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Dynasties in Historical Political Economy

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Abstract

The hereditary transfer of political power within families is a prominent feature of premodern societies, and persists in some form even in modern democracies. This chapter reviews the role of dynasties in the historical development of states, and how patterns in dynastic politics serve as a useful metric for understanding the evolution of power and state organization in historical political economy research. We identify and describe three broad declines in the role of dynasties in politics: (1) a decline of monarchy in favor of democracy and other forms of government; (2) a decline in the prevalence of elected members of dynasties in democracies; and (3) a decline in the gendered differences in reliance on dynastic ties for entry into politics. Despite these general declines, dynastic ties remain advantageous to politicians' careers in many countries, especially when it comes to reaching the top echelons of power in the executive. (148 words)

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Introduction

Political dynasties are as old as politics. Whenever societies organize people into those with the power to rule, and those who are ruled, there must be a mechanism for selecting the former. Throughout most of human history, family ties through blood or marriage to the outgoing ruler have served as an important (but not singular) organizing principle in that selection decision. Indeed, the history of the world is often organized around the reigns of monarchs—and the conflicts that arise in replacing them. The modern development of representative democracy, whereby rulers are selected via elections by a broadly enfranchised citizenry, might be expected to shift power away from dynasties. But even within democracies, members of established political families often continue to enjoy an advantage over newcomers in gaining and holding onto power.

A growing literature in political science, history, and economics considers not only the puzzle of why dynastic selection into power occurs—in both autocracies and democracies—but also whether dynastic rule produces any meaningful consequences for the quality of governance and other outcomes. When and why do dynasties emerge or fade from political life? Does hereditary succession into power produce stability or conflict? Do dynastic leaders bring long-term economic growth or stagnation? Are dynastic leaders of higher or lower quality than non-dynastic leaders? And what is the relationship between the persistence of dynasties and features of the political and economic environment, such as the institutions of elections and political parties, or the relative value of political office compared to private enterprise? These kinds of questions place the puzzle of dynasties at the intersection of the various disciplines that have inspired the development of historical political economy as a distinct field of research.

This chapter reviews the historical and contemporary roles that family ties play in political selection. Broadly, the evolution of dynastic politics over time can be characterized by three patterns of decline. First, in terms of regime type across states, there has been a long-term decline in monarchies and family-based dictatorships, in favor of representative democracy with directly or indirectly elected executives. Second, within democracies there has been a long-term decline in the presence of elected members of dynasties serving in national legislatures, as political parties have institutionalized the processes of recruitment, campaigning, and elections. Exceptions to this pattern among advanced industrialized democracies are found where parties are weak and elections are highly personalized. Third, there has been a decline in the gendered nature of dynastic selection into politics—while women have historically been more likely to enter politics through a dynastic channel, this pattern has declined over time as gender representation has increased.

Despite these general tendencies for hereditary selection into politics to decline over time, members of dynasties continue to enjoy significant advantages in democracies—not only in getting recruited and elected, but also in reaching the highest positions of power in executive cabinets. Although democracies select rulers through elections, and parties provide a vehicle for ambitious newcomers to enter into politics, dynasties remain relevant to understanding power in democracies around the world. The impact of these modern-day democratic dynasties on political outcomes, and how the evolution of dynastic power coincides with broader patterns in the historical development of states, are important frontiers for research in historical political economy.

The First Decline: Absolute Monarchies and Personalist Autocracies

There are numerous theories of the early origins of the state and its consolidation (see Diamond 1997; Spruyt 2002; Scott 2017; Grzymala-Busse 2020). A stylized view of the conventional wisdom begins with small kinship-based groups of nomadic peoples led by elders or chiefs. The development of agriculture and domestication of animals around 8000 BCE allowed for sedentary settlement and the accumulation of surplus food. This in turn led to technological innovation, the development of societal hierarchies, conquest and expansion, and the accumulation of greater wealth and power. While early forms of democracy (or oligarchy) existed throughout the pre-modern world (see Stasavage 2020), in most pre-modern states, hereditary rule emerged as a logical extension of kinship to manage societies as they enlarged (Duindam 2016).¹

If a society is ruled by a king, there must be some mechanism—a succession rule—for replacing him when he dies or vacates office peacefully (i.e., is not overthrown by a rival who becomes the new king). Open competition by would-be successors inevitably invites conflict and disorder, and appointing a successor in advance may create incentives for that successor to depose the king to take power for himself (Herz 1952). An expectation of hereditary succession, in contrast, reduces the pool of would-be successors to family relatives, but might still invite intrafamilial conflict over which relative will take power. In most early forms of kingship in Europe (and elsewhere), succession decisions involved some combination of hereditary right, the strength or suitability of would-be rulers, and some form of election by peers (Duindam 2016, p. 145).

¹ Queens and other female rulers have been less common, although women frequently exercised influence as advisors to their male relatives (Duindam 2016); see also Dube and Harish (2020). Broader kinship networks remained an important component in the organization of power and a tool for expanding the control of the king or central leader over larger territories (e.g., Wang 2022). On oligarchy, see Winters (2011) and Ramseyer and Rosenbluth (1995). On political legitimacy more broadly, see Greif and Rubin (2022).

Primogeniture emerged later and appeared throughout the world, but most notably in Europe. Succession by the eldest son brings some risk of a weak ruler coming into power, but is thought to have aided political stability by constraining elite expectations about which of the many potential successors could be deemed legitimate, and by reducing the risk of early coups (Tullock 1987; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2000). As Kokkonen and Sundell (2014) summarize, primogeniture as a succession rule provides an autocrat with “an heir, who because of his young age, can afford to wait to inherit power peacefully, and it provides the elite with assurance that the regime will continue to live on and reward their loyalty.”

