Aristocratic Networks in British Politics: 1831 to the Present

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Abstract

Are political careers facilitated by family networks? We address this question using a novel dataset assembled from various sources and combining information on the political careers of British MPs with information about the family trees of the British aristocracy. Our data span almost two centuries (1932-2022) and document the evolution over time of the background of British MPs, their social origin (in particular whether aristocratic or not), education (university and school attended), profession and political experience. Using information on family trees we can then calculate the centrality of each MP in the aristocratic network and assess the role of network centrality in determining election and career progression.

Keywords: social networks, political careers, political selection

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1 Introduction

Political power can often be acquired through family connections. This is an explicit feature of systems based on the hereditary transmission of political roles, for example in monarchies. Even when such explicit mechanisms are not in place, however, some families often emerge as politically prominent to the point of creating sort of dynasties. Well known examples can be found in the ancient Roman republic as well as in contemporary democracies like the USA and India. In this paper we ask how do political careers relate to family networks. We try to address this question with a novel dataset combining information on the political careers of British MPs since 1831 and on the family trees of the British aristocracy. We ask if the political careers of British MPs during a period lasting almost two centuries can be related to their centrality in the aristocratic network. We document a number of patterns, including the decline over time of the importance of aristocratic networks as well as the persistence of other characteristics, for example having attended an elite university. On average we find that more central members of aristocratic networks were, ceteris paribus (i.e. controlling for education and professional experience) entering parliament much younger, hence accumulating more legislative experience and seniority. Even controlling for seniority, we find that more central members of aristocratic networks were more likely to acquire executive responsibilities as members of the cabinet.

2 Related literature

The political consequences of family networks are receiving increasing attention in political science and political economy. The literature is not vast but has certainly delivered very important and promising results.

Some contributions focus on political dynasties without looking at entire family trees or calculating centrality scores. Dal Bó et al. 2009 find that the dynastic persistence of legislators in the US Congress is higher than in other professions and that holding a seat for longer increases the probability of having a relative being elected in Congress in the future. Van Coppenolle 2017 on the other hand, in a study of the British parliament, using RDD find no evidence of an effect of tenure length on dynastic persistence. Both papers use a binary indicator of connection which

is equal to 1 if two individuals are related, but do not exploit the family network structure.

Another paper using connections but not networks is Xu (2018), which shows that interpersonal relations due to family, being a member of the aristocracy or having attended the same elite schools and universities, increased the probability to make an administrative career in the British colonies. More connected people were appointed to better jobs, ceteris paribus. This patronage appointments had social costs because people appointed because of their social connections often turned out to be less effective governors, investing less, raising lower tax revenues etc.

The paper most related to ours is Cruz et al. 2017 which uses centrality scores from network theory calculated for families in the Philippines. They show that more central individuals are more likely to become politicians (i.e. to be candidates) and, once they are candidate, they obtain more votes (ceteris paribus, i.e. controlling for wealth and other personal characteristics).

Two more papers have interesting results on the political importance of networks. Benzell and Cooke 2021 builds the family network of European monarchs from XV century onwards to show that if two countries have family links (often via marriages, but not only) they are less likely to fight a war. They use unexpected deaths that break connections to show that these deaths increase the probability of wars.

Wang 2022 builds family networks for the period 960-1100 in China using tombs epitaphs (which often cite family trees). Families with more geographically dispersed networks were more likely to support the building of state institutions while those which had more concentrated networks (because all family members lived in the same or nearby regions) were less likely to support the devolving of province powers to the central state.

This short section is not meant to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the political importance of family networks but rather to show how varied and promising is the field to which our paper aims to contribute.

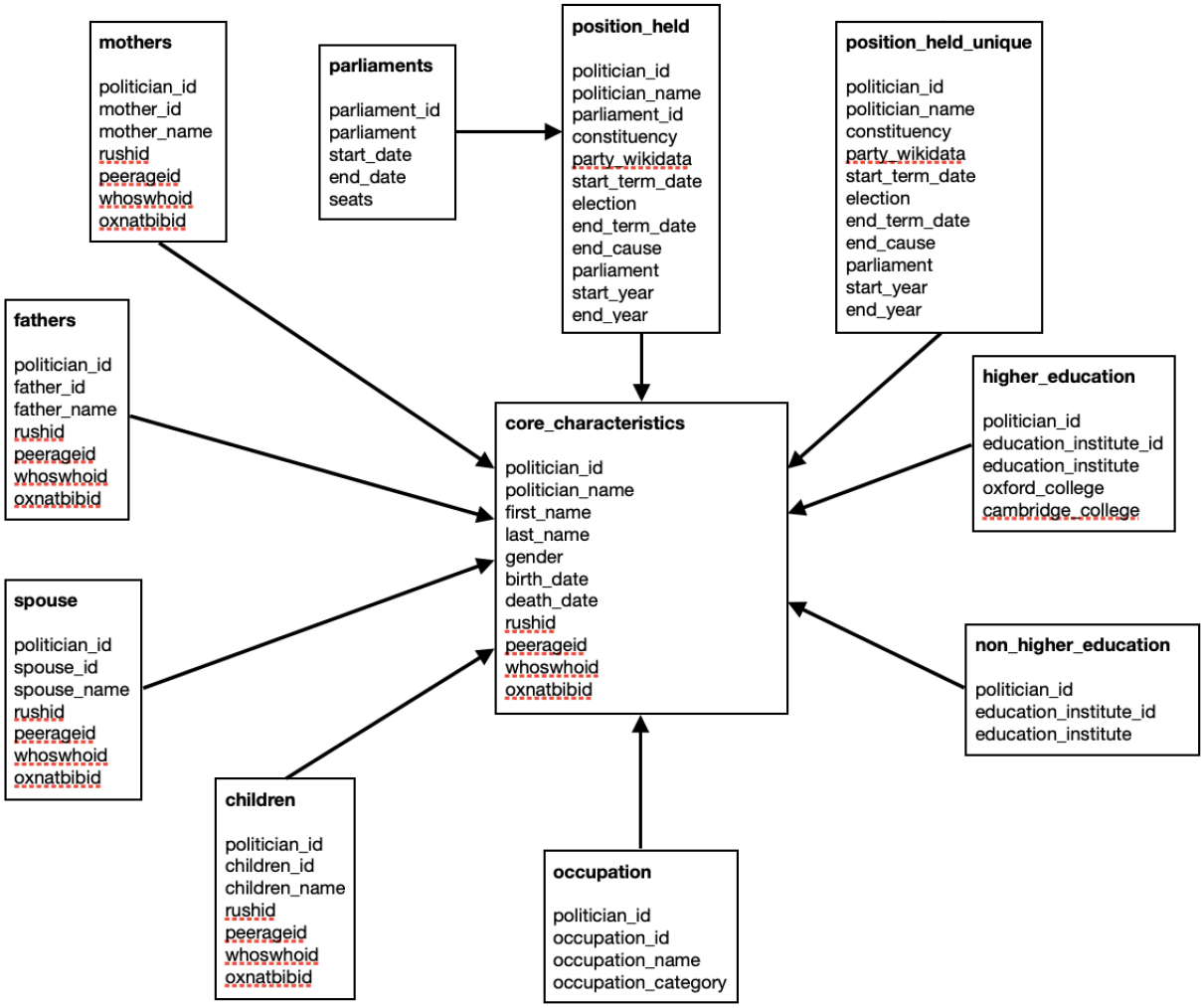
3 Data and methodology

Our dataset combines biographical and political information on MPs with a detailed reconstruction of aristocratic family networks. Our first source of information consists of data gathered from Wikidata. For some variables (e.g. schooling), we complement this data with the database built by Michael Rush, which contains information on British MPs (House of Commons) since the 1832 Reform Act. Our inspection reveals that the Wikidata is more accurate and complete than the Rush database. However, the Wikidata have been assembled using, among other sources, also the Rush database. Our final sample consists of around $10,500$ elected MPs born between 1751 and 1996 and who have been in parliament since 1831. Our dataset includes a wide range of variables such as the MPs party affiliations, cabinet positions, school and university education, and occupations.

