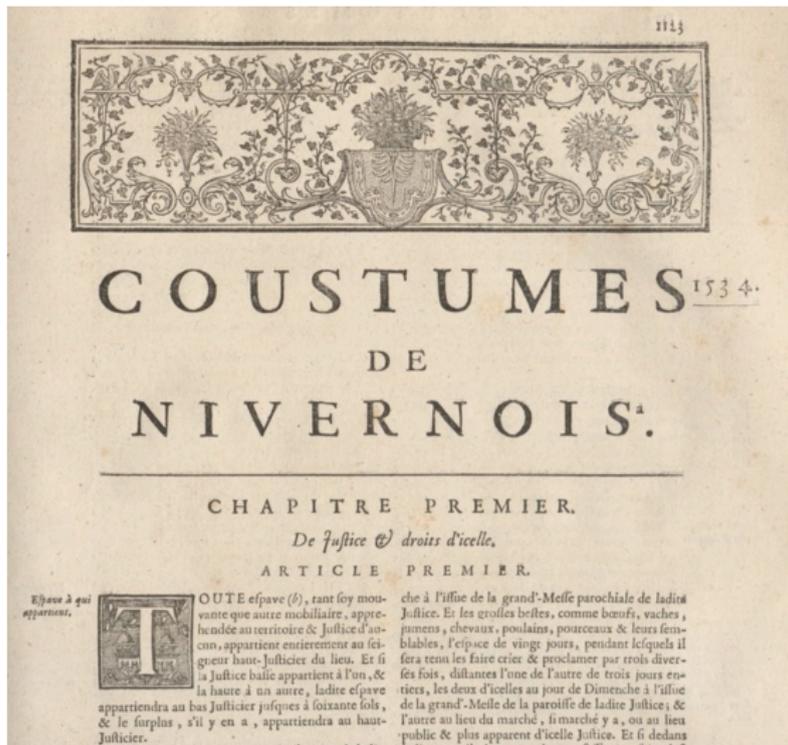
Table B.2—Continued

Identifrer	Custom	Source	Url
5700	Marseille	<i>Les status municipaux et coutumes anciennes de la ville de Marseille</i> (Marseille: Garcin, 1656).	<a href="https://odyssee.univ-amu.fr/items/show/221">https://odyssee.univ-amu.fr/items/show/221</a>
5800	Meaux	Charles-Antoine Bourdot de Richebourg, <i>Nouveau coutumier général</i> (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1724), tome III, première partie, p. 381–412.	<a href="https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r">https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r</a>
5801	Sézanne	Charles-Antoine Bourdot de Richebourg, <i>Nouveau coutumier général</i> (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1724), tome III, première partie, p. 403.	<a href="https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r">https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r</a>
5900	Melun	Charles-Antoine Bourdot de Richebourg, <i>Nouveau coutumier général</i> (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1724), tome III, première partie, p. 434–82.	<a href="https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r">https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r</a>
6000	Metz	Charles-Antoine Bourdot de Richebourg, <i>Nouveau coutumier général</i> (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1724), tome II, première partie, p. 395–425.	<a href="https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551866m">https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551866m</a>
6100	Montfort-l'Amaury	Charles-Antoine Bourdot de Richebourg, <i>Nouveau coutumier général</i> (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1724), tome III, première partie, p. 141–72.	<a href="https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r">https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6551807r</a>
6200	Navarre	<i>Les fors et costumas deu Royaume de Navarre</i> (Pau: Desbaratz, 1681)	<a href="https://www.babordnum.fr/items/show/19">https://www.babordnum.fr/items/show/19</a>
6300	Nivernois	Charles-Antoine Bourdot de Richebourg, <i>Nouveau coutumier général</i> (Paris: Michel Brunet, 1724), tome III, seconde partie, p. 1123–92.	<a href="https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65523169">https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65523169</a>

Table B.2—continued on next page

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# The Coutumier Général



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# Year in which first TSA book is available for each *canton*


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