The expectation of hereditary succession may have also created incentives for good governance by incumbent rulers, who would have viewed their rule with a longer time horizon and would have wanted to bequeath a well-functioning state to their progeny (Olson 1993). In Olson’s terms, monarchs can be characterized as “stationary bandits,” with incentives to respect private property and promote growth, in contrast to “roving bandits” who simply take what they can extract and move on. If an incumbent monarch expects to bequeath his realm to a son or other relative, he will have greater incentives to ensure its security and economic wellbeing. Considering economic growth and leaders between 1874 and 2004, dynastic leaders were indeed found to improve growth, but only when executive constraints were weak (Besley and Reynal-Querol 2017).

Conflict can still arise under hereditary succession rules, whether due to a lack of male relatives or because the monarch dies before an heir is old enough to command the allegiance of the broader elite. For example, Abramson and Velasco Rivera (2016) find that (male) leaders from 505 BCE to 1900 CE with longer tenures were more often succeeded by their sons, and that these successors were less likely to be deposed or face parliamentary constraints. Kokkonen et al. (2021) similarly find that European monarchs from 1000 to 1799 CE with larger families were less frequently deposed, since the pool of potential successors was deeper. Broader kinship networks between rulers are also thought to have reduced interstate conflict in historical Europe (Benzell and Cooke 2021). When women took power in the absence of a male heir, the uncertainty that followed their succession also encouraged conflict. Exploiting gender and birth order, Dube and Harish (2020) find that single queens were more often attacked, and married queens more often went on the attack, compared to kings.

In a study of European rulers between 1000 and 1500 CE, Acharya and Lee (2019) argue that conflict over succession led to weaker state institutions and long-term negative effects on economic development, measured in contemporary GDP per capita. Blaydes and Chaney (2013)

similarly connect economic stagnation in the Islamic world to shorter tenures of Muslim sultans compared to Europe's Christian monarchs. These kinds of arguments find parallels in contemporary historical political economy debates over the long-run effects of war and other forms of conflict on economic and social development (e.g., Miguel and Roland 2011; Davis and Weinstein 2002; Cassar, Grosjean, and Whitt 2013; Charnysh and Finkel 2017).

In short, dynastic rule is believed to have contributed to the development of state capacity and long-term economic growth, and it arguably provided stability when there were no alternative (parliamentary) institutions to provide this role. However, hereditary succession is an imperfect solution to maintaining political stability. As noted, if a family in power lacked a sufficient number of qualified heirs, conflict often ensued in violent wars of succession. Over time, most societies have either reduced the political power of monarchs, making them subservient to elected legislatures, or rejected them entirely in favor of a republican form of government.

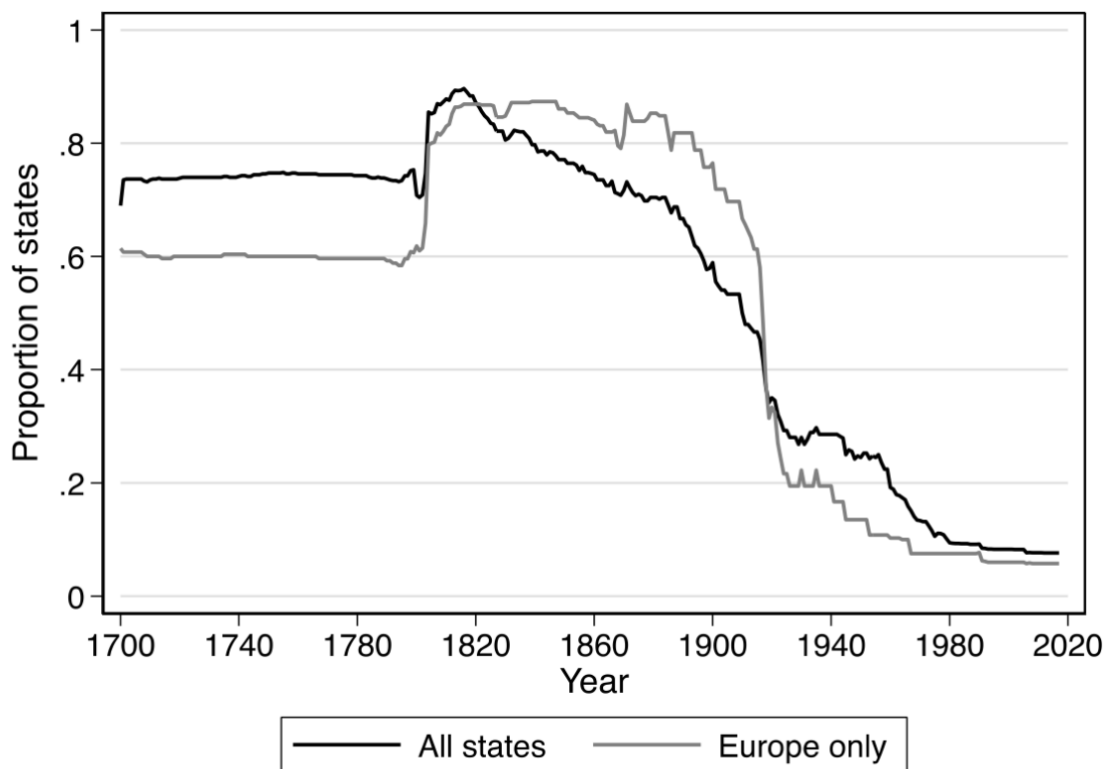


Figure 1: Monarchies in the world, 1700-present

Note: Figure created by the authors using data from Gerring et al. (2021). Each line indicates the share of monarchies among all states (and those in Europe only) over time. Monarchies are defined as states in which executive power is (1) held by a single person, (2) endowed with life tenure, (3) hereditary, and (4) of nontrivial importance.