The MP data is not a network dataset. We use network features from the second key source of data for this project, the records of families related to the British aristocracy. The database on the peerage of Britain as well as the royal families of Europe was collected by Darryl Lundy.[1] The core of the database is a digitised version of the *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage* books (1999 and 2003 editions) but subsets of other books and further information have been added to the database . It is not obvious how to pin down the criteria that have determined entry into the Burke's books and the Lundy's extensions. This is probably also related to the fact that, unlike other European aristocracies, it has never been entirely clear how to the define the boundaries of the British aristocracy. According to historian Beckett 1986 "if in theory the English aristocracy was not a closed caste, entry and promotion were an extraordinarily complicated process which makes it extremely difficult to decide who belonged to the group in a given point in time (...). With the establishment of the House of Lords a clearer distinction arose between the hereditary nobility (the peerage) and the other ranks, although all remained technically noble." The 1965 edition of Debrett's suggested that "the custom had arisen of using the word nobleman for members of the peerage and baronetage (...) at the same time it was accepted that everyone bearing duly authorized arms was equally entitled to be styled noble, whether he was a peer, a baronet, a knight or a gentlemen" (i.e. untitled). In a 1830 pamphlet

[1] Available online at `https://www.thepeerage.com/`

Figure 1: Schema of the dataset of Members of Parliament



which was attempting to define the boundaries of aristocracy we can read that "the nobility in England, though it forms the basis and the bulk, forms not the whole of our aristocratic body. To all practical purposes we must include under that name all their immediate connections, and even all who live in the same circles, have the same objects, and from time to time attain the same privileges". In any event, although the decision to include some families in the Burke's books could have been somewhat arbitrary for marginal cases, we have good reasons to believe that the most prominent and central families were always included, so that the problem could be more one of false negatives than false positives.[2].

The Burke-Lundy dataset currently contains around 740,000 individuals and their family relations, with birth years ranging from 350 to 2022. If we only consider entries sourced from Burke's books we have around 370,000 individuals.

The Wikidata pages of MPs already contain links into this peerage dataset (further links may be found with fuzzy matching of names). Hence, we are able to reconstruct detailed family trees of all MPs who are in the Burke-Lundy database.

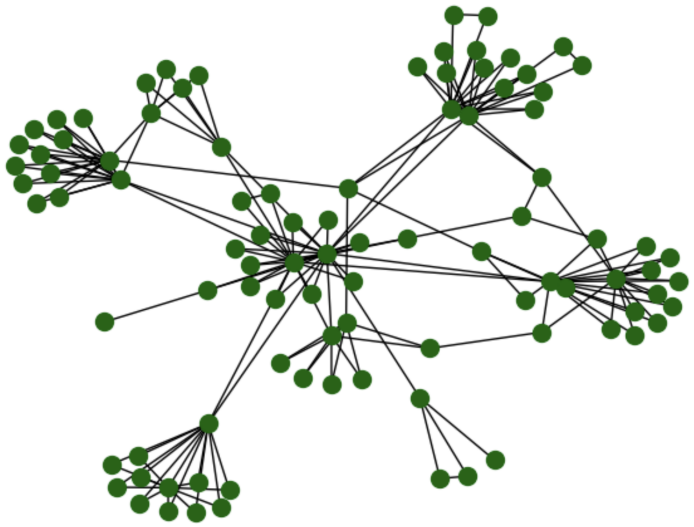
Our next step then is to construct for all MPs their indicators of centrality in the network of the British aristocracy. MPs who do not have entries in the Burke-Lundy database are assumed to have no aristocratic connections. For those who appear in the Burke-Lundy database we compute (eigenvector) scores of centrality in the aristocratic network. We can then determine correlations of centrality scores with career progression and other variables of interest.

Since our data span several centuries, we have many degrees of freedom for setting up the network structures. This poses several important challenges since we would like to come out with indicators which have a clear and meaningful interpretation with respect to our goal of better understanding the careers of politicians.

The main challenge we face is to decide, for each of the entries, what are the relevant connections. For example an aristocratic MP born in 1780 and sitting in parliament in 1845 has both backward and forward connections, with people who have lived centuries apart. Deciding which connections are relevant is not a straightforward task and we could not find any accepted or standard methodology in the existing literature.

[2]We also face potential issues of reverse causality for those cases where a successful political career could determine inclusion into the books, rather than the other way around. We will discuss this issue later in the paper

Figure 2: An example of family networks and their connections



One simple way to build the relevant network is to construct an unweighted and undirected graph by simply adding connections between parents and children and between spouses. This method, although quite simple and intuitive, also poses numerous challenges. Constructing a single aristocratic family network for the whole peerage dataset spanning birth years from 350 to 2022 would mechanically tend to give people with many descendants a higher centrality. However, children and other descendants mostly did not matter for MPs' career progression. Another problem is that individuals of earlier birth years would also mechanically have many generations of descendants in this network, while individuals born close to the end of the dataset would have almost none. In other terms, as the network grows over time, earlier entries would mechanically become more central. For these reasons, it is natural that for each MP we only consider backward connections and not forward connections.

A possible way to restrict the network of each individual only to relevant (i.e. backward) connections is to "slice" our dataset to create a sequence of networks. For example, we could consider as separate the networks of individuals born in different decades, creating a network of all individuals born in 1750-1759, a network of all individuals born in 1760-1769 etc. We would then focus only on backward connections, i.e. consider as part of the network only individuals born up until that decade. In this way we can determine everyone's centrality *at birth* by first

matching them to the network ending at their birth decade and then computing their centrality based on that network.

This approach poses another challenge, namely that centrality scores of MPs born in different periods now come from different networks. The average centrality in the up-to-1750 network is different to the average centrality in the up-to-1970 network. Centrality relative to everyone in a network ranging all the way back to 350 AD also does not seem to be the most natural indicator if we intend to use that to explain career progression. A possible solution consists in using full up-to-year network to compute centrality scores (as previously explained), but then compare individuals' centrality only to those born in their birth decade. This means comparing individuals within their cohort rather than across all generations, which seems the natural way to approach the "race" to the top faced by the politicians of each generation.

To implement this idea we create dummy variables equal to 1 for individuals whose centrality score (as previously defined) is in the top 10% or top 25% within their birth decade. In the end, every individual has a value of 0 or 1 in a centrality indicator variable. However, all these values are computed based on their specific networks at birth.[3]

To recap, our procedure to include centrality in the aristocratic network into the MPs dataset is the following: for each member of parliament in our dataset: 1) Determine the birth year, say e.g. 1972; 2) check whether the MP is contained in the aristocratic (Burke-Lundy) dataset. If yes, set an aristocratic dummy value of 1, otherwise 0; 3) if the aristocratic dummy is equal to 1, use the up-to-decade-of-birth network to compute centrality scores for all nodes; 4) create a dummy variable for MPs in the top 10% of centrality scores: if an MP's centrality is in the top 10% of centrality scores relative only to people born in the same decade then set the dummy equal to 1, otherwise to 0; 5) repeat the procedure under 4) to create a dummy for MPs who are between the top 10 and the top 25% of centrality scores.

[3]An alternative network analysis would consist in creating a weighted network with adjacency matrix containing coefficients of relatedness/kinship. In this case we would then try to approximate the genetic information that someone shares with their birth cohort in the aristocratic network. And we could then again create an indicator for the top x percent, now without an immediate need to compute centrality scores. This procedure can get computationally very heavy and all incomplete parental data are dropped by some libraries. We have calculated these kinship scores and kinship dummies. The correlation between top 10 kinship dummy with top 10 centrality dummy turns out to be ≈ 0.6.

4 The socio-economic background of British MPs: 1831-2023

In the following we use our novel dataset to document some stylised facts about the background of British MPs during the last two centuries.

