

# Autocratization and Political Dynasties: Evidence from Denmark \*

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## Abstract

The existence of dynastic politicians is a common phenomenon across many types of political systems, but what increases or decreases their prevalence? Recent research has argued that increased political competition and democratic reforms may reduce the prevalence of political dynasties. In this article, we study whether these effects are symmetrical to political reforms which decrease the democratic features of a political system. We use the case of Denmark from 1849 to 1915, where a change to the constitution in 1866 created a privileged franchise to the upper chamber of the Danish parliament. However, since the voting rules to the lower chamber were unchanged, we are able to apply a difference-in-difference approach to show that this autocratizing reform indeed increased the share of dynastic politicians in the upper chamber relative to the lower chamber. The 1866 changes to the constitution increased the

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\*We thank Ulrik Kjær and Martin Ejnar Hansen for advice and data on Danish MPs. Additionally, We thank Mathilde Hammer, Claudia Immersen and Siri Madsen for research assistance.

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representation of the Danish nobility in the upper chamber of the parliament, including for members of the nobility with political-dynastic ties.

## 1 Introduction

Political dynasties have been prominent political actors throughout history. Over the last few years, empirical historical research has gained a better understanding of some of the causes of political dynasties in fledgling modern parliaments, as well as of some of the institutional reasons for their decline, including the rise of more democratic political institutions (Corvalan, Querubin and Vicente 2018; Van Coppenolle 2022, 2023; Van Coppenolle and Smith 2022). However, the democratisation processes which have supposedly led to the decline of political dynasties have often involved set-backs. So what happens with regards to political dynasties when such democratising institutional development are reversed?

This paper aims to answer this question by considering the Danish case of democratic reversal in the 1866 constitution. We ask whether this instance of autocratisation affected the prevalence of political dynasties - relatives of other politicians - in the bicameral Danish parliament. Denmark at the time displays a number of unique features which make it a suitable case for the application of a careful research design to trace the answers to these questions. The initial 1849 constitution involved comprehensive electoral democratisation by extending voting rights to almost all male heads of households. The nobility lost all of their formal political privileges. A bicameral system was introduced, but the same electorate qualified to elect the membership of both houses, in direct elections to the lower house, but in an indirect way only for the upper chamber. However, in the 1866 reversal of these democratic achievements, the franchise to this second, upper chamber was severely restricted and a two-class voting system was established. The electors of upper chamber members were selected in 11 multi-member districts with a strong bias towards rural areas which under-represented the population in the cities. A substantial proportion of electors was to be

elected by only the top tax paying members of the electorate, while another group was directly drawn from these top tax payers. The rest of the electors were elected by the lower chamber electorate. The full group of electors then proceeded to select 54 members of the upper chamber, and the monarch had the privilege of appointing 12 additional upper chamber members for life. As a result, the electoral system to select members of the upper chamber was very unrepresentative compared to the one used to select members of the lower chamber.

We consider the consequences of this franchise restriction for the prevalence of political dynasties as well as the political representation of a traditional hereditary elite in the form of the Danish nobility. As the voting rules for the lower house were left unchanged, we treat the legislators who were seated in the lower house as our control group in a difference-in-difference design. As expected, we find that dynasties became more prominent in the indirectly elected upper chamber after the franchise restriction. Additionally, our results also show that the franchise restriction increased the political representation of the Danish nobility in the upper chamber, including members of the nobility with political-dynastic ties.

## **2 Political dynasties and democratization**

Dynasties are common in politics. Throughout history, ruling dynasties have played a prominent part that they can be expected to relinquish as countries democratise. Recent research has noted such patterns of decline in political dynasties over time and space, as summarised by Van Coppenolle and Smith (2022). Yet which institutional changes can be causally linked to such decline? What happens to dynasties if such democratic institutional changes are reversed?