Figure 1 illustrates this pattern using comparative data from Gerring et al. (2021), who define a monarchy as a state in which executive office is (1) held by a single person, (2) endowed with life tenure, (3) hereditary, and (4) of nontrivial importance. From the 1700s to the early 1800s, the share of all states headed by a monarch was relatively stable—roughly 60 percent of states in Europe, and three quarters of all states around the world. This pattern gave way to a period of decline in the 1800s. By the 1980s, less than 10 percent of states were ruled by a monarch. Today, only a handful of monarchs retain their title and powers—Bahrain, Bhutan, Brunei, Jordan, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Swaziland, Tonga, and the United Arab Emirates. Many of the remaining monarchies are concentrated in the Middle East, where they have proven to be more stable than other forms of government in the region (Herb 1999; Kostiner 2000; Menaldo 2012; McMillan 2013).

Beyond the remaining formal monarchies, a small number of personal dictatorships feature rulers with nearly absolute executive power, even if the title of king is absent. Hereditary succession in modern autocracies of this kind might persist so long as the party system or leadership selection mechanisms are weak, and power distributions and access to rents among the broader elite class are sustained (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Brownlee 2007; Svobik 2012; Meng 2021). Examples of contemporary autocratic dynasties include the Kim dynasty in North Korea and the Assad dynasty in Syria (Monday 2011; Yates 2021).

The question of when and why rulers relinquish dynastic control of power, and how representative democracy emerges, forms a broad research agenda within historical political economy and related disciplines (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2005; Boix 2010; Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010; Albertus and Menaldo 2017; Grzymala-Busse and Finkel 2022). We leave aside the question of why these processes occurred in some countries at a certain point in time, and focus in the next section on the patterns of dynastic representation following democratization.

The Second Decline: Democratization and “Democratic Dynasties”

Democracy is ostensibly the antithesis to monarchy, offering an alternative mechanism for political selection that replaces hereditary claims to legitimacy with popular election by enfranchised citizens. The development and diffusion of democratic institutions proceeded in tandem with industrialization and modernization, which might also be expected to facilitate a decline in the power of the dominant elite families (e.g., Huntington 1966; Adams 2005). In the words of Fukuyama (2011, p. 51), modernization entails “a transition from kinship-based forms of organization to state-level organization.”

Scholars have long noticed, however, that even after the introduction of democracy, elite families tended to maintain their dominant positions of power (Michels 1915; Pareto 1916; Mosca 1939; Manin 1997; Offerlé 1993). In many European democracies, for example, members of the pre-democratic aristocracy or nobility simply entered into the practice of democratic politics, whether in fully elected bodies such as the British House of Commons, or in upper chambers with restricted membership, such as the House of Lords (Best and Cotta 2000; Berlinski, Dewan and Van Coppenolle 2014; Rush 2000; Wasson 1991). Even in the US, where the Constitution establishes that “no title of nobility shall be granted,” several families have sent multiple members to Congress and the presidency. Many of America’s early dynasties, such as the Adams family, shared a common elite background, often with direct connections to the American Revolution (Hess 1966). However, as the US grew and developed, new dynasties continued to form, in all levels of government and with various backgrounds (e.g., Clubok, Wilensky, and Berghorn 1969; Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder 2009; Gronnerud and Spitzer 2018).

Philosophers from Aristotle to Rousseau viewed any form of election as intrinsically aristocratic compared to selection by lot. Elaborating on these arguments, Manin (1997) attributes the persistent “aristocratic character” of elections to four factors: (1) the unequal evaluation of candidates by voters (voters’ intrinsic preferences for certain kinds of representatives), (2) the way in which choice necessitates distinction (to be successful, a candidate must stand out above others by possessing positively valued aspects of quality), (3) the advantage of salience (name recognition or network centrality), and (4) the cost of disseminating information (wealth and other resource advantages in campaigns). Each of these factors give members of an established elite—whether incumbent politicians or their offspring—an advantage over newcomers in winning elections.

The various advantages enjoyed by members of dynasties (voter preferences, name recognition, network connections, campaign finance resources, etc.), and how these contribute to their continued grip on power within democracies, has been the subject of several empirical studies in political science and economics, focused not only on the US (e.g., Dal Bó, Dal Bó, and Snyder 2009; Feinstein 2010), but also other democracies around the world (e.g., Chhibber 2013; Asako et al. 2015; Querubín 2012, 2016; Chandra 2016; Rossi 2017; Smith and Martin 2017; Cruz Labonne, and Querubín 2017; Van Coppenolle 2017; Fiva and Smith 2018; Smith 2018).

Several of the factors behind the persistence of democratic dynasties can be categorized as operating on the “supply side” of political selection (Norris 1997), because they explain why would-be dynastic candidates might desire to enter politics. These include informational advantages, political socialization, and even personality traits (Oskarsson, Dawes and Lindgren

2019; Lawless 2012). Others are better thought of as “demand-side” factors, i.e., reasons for why party elites and voters might want to select dynastic candidates. These include name recognition in candidate-centered elections, campaign finance resources, and network centrality (Feinstein 2010; Chhibber 2013; Cruz, Labonne, and Querubín 2017; Chandra 2016; Smith 2018). Dynastic ties might generally function as an important signal of quality for new candidates, as party elites or voters can infer the quality of the (unknown) junior member from the (known) quality of the senior member (e.g., Folke, Rickne, and Smith 2021).

A key empirical finding across several contexts is that longer tenures in office increase the probability of hereditary succession (e.g., Smith 2018). However, disentangling the supply and demand effects of length in office is tricky—more time in power increases the potential socialization of a politician’s offspring and their desire to continue the family business, but it also increases the value of the family “brand” to voters and parties. Moreover, longer tenures are usually associated with higher-quality politicians, who might in turn have higher-quality offspring. A causal effect of (re)election on dynasty formation for marginal candidates (who might otherwise be considered equivalent in terms of quality to marginal losers) has been found in the US and the Philippines (Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder 2009; Querubín 2016), but not in Norway or the UK (Fiva and Smith 2018; Van Coppenolle 2017).