We begin with education, by looking first at the type of institutions attended. The Public Schools Act of 1868 defined a group of "great nine" elite schools which have up to our days a higher status and reputation than other schools in Britain. These schools were identified by a Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of the 4th Earl of Clarendon, and are commonly known as Clarendon schools.[4]

Figure 3 shows the share of MPs who attended one of the Clarendon elite schools. This share has been more or less constantly declining from about 0.35 in 1831 to about 0.05 today. It is interesting to note the sharp declines following the two World Wars.

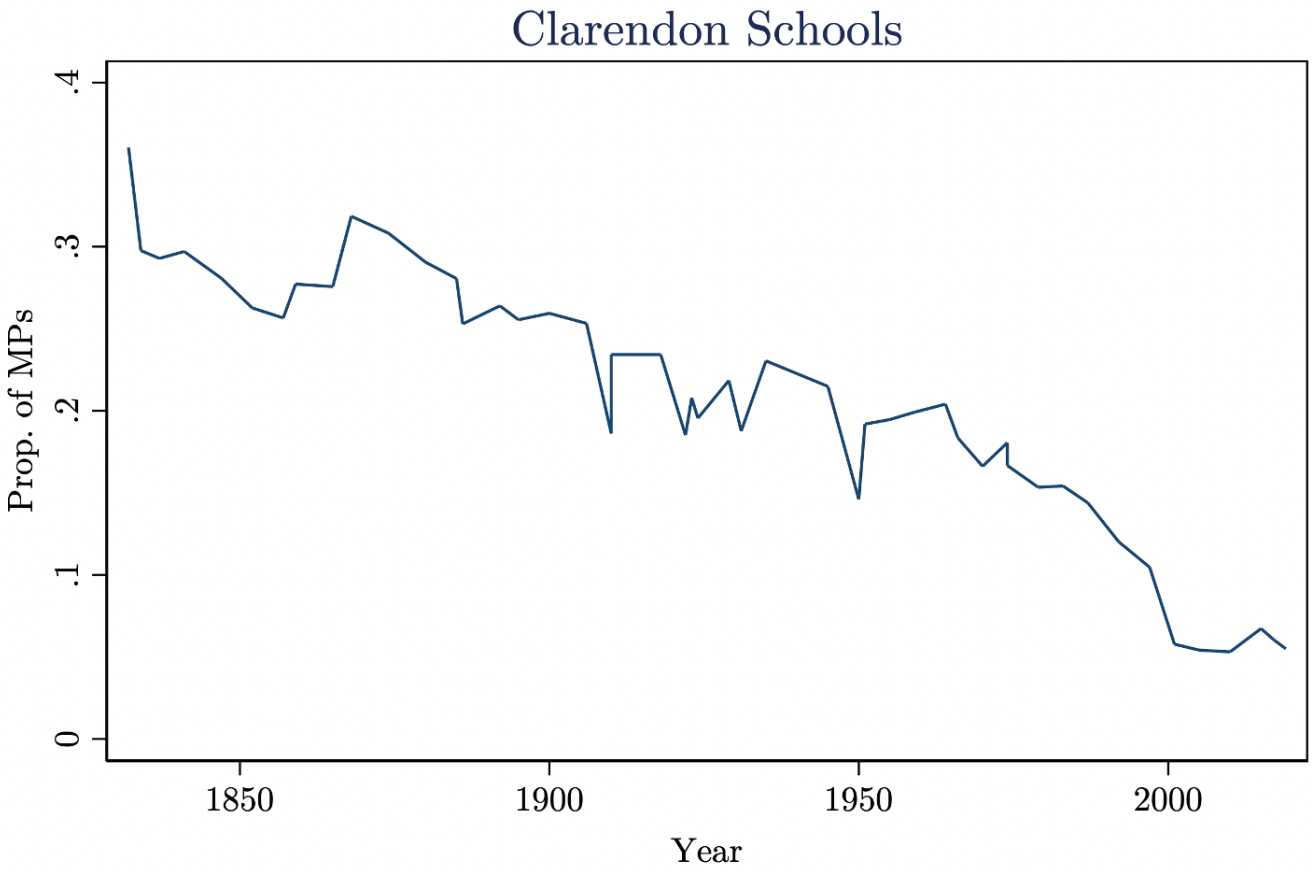
Starting in 1920, when the Labour party acquires a meaningful parliamentary presence, we can look at MPs attending Clarendon school separately for the Conservative and the Labour party. Figure 4 shows that the Labour party always had a tiny share of MPs educated in elite schools. This share has always been much higher for the Conservative party but has declined over time and it is about 10 percent today.

Even among the Clarendon schools, two institutions, Eton and Harrow, have special prestige, having educated between them 17 Prime Ministers during the period we study. Figure 5 shows the share of MPs who were educated either at Eton or Harrow. Here too we observe a decline over time. It is remarkable that, at the start of our period of interest, almost 1 out of 3 MPs had been educated at one of these institutions. In recent parliaments this figure has been around 3-4 percent, which is much smaller but perhaps not so small if we consider that we are talking about just two schools.

We next turn to university education. Figure 6 shows the share of MPs with a university degree, which has been constantly increasing over time both for the Conservative and the Labour

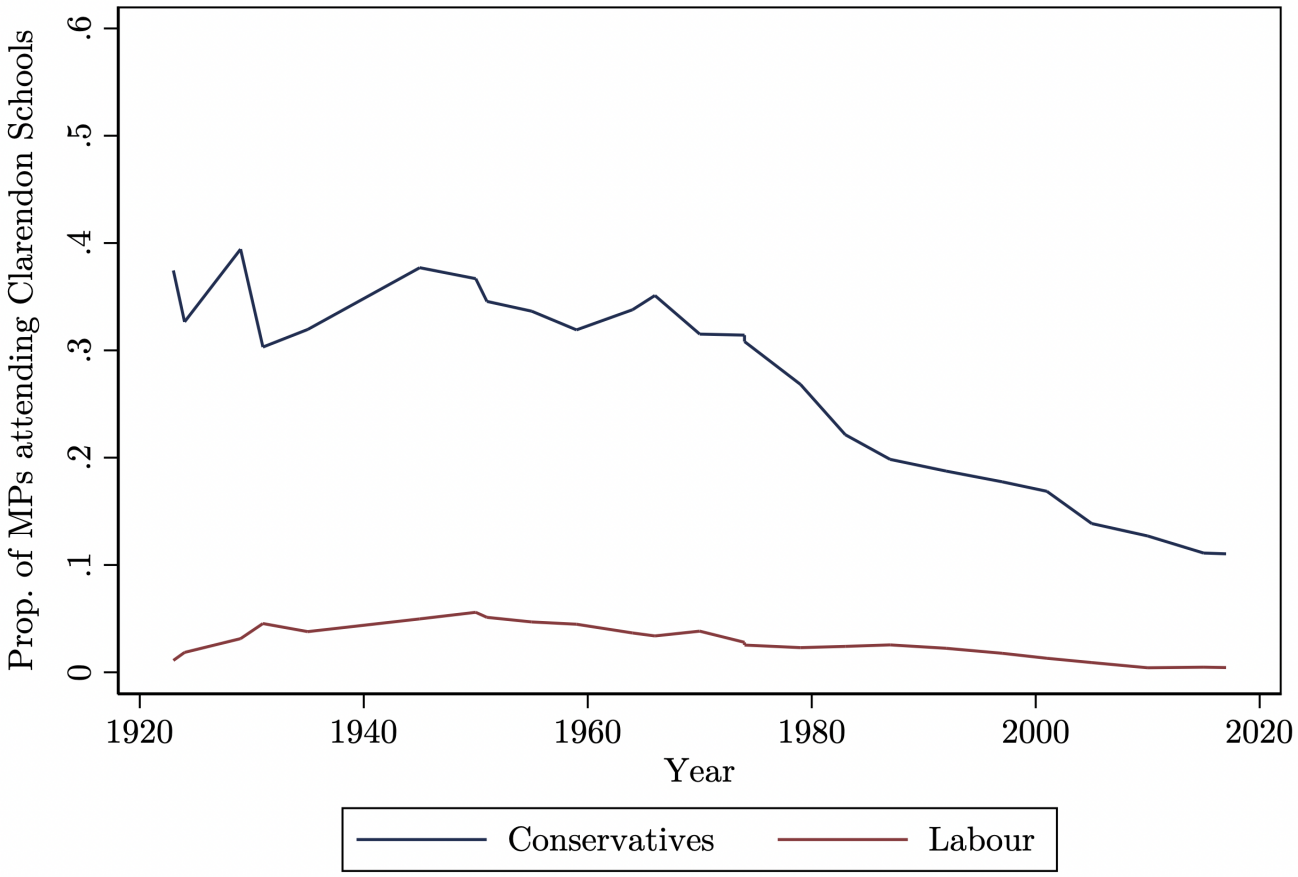
[4]These elite schools are Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Merchant Taylors', Rugby, St Paul's, Shrewsbury, Westminster and Winchester.