While the reasons for why dynasties decline may be different, the literature on political dynasties so far has mostly focused on what causes the phenomenon to persist in democracies. Even in competitive democracies, family relatives of previous politicians hold numerous

advantages. Relatives have a head start throughout the selection, election and promotion process (Bohlken and Chandra 2014; Smith and Martin 2017), from their early political socialisation and centrality in social networks (Cruz, Labonne and Querubin 2017), shared partisan connections and political capital (Smith 2018), or interpersonal incumbency advantages including the informative signal of their familiar surname in elections (Folke, Rickne and Smith 2021; Van Coppenolle 2020). Yet identifying the institutional causes of political dynasties in democracies is fraught with research challenges such as omitted variable bias or reverse causality concerns. Internally valid results from careful research designs also do not always travel to other contexts. To improve the external validity of the research findings in the current state of the literature, we need to study the evolution of political dynasties in more and different countries. While interpersonal incumbency advantages were found in the US (Dal Bo, Dal Bo and Snyder 2009), it seems that there was no similar marginal re-election advantage to relatives in elite-controlled, party-centered or captured political systems as varied as the UK, Norway or the Philippines (Van Coppenolle 2017; Fiva and Smith 2018; Querubin 2016). While we know that dynasties tend to decline along with democratisation, pinpointing the exact causal institutional changes, separately from the broader context in which their decline took place, is similarly challenging to establishing their origins.

Among the factors that have been identified to have contributed to dynastic decline we can count the abolishment of property-based eligibility restrictions (Corvalan, Querubin and Vicente 2018), the introduction of direct elections (Van Coppenolle 2022), and the non-partisan redistricting of electoral constituencies (Van Coppenolle 2023). Counter-intuitively, some reforms were found to have had no effect on political dynasties, e.g. franchise extension (Berlinski, Dewan and Van Coppenolle 2014), or even an opposite effect, e.g. gender quotas or term limits (Labonne, Parsa and Querubin 2021; Querubin 2011).

Yet, while we know that specific democratic reforms (may) have contributed to dynastic decline along with improved political competition, we do not yet know whether the reverse reforms, i.e. steps back in the democratisation process, have had the opposite effect on

dynasties. In order to fill this void, this paper specifically studies autocratization's - or the franchise restriction - that took place in Denmark in 1866 effect on the prevalence of political dynasties. Consequently, our paper's research design extends the study of the evolution of political dynasties to whether the supposed effects of democratization on the prevalence of political dynasties are symmetrical to autocratization. Additionally, by specifically studying the effects of franchise restriction, our paper complements a broader political economy research agenda on franchise extensions (Lizzeri and Persico 2004; Cox, Fresh and Saiegh 2023; Aidt, Daunton and Dutta 2010; Leon and Aidt 2023). Democratization has often been thought to decrease the political representation of traditional elites (including the nobility and other landowning elites) who had less of an interest in the mass-focused political campaigning needed to be political successful in competitive political systems (Ziblatt 2017, 43-44). Consequently, one could expect autocratization to facilitate an increase in the political representation of traditional elites such as the nobility, including through the use of dynastic channels (Jesper and Clemmensen 2017, 162-163)

### **3 Background: Danish democratization 1849-1915 and the 1866 constitution**

We use the the period of Danish democratization 1849-1915 and specifically the changes to the 1866 constitution as testing ground for whether autocratization affect the prevalence of political dynasties. This period began with the the 1849 constitution, which ended almost two centuries of absolutism in Denmark, and ended with the 1915 constitution, which introduced (almost) universal suffrage for both men and women.

#### **3.1 The upper and lower chamber electorate**

The 1849 constitution had established voting rights for all male head of household above the age of 30 with some additional restrictions for criminals and a few other groups. The members

of the lower chamber ("Folketinget" in Danish) were elected through a plurality system in single-member districts, while members of the upper chamber ("Landstinget" in Danish) were indirectly elected by electors in multi-member districts with the same lower chamber electorate electing the electors. While there were no differences in enfranchisement for the directly and indirectly elected chambers, there were some eligibility restrictions for serving. Members of the upper chamber had to be above the age of 40 with an additional income requirement.<sup>1</sup> In effect, that required candidates for and members of the upper chamber to be part of the economic elite in Denmark but made them otherwise at least partly accountable to the wider (male head of household) electorate where no income restrictions were in place.