Despite the advantages that members of dynasties enjoy in elections, if we look at historical data on legislative backgrounds over time, we see again that the general tendency is for dynastic legislators in democracies to decline in prevalence over time. **Figure 2** illustrates this pattern, using comparative data from Smith (2018), Cirone and Van Coppenolle (2018; 2019) and Van Coppenolle (2017; 2022) on national legislators in fifteen advanced industrialized democracies.² The left panel (a) provides a full view of the long-term patterns in dynasties in the lower chamber of each country. The right panel (b) zooms in on the post-1940 data to more clearly show variation across countries in recent decades. The data for each country are aggregated to decades.

In most democracies, the pattern that emerges is an initial increase in dynastic legislators, followed by a steady decline.³ In the early decades of American democracy, for example, about 15 percent of the House of Representatives were dynastic, but this figure declined in the mid-1800s

² Dynasties are defined here as any family with two or more individuals who have served in national political office, and we only count the junior relatives who had at least one relative in parliament before their first entry (e.g., Van Coppenolle, 2017; Smith 2018). This basic definition could be relaxed or constrained to include or exclude different types of relationships, and different types of political offices (e.g., local versus national offices; elected or appointed). Another distinction is whether family members serve in the same office over time (vertical dynasties) or simultaneously across different offices (horizontal dynasties) (e.g., Dulay and Go 2022).

³ The initial increases are not especially substantively interesting, since the limited number of previous legislators in early periods means fewer potential family connections to observe.

and has stayed in the range of 6 to 8 percent. The Senate once featured more dynasties—over 20 percent of members in the late 1800s and early 1990s—but has since come to resemble the House. Van Coppenolle (2017) similarly documents that the share of dynastic members in the British House of Commons declined from more than 30 percent in the late 1800s to less than 10 percent in recent years. The exceptions to this general pattern are Ireland and Japan, where a relatively high proportion of dynastic legislators has been attributed to highly personalistic elections and decentralized party organizations (Smith 2018; Smith and Martin 2017; Gallagher 2003).

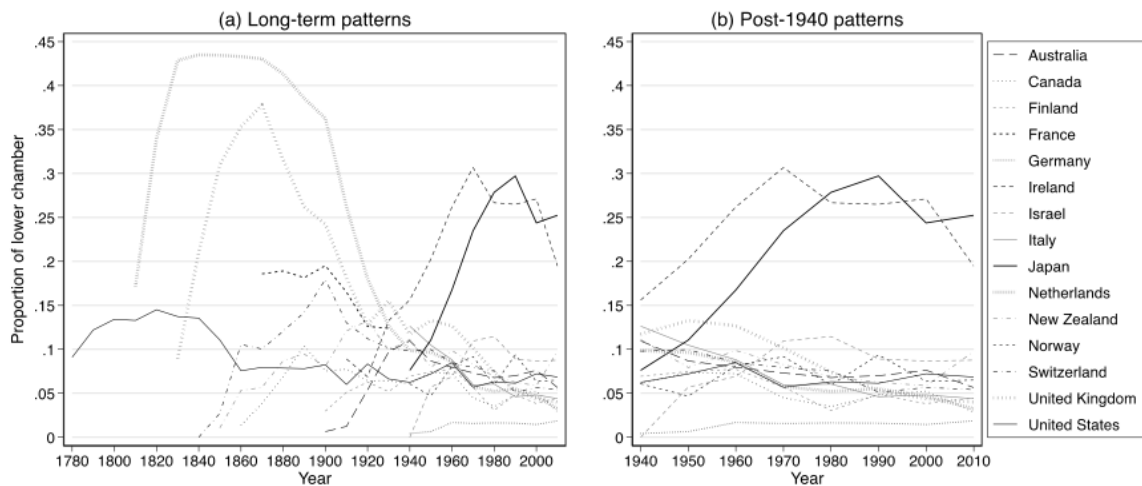


Figure 2: Dynasties in democracies over time

Note: Data are from Smith (2018), with the exception of the United Kingdom (Van Coppenolle 2017), France (Cirone and Van Coppenolle 2018; 2019) and the Netherlands (Van Coppenolle 2022). Each line indicates the share of junior dynastic politicians among members of the lower chamber of each country over time (aggregated to decades). Panel (a) provides a long-term view of the data; panel (b) focuses only on the post-1940s period.

What explains the general decline in democratic dynasties over time? Clubok, Wilensky, and Berghorn (1969) suggest that it can be attributed to political modernization, rather than population growth or social change. Other theories developed to explain patterns in India and Japan would point to institutional changes, such as the development of strong parties or the introduction of primaries for candidate selection, as contributing factors in the diversification of the political elite (Chandra 2016; Smith 2018).

Yet not all institutional changes were equally effective at tipping the equilibrium away from hereditary succession in politics. Take the nineteenth century franchise extension in the UK, whereby a broader share of the male population was given the vote conditional on meeting certain property thresholds. Berlinski, Dewan and Van Coppenolle (2014) find no evidence that the identities of representatives in constituencies where a larger share of the population was enfranchised changed, including whether representatives came from existing dynasties. In other contexts, the mere introduction of direct accountability through elections appears to have been

effective at reducing dynasties. For example, the introduction of direct elections in the bicameral Netherlands, whereby the upper chamber remained indirectly elected, reduced the share of dynasties by increasing competition between incumbents (Van Coppenolle 2022).