Figure 3: Share of MPs who attended one of the Clarendon Schools



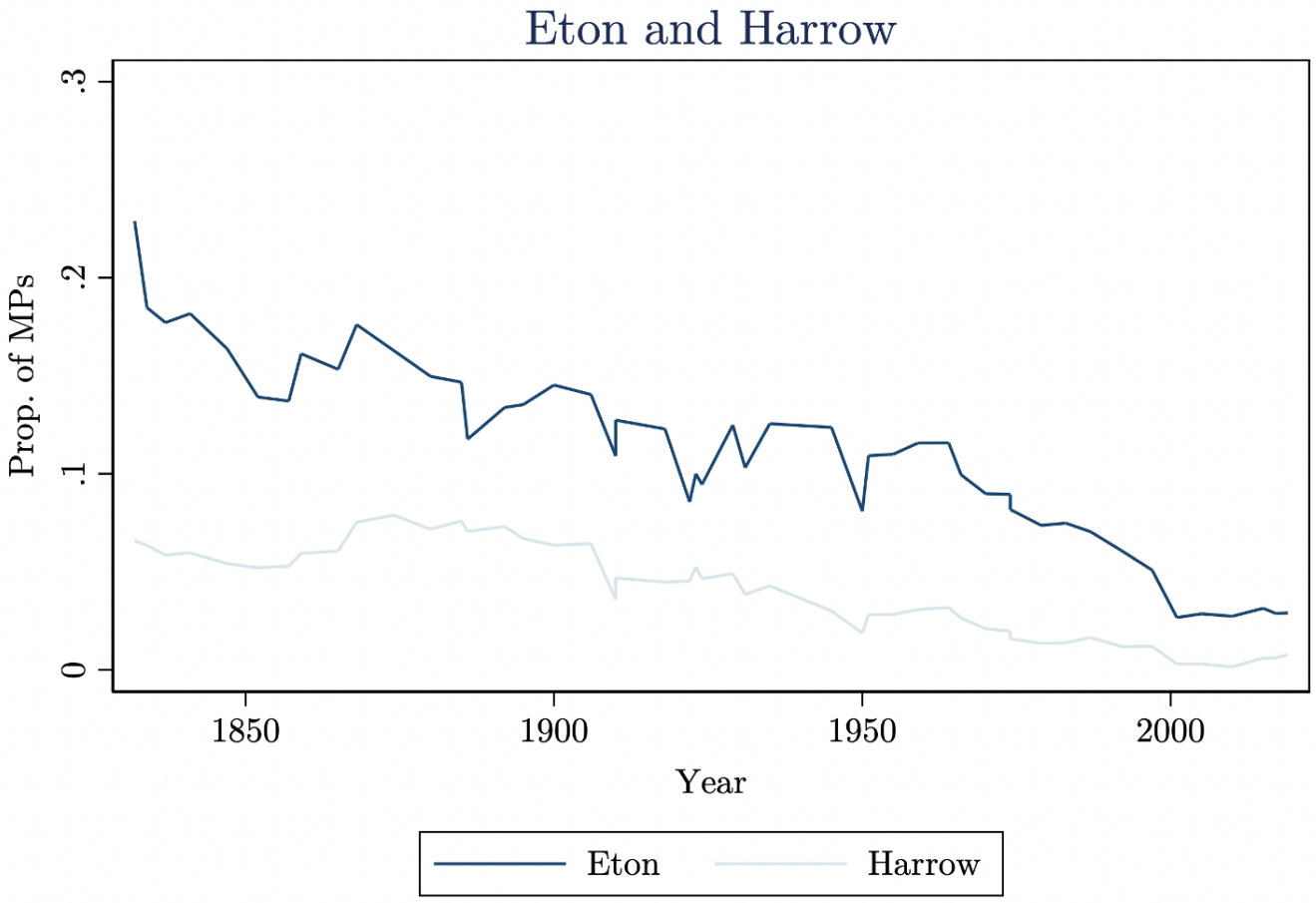
Note: year refers to the end year of a given parliament. Clarendon schools refer to nine prominent schools: Eton, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Westminster, Winchester, St Paul's and Merchant Taylors'

Figure 4: Share of MPs who attended Clarendon Schools by party



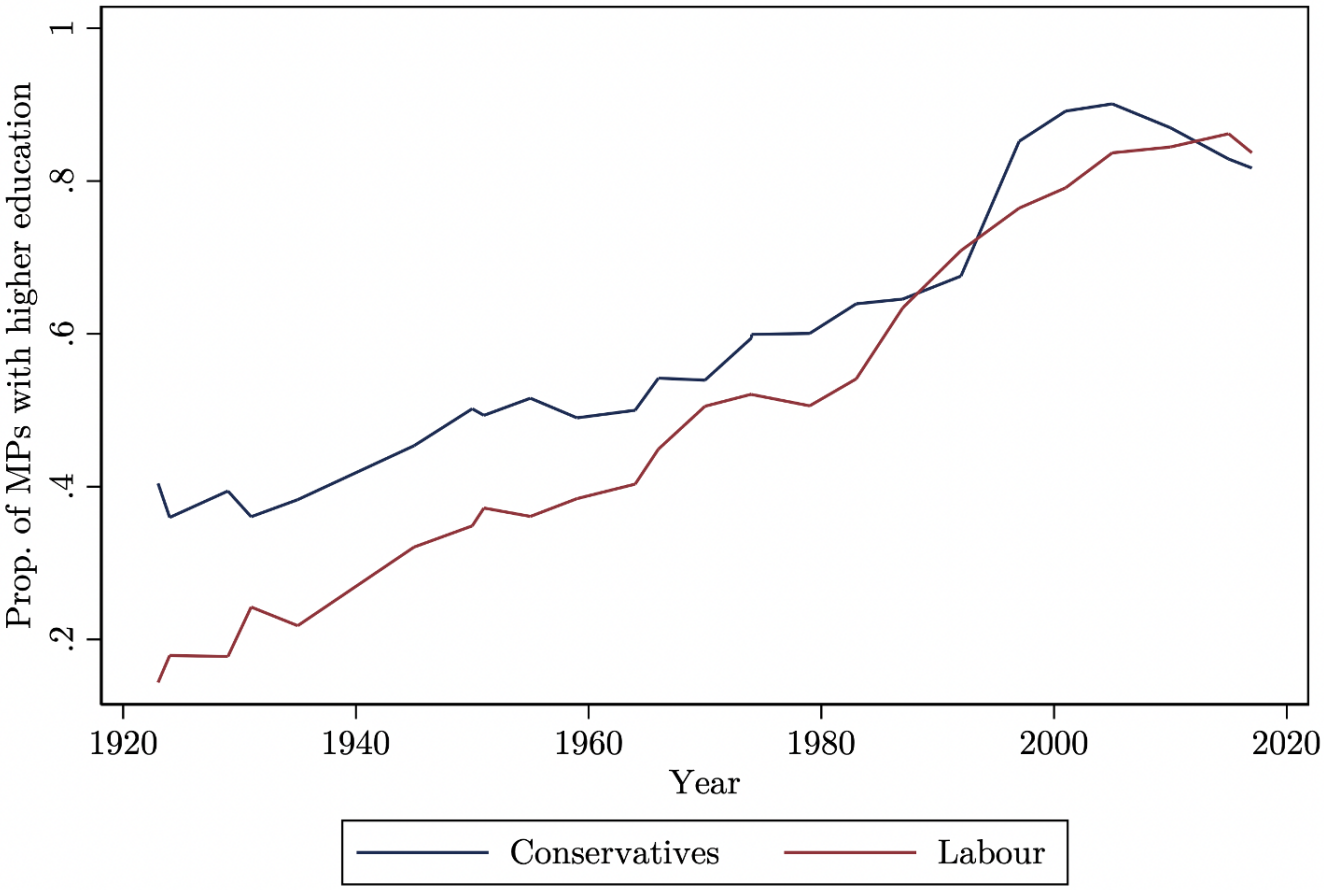
Note: each series plots the prop. of MPs by party educated at Clarendon schools. Averages are taken by parliament. Year refers to the start year of each parliament.