Electoral system reforms that strengthen parties can also reduce the power of dynasties. In Japan, dynasties became far less likely to form after an electoral reform that eliminated intraparty competition and thereby shifted the focus of electoral competition toward parties rather than candidates (Smith 2018). Redistricting can have similar effects. Van Coppenolle (2021) documents how nineteenth century redistricting in the UK, conditional on this redistribution not having been biased towards any party, reduced the chances of politicians' relatives entering into politics. Finally, Querubin (2011) finds that the introduction of term limits in the Philippines worked counter-productively: it encouraged dynastic candidates to run when a relative was term-limited. These findings suggest that caution is warranted in taking at face value the idea that institutional reforms will automatically reduce dynasties. Precisely which institutional conditions will decrease the prevalence of dynasties may be context-specific, and untangling the causal mechanisms requires careful attention.

A small, but growing, set of studies examines the consequences of dynastic legislators for the quality of governance and economic outcomes (e.g., Geys and Smith 2017). In this regard, the existing evidence paints a mixed picture. For example, Asako et al. (2015) find that dynastic legislators in Japan bring more distributive benefits to their districts, but do not improve the economic performance (growth) of those districts.⁴ Similarly, Dulay and Go (2021) find that mayors in the Philippines who serve concurrently with relatives spend more but do not produce higher economic growth or lower poverty. Dynastic legislators in the Philippine Congress also tend to represent districts with lower indicators of human development and higher levels of inequality (Mendoza et al. 2012), and appear to be less engaged in legislative activities (Panao 2016). In contrast, Bragança, Ferraz, and Rios (2017) find no evidence for public goods provision differences between dynastic and non-dynastic legislators in Brazil. Labonne, Parsa, and Querubin (2021) also find no such differences among male and female dynastic mayors in the Philippines. There may be important differences in the effects of dynastic representation on economic performance in developed versus developing countries, or across institutional environments, and these will only become clear with further empirical investigation.⁵

⁴ Muraoka (2018) also finds that dynastic legislators in Japan tend to adopt particularistic appeals in campaign materials (candidate manifestos), and Smith (2018) finds that dynastic legislators whose relatives previously served in cabinet are more active in legislative debates.

⁵ Other effects of democratic dynasties are only beginning to be investigated. For example, members of dynasties may be more inclined try to protect democracy when it comes under threat (Lacroix, Méon, and Oosterlinck 2019).

The Third Decline: Dynastic Pathways to Gender Representation

A third important pattern of decline in the historical evolution of dynastic politics relates to gender. Across many democracies, women in politics have been more likely to have family ties to a current or former politician than their male counterparts. This tendency has been observed both at the level of legislatures (Folke, Rickne, and Smith 2021; Schwindt-Bayer, Valleja, and Cantú 2020; Basu 2016; Hinojosa 2012), and in executive offices (Derichs and Thompson 2013; Jalalzai 2013; Jalalzai and Rincker 2018; Baturu and Gray 2018).

The first woman elected to the US House of Representatives, Jeannette Rankin, hailed from a local political family in Montana. For other early women in American politics, the dynastic pathway took the form of the so-called “widow’s succession,” following the death of a male incumbent relative (Kincaid 1978; Gertzog 1980). Early congresswomen Rebecca Latimer Felton, Winifred S. Huck, Mae Ella Nolan, Florence Kahn, Edith Nourse Rogers, Pearl Peden Oldfield, and Ruth Bryan Owen all followed deceased husbands or fathers into office. The husband of another, Kathleen Langley, was only *politically* dead—“Pork Barrel John” Langley resigned his seat after being convicted of violating Prohibition laws by trying to sell 1,400 bottles of whiskey. His wife ran for his seat as a “vindication campaign.”⁶ Such female legislators, in the US and elsewhere, have sometimes been characterized as “proxies” for their male relatives, or placeholders until a male politician (sometimes from the same family) becomes available (Jalalzai 2013; Hinojosa 2012; Derichs and Thompson 2013). But as the breakers of glass ceilings, they played an important role in expanding subsequent opportunities for non-dynastic women.

Folke, Rickne, and Smith (2021) explain the prevalence of dynastic women in politics on the basis of informational asymmetries in political selection decisions. As noted earlier, dynastic ties can function as a signal of quality to the party selectorate or voters, with the (unknown) quality of a would-be junior member of a dynasty being inferred from the known quality of the senior member. However, this signal will be more important for women due to their informational disadvantages in a male-dominated political marketplace. As a result, we may observe what Folke, Rickne, and Smith (2021) call a dynastic bias in women’s representation, measured as the difference in the proportion of dynasties among female legislators and the proportion of dynasties among male legislators in a given legislature. As more women enter politics, we should expect this dynastic bias to decline.

⁶ See “Katherine Gudger Langley” in *Women in Congress, 1917-2006*. Prepared under the direction of the Committee on House Administration by the Office of History & Preservation, U.S. House of Representatives. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006. URL: <https://history.house.gov/Exhibition-and-Publications/WIC/Women-in-Congress>.

The empirical evidence from the US and other democracies confirms that dynastic ties become less important to women’s representation as more women enter into politics. In the most recent US Congresses, for example, the dynastic bias in women’s representation has been almost entirely erased. There has also been a qualitative shift, in the US and elsewhere, in the types of dynastic women who run: from mostly widows or wives in earlier decades, to daughters, nieces, and other second-generation relatives in more recent times (Folke, Rickne, and Smith 2021). For example, the most powerful woman in the 117th US Congress (2021-2023), House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, is the daughter of former Representative Thomas D’Alessandro, Jr., and she did not directly succeed him in the same district.

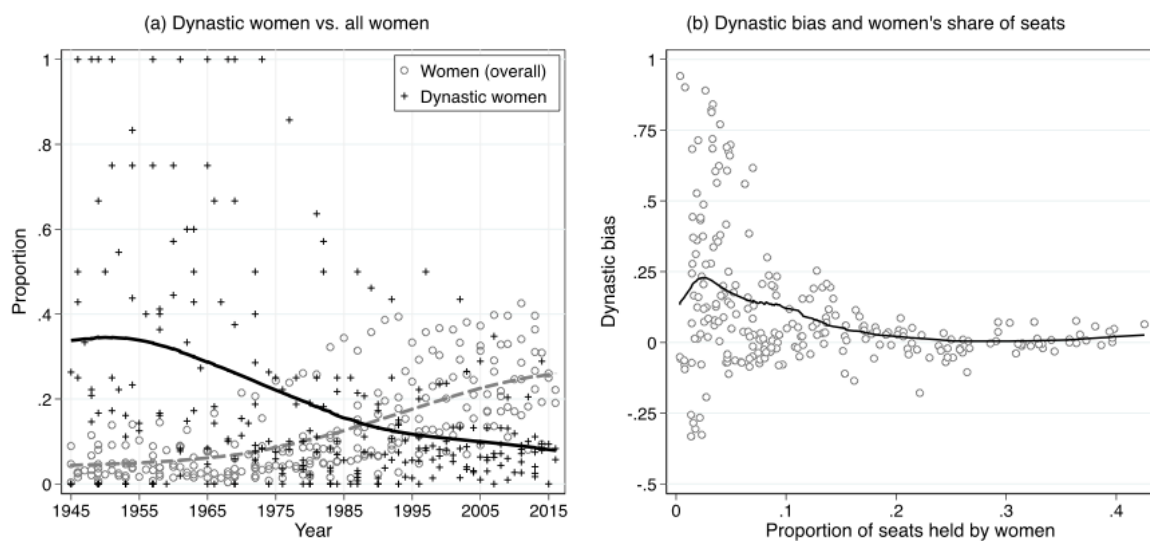


Figure 3: Dynastic paths for women into politics over time

Note: Adapted from Folke, Rickne, and Smith (2021). Data from 1945 for twelve democracies as in Smith (2018). Panel (a) pools the data and plots the share of women in the legislature (gray circles; dashed lowess curve) and the share of dynasties among the women (black pluses; solid lowess curve). Panel (b) plots, for each legislature, the dynastic bias in women’s representation (share of dynastic MPs among women minus the share of dynastic MPs among men) and the share of women in the legislature.

Figure 3 illustrates the general tendency for the dynastic bias in women’s representation to decline, using pooled data from twelve advanced industrialized democracies. As panel (a) illustrates, as the overall share of women in legislatures increased over time, the share of these elected women who come from dynasties decreased. Panel (b) shows the relationship between the dynastic bias in women’s representation and the share of women in the legislature. This bias is larger when there are fewer women overall. No significant relationship exists between the share of men (or women) in office and dynastic patterns among the men.

Do male and female dynastic legislators behave differently in office? We know that electing women to political office affects policy outcomes and even wider gender attitudes in society (e.g.,

Bratton and Ray 2002; Pande 2003; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Beaman et al. 2009). Analyzing the behavioral differences between dynastic women and men forms a rich area for further study. In a study comparing male and female dynastic mayors, for example, no evidence was found that women acted differently, in terms of public goods provision, from their male dynastic colleagues (Labonne, Parsa, and Querubin 2021).⁷ Future work could investigate such effects not only for women, but also for other traditionally underrepresented groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities and young people, among dynastic candidates.

Finally, informational asymmetries in elections can exist not only between dynastic candidates and voters, but also on the part of the party organization tasked with candidate selection. One possibility is that dynastic women may be temporarily easier to recruit than non-dynastic women after sudden changes, such as the expansion of suffrage to women or the introduction gender quotas. Gender quotas impose a sudden shock, which has been shown in some cases to reduce the number of lower-quality men on party lists in favor of a larger slate of women (Besley, Folke, and Rickne 2017). When parties must increase the share of nominations going to women because of the introduction of a quota, dynastic women will have an informational advantage over their non-dynastic competitors. Yet, this equilibrium should also change once parties learn more about female candidates, and the informational asymmetries abate (Folke, Rickne, and Smith 2021; Schwindt-Bayer, Valleja, and Cantú 2020).

Persistent Dynastic Advantage at the Top

We have so far documented the general decline in the power of dynasties within democracies, despite persistent advantages in winning elections. A final advantage of dynastic family ties relates to career progression. Across many democracies, members of dynasties appear to be able to climb the ranks of power into executive offices more quickly than their non-dynastic peers, particularly if they had relatives who served in previous cabinets (Smith and Martin 2017; Van Coppenolle 2017; Smith 2018). As a result, dynastic politicians can often be found at the apex of power in democracies, even where the share of dynasties among all legislators in general is low.

A possible straightforward explanation for their early and repeated electoral success is that talent or motivation for politics simply runs in families. Yet if this were the only relevant explanation, we should not observe such large interpersonal incumbency advantages, particularly among winners of narrow elections. Nor are differences in political quality, e.g., talent, motivation,

⁷ In this context, many of the dynastic female majors serve only a single term, which indicates that they are placeholders for their temporarily term-limited relatives.

skills, likely to completely explain differences in career progression between dynastic and non-dynastic legislators.

Instead, it is likely that a more informative signal about what they will bring to politics, inferred from their relatives' reputations, is what makes junior members of dynasties more successful at different career stages, such as (re)selection, (re)election, and promotion to ministerial positions. In these selection processes with informational asymmetries, dynastic status can signal a politician's quality and motivation, and this signal is not as readily available to non-dynastic competitors. A familiar surname, perhaps in combination with an elite education, can provide a positive, informative signal directly; but dynastic legislators may also signal more indirectly, if they enter parliament at an earlier age and tend to stay longer, building up more experience along the way. In addition to advantages in signaling, dynastic candidates may also have improved access to information, because of their networks and connections (Smith and Martin 2017). Nepotism cannot be ruled out, but it is unlikely to be the primary driver of the dynastic bias in executive appointments, as parliaments hold executives to account in democracies.