Figure 5: Share of MPs educated at either Eton or Harrow



Note: year refers to the end year of a given parliament.

Figure 6: Share of MPs with a university degree



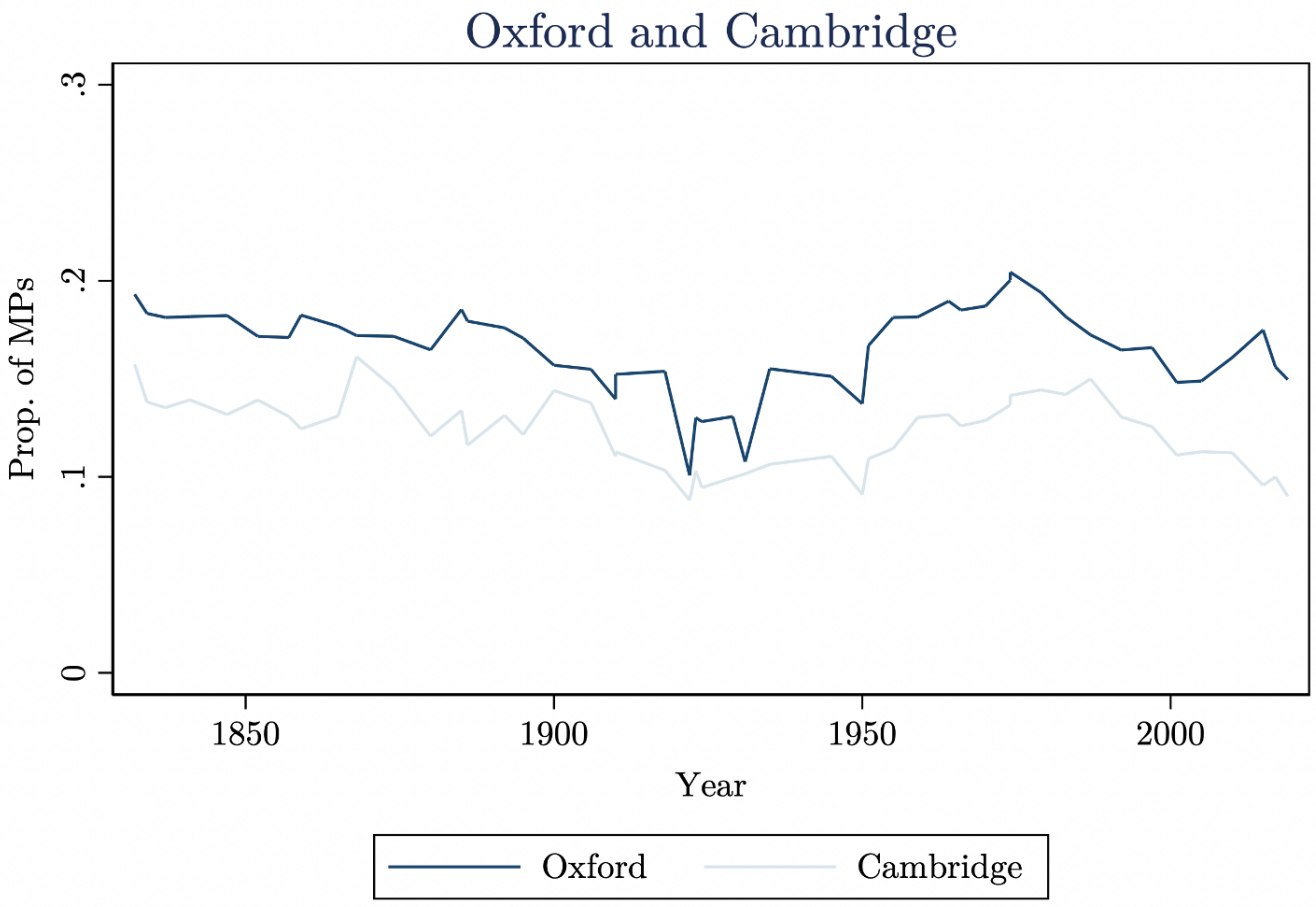
Note: each series plots the prop. of MPs by party with higher education. Averages are taken by parliament. Year refers to the start start year of each parliament.

party.

Also within the university education system, two institutions, Oxford and Cambridge, have historically had a special role in educating the British ruling class. Figure 7 shows that, unlike what we have seen for elite schools, the share of MPs educated at either Oxford or Cambridge has remained fairly constant over two centuries (especially so for Oxford). Today about 1 in 3 MPs has attended one of these two universities. Splitting by party (Figure 8), it is clear that, historically, the share of Conservative MPs educated in Oxbridge is substantially higher than the share of Labour MPs, although this last figure has been rising over time, while the Conservative share seems to have declined during the last three decades.

Figure 9 shows the share of female MPs. The first woman to take up a seat in Westminster

Figure 7: Share of MPs who graduated from either Oxford or Cambridge



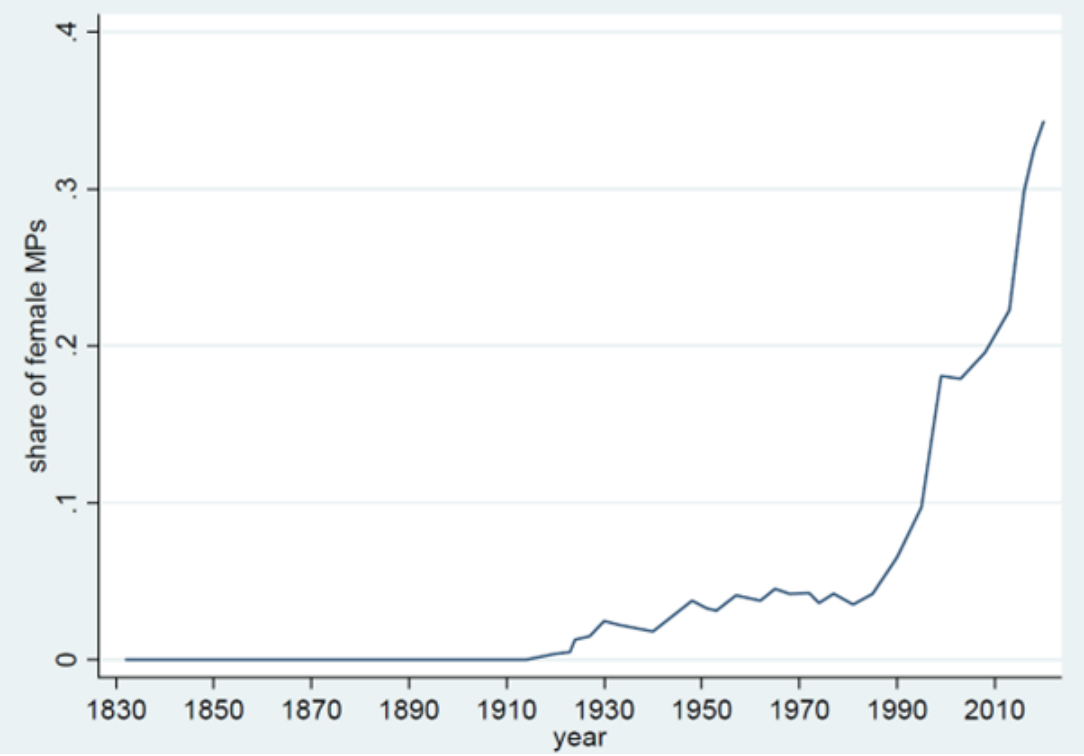
Note: year refers to the end year of a given parliament.