It is of course important to note that while executives, and their dynastic members, may be dependent on parliaments, they are not necessarily directly elected by these parliaments. Differences in parliamentarism and presidentialism may help explain some variation in dynastic membership of executives. Moreover, not all parliamentary democracies require ministers to be selected from parliament. Yet where they are, the composition of parliament will matter. Therefore, the proportion of dynastic members of the executive will certainly be associated with the proportion of dynastic members in parliament.

Within parties, we know that seniority matters for selection into higher office (Cirone, Cox and Fiva 2021), and this likely extends to the top offices of cabinet. Therefore, if dynastic members have longer tenures, this could explain part of their higher selection chances. It is of course difficult to think of a good counterfactual to selection by parties—i.e., an alternative, or baseline, political selection rule. One such a rule could be the random draw. For obvious reasons, executives are not drawn randomly from the legislature. However, some past work has exploited random draws from the legislature to study election to committees and subsequent cabinet appointment (Cirone and Van Coppenolle 2018). Under this alternative, lottery-based selection rule, dynasties were not particularly advantaged (Cirone and Van Coppenolle 2019). Smith (2018) shows that dynastic legislators in Japan enjoyed no significant advantage in promotion when seniority norms were in place, but that they gained an advantage when those norms were relaxed.

Table 1: Dynastic advantage in reaching the executive (cabinet)

	DV: Ever Appointed to Cabinet?					Before	After
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	1940	1940
						(6)	(7)
Junior	0.061*** [0.005]	0.044*** [0.006]	0.040*** [0.006]	0.058*** [0.005]	0.045*** [0.007]	0.012* [0.006]	0.084*** [0.012]
Cabinet junior		0.083*** [0.012]	0.089*** [0.013]		0.077*** [0.013]	0.065*** [0.014]	0.079*** [0.019]
Age			-0.001*** [0.000]	-0.001*** [0.000]	-0.001*** [0.000]		
Junior*Age			<0.001 [0.001]				
Cabinet junior *Age			0.002** [0.001]				
Female				-0.002 [0.006]	-0.001 [0.006]		
Junior*Female				-0.034 [0.022]	-0.049* [0.025]		
Cabinet junior *Female					0.013 [0.051]		
Observations	45,526	37,827	37,573	44,186	37,027	15,093	22,734
R-squared	0.075	0.075	0.076	0.078	0.075	0.063	0.074

Note: Dependent variable is a dummy indicating MPs who are ever appointed to a cabinet position from the lower chamber. Data are from Smith (2018), with the exception of the United Kingdom (Van Coppenolle 2017), France (Cirone and Van Coppenolle 2019) and the Netherlands (Van Coppenolle 2022), excluding the United States and Italy for which cabinet information is unavailable. Sample includes legislators at first entry to the lower chamber, for the following countries and years: Australia (1901-2013), Canada (1867-2015), Finland (1907-2011), France (1877-1932), Germany (1949-2013), Ireland (1918-2016), Israel (1949-2015), Japan (1947-2014), New Zealand (1853-2014), Norway (1945-2013), Switzerland (1848-2011), the Netherlands (1815-1940), the UK (1832-2010). Models 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 exclude Switzerland and France (for which cabinet legacy information is unavailable). Columns 4 and 5 exclude the Netherlands (for which gender information is unavailable). Columns 6 and 7 split the sample from column 2 into two time periods. Age is demeaned by sample; average age is about 46. All regressions include country and year fixed effects. * p-value < 0.10, ** p-value < 0.05, *** p-value < 0.001.

To illustrate some of these patterns of dynastic cabinet selection, **Table 1** presents the results of several simple regression models on a combined comparative sample of parliaments over time (see Cirone and Van Coppenolle 2018; 2019; Smith 2018; Van Coppenolle 2017; 2022). We investigate the career outcomes (promotion to cabinet at any point) for legislators based on their characteristics at the time of their first entry into parliament, and consider as explanatory variables their junior dynastic status, whether their relative had previously served as a cabinet minister, their age at entry, and their gender. Each of the models includes year and country fixed effects, and robust standard errors.

In the full sample, dynastic legislators are about 6 percentage points more likely to be appointed to a cabinet position at some point in their careers than non-dynastic legislators (Model 1). Yet once we split that group up into those with and without ties to a former cabinet minister, we find that junior members are only 4 percentage points more likely to enter cabinet than others. In contrast, cabinet legacies are an additional 8 percentage points more likely to enter cabinet than those without any family connections (Model 2).

One reason why dynastic legislators enjoy an advantage could be that they tend to be younger than non-dynastic legislators when they enter parliament, and a lower age at entry should be particularly important in legislatures or parties operating under a seniority system. Controlling for age at first entry does not substantively change the estimated dynastic advantage in entering cabinet (Model 3). Age at entry itself seems unimportant—except for the cabinet legacies (Model 3). Junior relatives of former cabinet ministers are more likely to be appointed the older they are at first entry. In general, the effect size for the dynastic advantage in promotion is largely unchanged by controlling for age at entry and its interaction with dynastic status.

The next set of models consider whether women, and dynastic women in particular, are more often appointed to the cabinet. The results suggest that dynastic women are not more likely to enter the cabinet (Models 4 and 5). If anything, female dynastic legislators are less likely than their male dynastic colleagues to have entered cabinet over time—and any differences among male and female relatives of past cabinet ministers are insignificant (Model 5). The coefficients on junior and junior relative of cabinet minister also remain virtually unchanged after controlling for gender. These findings suggest a need for more research on the gendered dynastic paths to executive power, and how cabinet composition differs from presidents and prime ministers (e.g., Jalalzai 2013; Jalalzai and Rincker 2018; Baturo and Gray 2018).