Figure 8: Share of MPs who graduated from either Oxford or Cambridge, by party



Note: each series plots the prop. of MPs by party educated at Oxbridge. Averages are taken by parliament. Year refers to the start start year of each parliament.

Figure 9: Share of female MPs

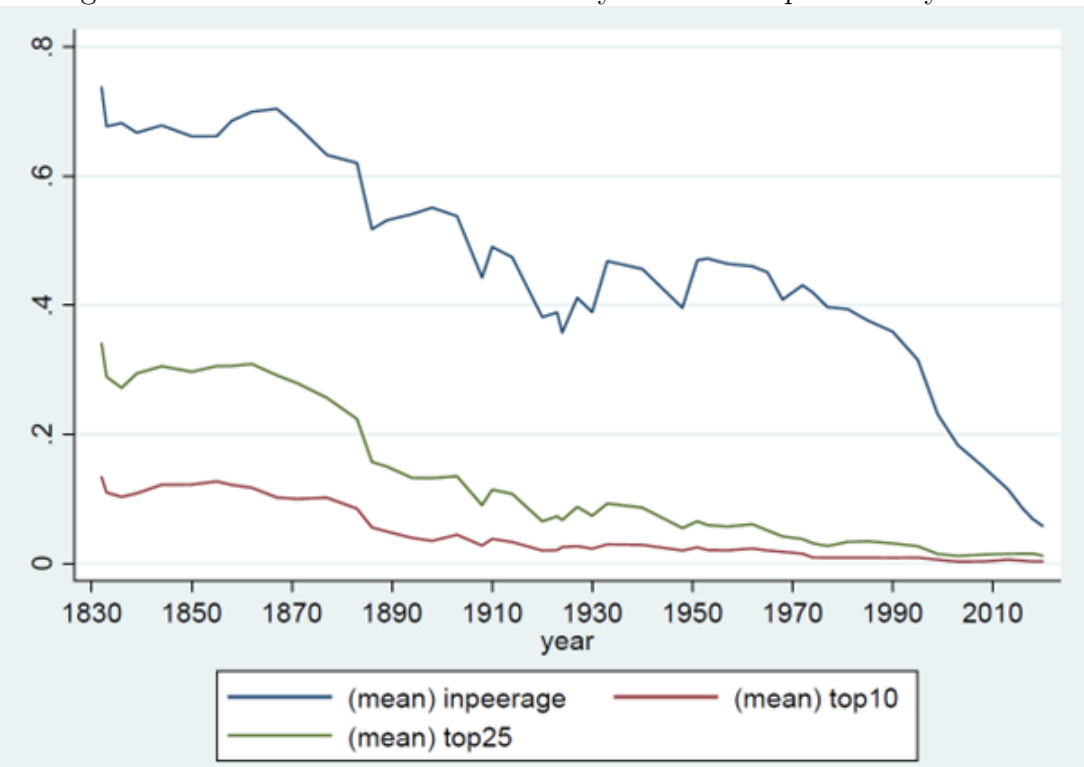


was Nancy Astor in 1919. Female representation in parliament has then increased but remained less than 5 percent up until the 1970s. We need to wait the last decade of the XX century to observe a new dynamics, with a steady increase in the number of female legislators, whose share stands today at about 35 percent.

Next, we look at MPs with aristocratic connections and the evolution over time of the aristocratic centrality scores of MPs. Figure 10 shows three lines. The first describes the percentage of MPs who have entries in Burke's books or in the extended Lundy's database. The share of aristocratic MPs has declined almost constantly over the time period we study. Although aristocratic presence in the House of Commons is almost negligible nowadays, it was well above 70 percent of parliament in the early 19th century. It should be noted that, with ups and downs, the share of aristocratic MPs in parliament remained substantial at about 40 percent (and in fact recovered after a period of decline) up until the 1960s. It is only during the last 50 years that the decline has been very sharp to the point that we can talk of a fall (politically) of the British aristocracy.

To study the evolution over time of the centrality score we define dummy variables for,

Figure 10: Share of MPs in Burke-Lundy and with top centrality scores



respectively, MPs who are in the top 10 and 25 percent of centrality scores over the entire period 1831-2023. In other terms, we still calculate centrality scores using decade by decade cohorts, but then define the dummies over the entire period rather than for each decade. The result of this exercise is reported again in Figure 10 and shows again a constant decline over time, particularly pronounced at the end of the XIX century and the first decades of the XX.

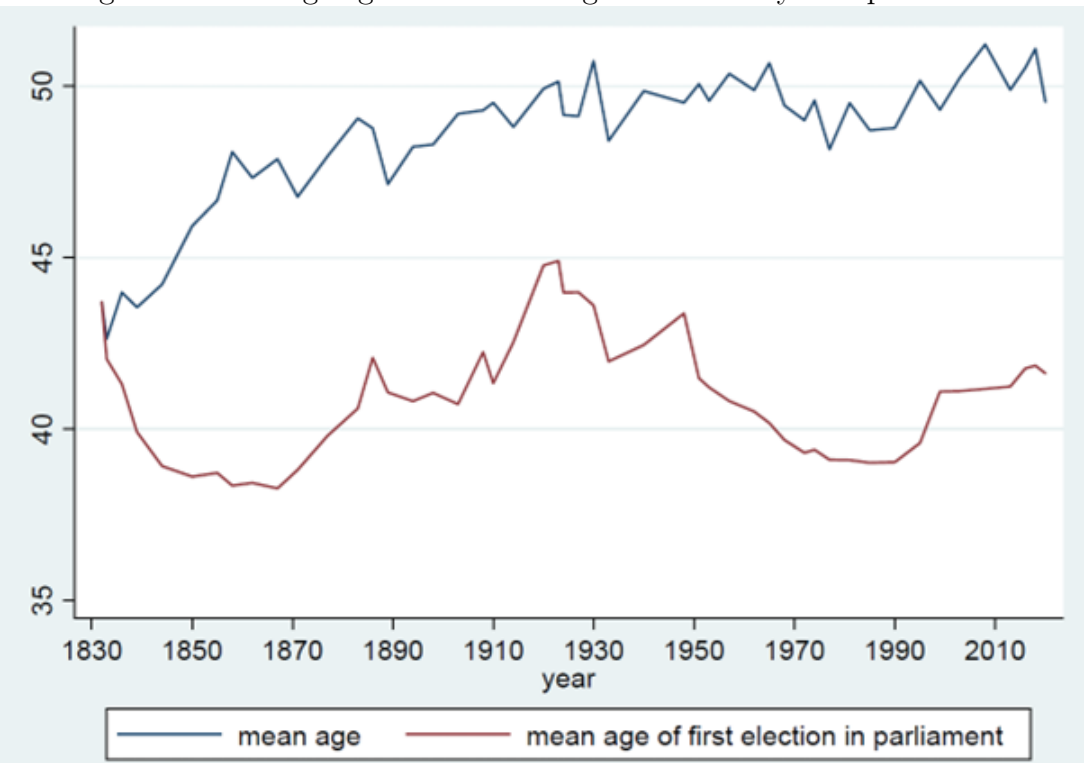
Overall, this section documents some important stylized facts about the evolution of political representation in Britain. We document the key role played by the aristocracy as reservoir of the British ruling class and its decline over time. The dynamics of descriptive representation appears to have particularly accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s, with a steep decline of aristocratic MPs, a rapid increase in the number of women and further decline in the number of MPs who attended elite schools. It is remarkable instead that the number of MPs who attended either Oxford or Cambridge has remained practically the same for two centuries.

5 The political careers of aristocratic MPs

In this section we report the results of regressions trying to assess the relationship between aristocratic connections and political careers. We will focus on two outcomes which can be taken as indicators of career progression. The first concerns the selection into parliament. The second the selection into cabinet. We can assume that selection into parliament is due to a number of observable and unobservable individual characteristics. Among our observables the explanatory variable of interest is centrality in the aristocratic network. We study how network centrality relates to selection into parliament controlling for a number of observables which are likely to affect the chances of becoming an MP. Since our sample only consists of MPs we can't compare MPs with non-elected candidates. We will focus instead on the age of first election into parliament. Our question is then: are connected MPs (that is, MPs who are more central in the aristocratic network) significantly younger when they enter parliament? Although entering parliament at a younger age could signal better skills or suitability for the job, we control for various indicators of education and occupation which should capture in part these characteristics. Political skills may obviously not be entirely explained by the observables we use (like education), which means that the following regressions will be unable to pin down the precise mechanisms generating the correlations.

Figure 11 reports the average age of MPs and the age of first entry into parliament during the period we study. Table 1 reports our regressions. Our results show that MPs who are more central in aristocratic networks enter parliament significantly younger than other MPs. This correlation remains substantial even when we control for being an aristocrat (as captured by having an entry in the Burke-Lundy database). Even controlling for university education, type of university or schools attended, and occupation, the age advantage of being in the top 10 of network centrality remains substantial. Being in top 10 of the aristocratic network centrality score means entering parliament at least 7 years earlier than average, ceteris paribus. Being in the top 25 percent but not in the top 10 implies becoming an MP at least 5 years earlier than average. Being in the top 10 of the centrality score is the single most important factor explaining age of entry. A university degree reduces age of entry on average by about 2.5 years, graduating

Figure 11: Average age of MPs and age of first entry into parliament



from Oxford or Cambridge cuts age of entry by another 1 or 2 years. Having attended an elite school appears to have almost the same weight as a university degree (about 2 years) but having attended either Eton or Harrow reduces the age by further 2 or 3 years. An aristocrat not in the top of centrality scores will gain another 2.5 years on average. These are in our view quite important numbers. For example, an individual in the top 10 of centrality scores who went to school at Eton and obtained a degree from Oxford will on average enter parliament 16 years younger than an individual with none of those characteristics. The difference becomes 14 years if the comparison is made with an individual with a university degree not from Oxbridge who attended a non-elite school. Although these correlations could be due to omitted variables, it's quite likely that inherited privileges could, at least in part, facilitate entry into parliament of individuals with shorter CVs. In any event these differences in age of entry are so large that they are likely to create permanent advantages in career progression due merely to seniority. They certainly deserve further study.

We next look at selection into cabinet, a major step in the political career of an MP. We ask

Table 1: Network centrality and age of first entry into parliament

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
top10centrality	-11.115***	-8.787***	-7.375***	-7.259***
	(0.635)	(0.585)	(0.544)	(0.530)
centrality_25_10	-8.610***	-6.322***	-5.460***	-5.375***
	(0.658)	(0.549)	(0.492)	(0.509)
inpeerage		-4.378***	-2.573***	-2.677***
		(0.358)	(0.339)	(0.344)
HEdegree			-2.535***	-2.498***
			(0.310)	(0.298)
oxford			-1.643***	-1.487**
			(0.585)	(0.572)
cambridge			-0.694*	-0.619
			(0.402)	(0.395)
Eton			-2.992***	-2.841***
			(0.425)	(0.419)
Harrow			-1.760**	-1.611**
			(0.687)	(0.670)
public_school			-2.007***	-2.035***
			(0.327)	(0.336)
Parliament fixed effects always included.				
The last column includes occupation dummies				
N	10323	10323	10323	10323
R^2	0.098	0.130	0.184	0.193
SE clustered at the parliament level				
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$				

then what are the correlates of the transition from the so-called backbench into the front-bench, and in particular what is the explanatory power of centrality in the aristocratic network.

Table 2 reports the results of a linear probability model with parliament fixed effects. The unconditional regressions of column 1 suggest that MPs in the top 10 of aristocratic network centrality are about 4 percent more likely than average to be in cabinet. The figure becomes 2 percent for MPs with centrality score between the top 10 and the top 25. When we control for the Burke-Lundy aristocratic dummy only the coefficient of the top 10 remains statistically significant and its magnitude halves. We then progressively include control variables, age and

seniority (years already served in parliament) in column 3, education variables in column 4 and occupation dummies in column 5. Columns 1-5 report standard errors clustered at the parliament level. In column 6 we cluster the standard errors at the individual politician level. This increases the standard error of top 10 centrality which remains nevertheless statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

On average, using the estimates of columns 5-6, MPs in the aristocratic network are 3 percent more likely to enter cabinet and this advantage becomes 5 percent if they are in the top 10 of centrality scores. Individuals in the top 10 are therefore about 2 percent more likely to enter cabinet than other aristocrats, which provides a bigger advantage than a university degree. Not surprisingly age and seniority matter, which means that top 10 MPs enjoy a double advantage, first by entering much earlier into parliament (hence accumulating more seniority, ceteris paribus) and then by having, for the same age, seniority and type of education, a higher probability of serving in cabinet.

Our regressions span almost two hundred years of data. It is then important to ask how the relationship between centrality in aristocratic networks and political careers has changed over time. For this reason we run separate regressions for each parliament to see if and how our coefficients of interest evolves. In Fig 12 we focus on age of first entry into parliament. Each dot represents a coefficient estimate for a given parliament, starting in 1831 and ending with the current parliament elected in 2019. We plot the coefficient of top 10 centrality, controlling for the variables included in Table 1, the bars are 5 percent confidence intervals.

Being in the top 10 percent of aristocratic network centrality was obviously very important during the entire XIX century, with all coefficients being negative and (with one exception) statistically significant at 5 percent level. The first election in which the top 10 did not seem to have had any age advantage is 1910. During the XX century, although connected aristocrats still tend to enter parliament at a younger age, the coefficient is often statistically insignificant.

In Figure 13 we repeat the same exercise for the probability of being in cabinet. In this case, due to the small numbers involved, statistical significance at conventional level is rarely achieved in the parliament-by-parliament regressions. The pattern emerging from the plotted