It is important to note that, regardless of country and year fixed effects, the R-squared of these regressions remains low. That means there is a lot of variation in cabinet appointments that cannot be explained by these simple individual-level characteristics alone. Yet the junior dynastic advantage in entering cabinet remains quite stable between 4 and 6 percentage points across our models. Moreover, the advantage appears to have become larger over time. The estimated cabinet selection advantage for dynastic legislators is smaller when restricting the sample to legislators who first entered parliament prior to 1940 (Model 6) than for those who entered after 1940 (Model 7). Viewed in the context of the historical patterns we document in this chapter, this implies that the dynastic advantage in reaching the top echelons of power has increased even as the relative share of dynasties in politics has declined. This could be because the average quality of dynastic

legislators increases as the overall prevalence of dynasties declines (i.e., suggesting better selection from among would-be dynastic candidates), though we lack the kind of observable data on legislators' quality that would be needed to test this hypothesis.

Moving Forward

We see several opportunities and challenges for future historical political economy research on dynasties.

First, a more complete understanding of the historical role of dynasties in democratic transitions and development will require more data and within-case identification from different countries. Much of the existing data collection efforts have focused on advanced developed democracies, where historical biographical records have often been digitized (e.g., Smith 2018; Van Coppenolle 2017), or developing democracies where dynasties are especially prevalent, such as the Philippines (e.g., Querubin 2016, Cruz, Labonne, and Querubín 2017), or India (Chandra 2016). This raises the possibility of selection bias in comparative analyses, and limits the number of explanatory variables related to institutions and economic development that can be tested. Several recent efforts to collect data on dynasties in other countries will help push the boundaries of research on contemporary dynastic politics (e.g., Batto 2018; Patrikios and Chatzikonstantinou 2015; Amundsen 2016; Purdey 2016; Thananithichot and Satidporn 2016; Nishizaki 2018). More data from bicameral legislatures and local assemblies will also be helpful, as will data on family ties beyond executive leaders in authoritarian regimes (e.g., Shih and Liu 2011).

Collecting and coding historical information on family ties also presents challenges (Cirone and Spirling 2021), but such data could contribute to understanding causes of dynasties or their decline, by exploiting quasi-natural experiments within specific countries. A clear opportunity for scholars of historical political economy in particular is to focus on particular historical episodes—democratization, expansion of the franchise, electoral system reforms, introduction of primaries, term limits, quotas, redistricting, direct elections, etc.—and how these episodes broadened opportunities for non-dynastic politicians. Is the general decline in democratic dynasties an inevitable part of democratic modernization, or can it be sped up through specific institutional reforms? How dynastic politics interacts with party development is a broad, open research agenda.

Second, there is also a need to better connect the largely separate literatures on monarchies, kinship networks, and democratic dynasties. The literature reviewed in this chapter is a first effort to connect some of the themes in these literatures, but few studies have directly considered the evolution of family ties in politics over time and across regime types. Further opportunities may

lie in considering how the historical patterns of hereditary succession in politics we review here connect to patterns of occupational inheritance outside of politics, and social mobility and inequality in general (e.g., Blau and Duncan 1967; Laband and Lentz 1983; Clark 2014). The political behavior of family-run firms (e.g., Balan 2022), the politics of business connections to dynastic politicians (e.g., Fisman 2001; Wang 2017), and the cross-pollination of dynasties with political and economic power—what Mills (1956) famously termed the power elite—are additional areas that are ripe for comparative and historical reinvestigation.

Conclusion

As democracies mature, a common assumption is that the decline of dynasties—or families in politics—follows in tandem. In fact, this idea is so natural that it forms part of how we think about democracy. The absence of dynasties is a presumed characteristic of any meaningfully democratic regime. A pluralistic definition of democracy requires that power is shared by competing interests (e.g., Dahl 1989), and therefore cannot be dominated by a limited group of families.

The prevalence and power of dynasties has evolved over time, but they remain a common feature of many democracies. In an optimistic view of democratic development, any dynastic relations that remain among powerful individuals today are nothing more than curiosities. And in any case—this line of reasoning goes—these days we should no longer worry about families' undue influence on democracies as traditional family structures become less and less relevant; instead, we should worry about other vested interests, such as networks of professionals from large multinational corporations. What matters most are the institutions that have meaningfully enabled pluralistic power-sharing throughout history—such as the right to vote, the development of parties and civil society organizations, and the rise of social movements.

Rather than viewing dynasties as a curiosity or a temporary phenomenon, scholars should link these institutions more explicitly to dynasties, and investigate the broader causes and consequences of increasing or declining dynastic proportions in parliament and executives. Dynasties are not only able to perpetuate within legislative and executive offices, but often find ways to enrich and entrench themselves beyond politics. Our presumed perspective of steady dynastic decline along with democratic development may be biased by our specific position in time, which more systematic information about dynasties across space and time can address.

The problem is that without research on dynasties in democracies, and the causes of their rise and decline, we do not know whether they are in fact harmless curiosities. Dynastic monopolization of power goes directly against the idea of broad representation in democracies,

and reflects political inequality across space and time—similar to how top incomes can function as an indicator of economic inequality (Van Coppenolle 2020). Whenever a small group of individuals dominates the exercise of political power, others will inevitably lack representation and feel excluded by the elite. In a world of increasing economic inequality, the question of how we can expect political inequality to develop—and what, if anything, can be done about that—is ever more important.

Recent research has made considerable progress in testing the causal factors we typically attribute to dynasty formation, as well as those attributed to dynastic decline—such as the growth of elections, incumbency, or changing gender stereotypes. But the puzzles of why dynasties persist in democracies and what consequences they might bring in terms of political and economic outcomes remain important topics for future study.

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