Table 2: Probability to enter cabinet

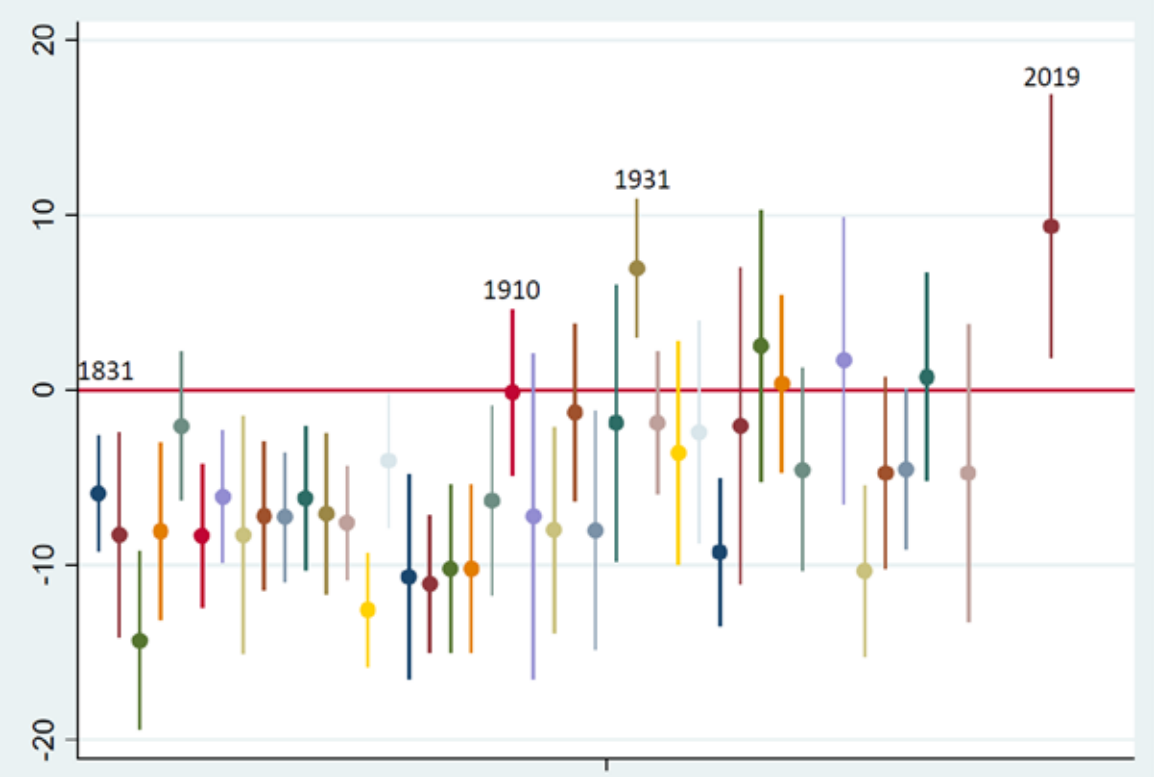
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
top10centrality	0.043***	0.019**	0.019**	0.023***	0.021***	0.021*
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.012)
centrality_25_10	0.022***	-0.002	-0.004	-0.002	0.000	0.000
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.008)
inpeerage		0.050***	0.037***	0.032***	0.030***	0.030***
		(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
age			0.008***	0.008***	0.008***	0.008***
			(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
age2			-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***
			(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
seniority			0.017***	0.016***	0.017***	0.017***
			(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
seniority2			-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
			(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
HEdegree				0.018***	0.015***	0.015***
				(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
oxford				0.022***	0.021***	0.021***
				(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)
cambridge				0.018***	0.016**	0.016**
				(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Eton				-0.015***	-0.013***	-0.013**
				(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Harrow				-0.001	0.001	0.001
				(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.011)
public_school				-0.001	-0.000	-0.000
				(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Parliament fixed effects always included						
The last 2 columns include occupation dummies						
N	34764	34764	34689	34689	34689	34689
R^2	0.009	0.025	0.054	0.061	0.071	0.071

SE clustered at the parliament level except in last column when it's clustered at the individual politician level

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

coefficients, however, reveals once again a clear decline of the importance of aristocratic networks over time. While the coefficient is almost always positive during the XIX and early XX century, it becomes decidedly less predictable later in the XX century and constantly negative during the XXI century. The precision of the estimate also declines substantially over time, due to the fact that fewer people in the top 10 of centrality enter parliament. Overall both Fig 12 and Fig 13 appear to confirm the descriptive pattern of Figure 10, namely that aristocratic networks

Figure 12: Age of entry into parliament: the coefficient of top 10 centrality over time



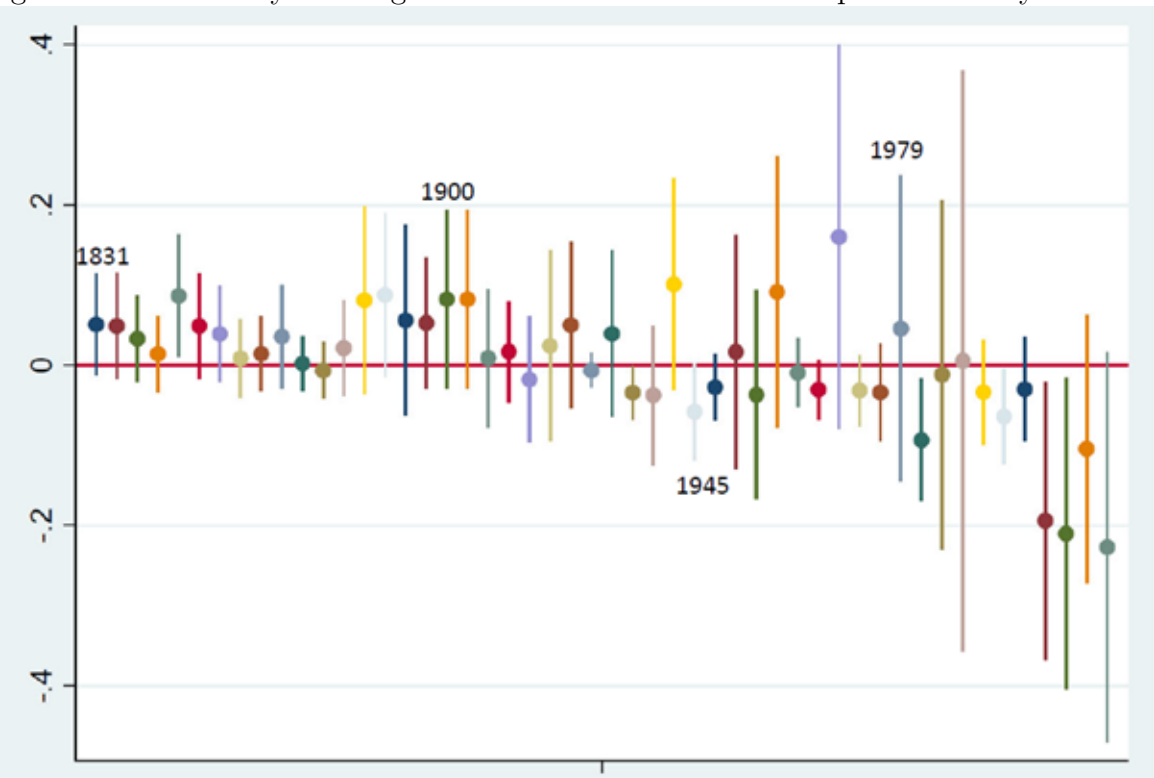
have played a key role in British politics during the XIX century but that their importance has declined during the XX centuries, and particularly from the 1970s.

6 Discussion

In this paper we introduce a novel dataset which combines biographical data on British MPs with detailed information on aristocratic family networks. We use this dataset to present new evidence on the socio-economic background of British MPs and on the correlates of political careers.

First, we present some descriptive evidence, mostly of an historical nature, on the evolution over two centuries of some of the socioeconomic characteristics of British MPs. We document the importance of the aristocracy in the House of Commons during the XIX century as well as its decline during the XX century, particularly the second half. We also document a number of stylized facts about MPs' education and the type of institutions they attended. Of particular

Figure 13: Probability of being in cabinet: the coefficient of top 10 centrality over time



interest is the fact that the number of MPs drawn from elite private schools has declined over time but the number of MPs who attended elite universities (Oxford and Cambridge) has remained remarkably stable over two centuries.

We then use the family network of British aristocrats to create centrality scores and check how aristocratic connections are related to political careers. We show that more connected individuals, ceteris paribus, enter parliament substantially younger and are more likely to progress into ministerial responsibilities. Our regression analysis spans two centuries of data and coefficients may therefore be hard to interpret. Hence, we run separate regressions for the 49 parliaments we cover (from the 10th to the 58th) and plot the coefficients to see how they change over time. This exercise confirms the declining role played by the aristocracy in British politics during the second half of the XX century.

The predictive power of our centrality indicators is encouraging, even more so considering that our estimates remain statistically significant even when we include a general indicator for aristocracy (as captured by having an entry in the Burke-Lundy database). Even if we

cannot claim to have identified causal effects, it seems unlikely that the predictive power of high centrality in the aristocratic network at birth can be entirely explained by confounders not included in our equations. It is also unlikely that politicians who were added to the books because of their political achievements (hence creating a problem of reverse causality) were also highly central in the network at birth.

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