### **3.2 The changes arising from the 1866 constitution**

The equality of the electorate to the upper and lower chambers changed with the 1866 constitution. Following Denmark's defeat in The Second Schleswig War in 1864, the political alliances in the Danish parliament had changed (Friisberg 2007, 165-197), and the result was a substantial change to the upper chamber voting system in a pro-elite and pro-rural fashion. While the voting rules and voting rights to the lower chamber was left unchanged, the voting rules to the upper chamber were changed towards an elite-biased two-class system. First and foremost, of the 66 members of the upper chamber 12 would be directly appointed for life by the monarch (in reality the government)<sup>2</sup>. The rest of the members would still be indirectly elected by electors in 11 multi-member districts, one of which was the capital of Copenhagen where 7 members of the upper chamber were elected.<sup>3</sup> However, the way the electors were elected was changed into a two-class system. In each rural municipality, the lower house electorate elected one elector per rural municipalities. In the cities,<sup>4</sup> half of the electors

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<sup>1</sup>See details at <https://danmarkshistorien.dk/vis/materiale/landstinget-1849-1953>

<sup>2</sup>It should however be noted that this was before the rise of Danish parliamentarianism, so the monarch had an active role in the selection of the government.

<sup>3</sup>Elections to the upper chamber was held in a rolling fashion, so that not all (elected) members of the upper chamber were elected during the same periods.

<sup>4</sup>Which always elected at least two electors each but usually more amounting to a total number of half the number of electors elected in rural municipalities

were elected by the lower house electorate, whereas the other half were elected by the voters with the highest income in those districts. Additionally, these elected electors were joined by an additional number of electors<sup>5</sup> recruited directly from among those voters in each upper chamber district with the highest tax payments in the latest tax year (Friisberg 2007, 198-199).

### **3.3 The democratic implications of the 1866 constitution**

This extremely complicated voting system had two major implications: First, it heavily over-represented wealthy voters both in the cities and rural areas (including owners of large landed estates) and substantially over-represented rural areas, as the number of electors between rural areas and cities were fixed, even as Denmark experienced a shift towards increased urbanization in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This voting system to the upper chamber of the parliament was in place until the constitution of 1915, which abolished the two-class voting system in the cities and the direct recruitment of top tax payers as electors as well as the appointment of life-long members of the upper chamber by the monarch.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, Denmark experienced, between 1866 and 1915, a period of franchise-based autocratization in a democratization process otherwise often characterized as relatively settled (Ziblatt 2017, 10), which is also reflected in the drop in Denmark's Polity score from 1 in 1865 to -1 in 1867.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Equal to those elected in the rural municipalities.

<sup>6</sup>However, the upper chamber still contained a few "conservative" features, as the voting age to the upper chamber was increased to 35, while voting age to the lower chamber was 25, and a quarter of the upper chamber would be elected by the outgoing upper chamber. The Danish parliament's upper chamber was eventually abolished in the 1953 constitution. See more details at <https://danmarkshistorien.dk/vis/materiale/landstinget-1849-1953>

<sup>7</sup>This autocratization was further (short-term) exacerbated during a constitutional crisis in 1885-1886, where the increased polarization between the upper and lower chamber led to the incumbent conservative government relying on provisional laws as well as several infractions on civil liberties following a failed assassination attempt on the conservative prime minister Estrup in 1885 (Friisberg 2007, 493-551).

### 3.4 The development of the Danish party system

However, during this period of temporary autocratization, and before Denmark's democratization in 1915, the Danish "four party" system formed. This system emerged from the previous weaker parliamentary factions. In this system, the Conservative Party ("Højre" in Danish) represented urban and rural elites (the ones overrepresented in the upper house by the 1866 constitution) as well as various socially heterogeneous constituencies. A separate Liberal Party ("Venstre" in Danish) developed as the political representative of the rural middle class. On the center-left, the Social/Radical Liberal Party split from the Liberal Party in 1905, and represented various urban constituencies as well as rural smallholders. The Social Democratic Party (which achieved parliamentary representation in the 1880s) became the party of urban workers. While conservative prime ministers held governmental power from 1866 to 1901, the Liberal Party was in power in various governments from 1901 to 1909, and again from 1910 to 1913, while the Social/Radical Liberal Party held government power from 1909-1910 and again from 1913 (Fink 2000, 14-33).

## 4 Data and estimation approach

In order to test whether increased autocratization of political institutions impacts the prevalence of political dynasties, we construct a dataset of all Danish MPs in both the lower and upper chamber from 1849 to 1915 based on existing datasets of Danish MPs from both the upper and lower house acquired through the Danish National Archives and the research project on Danish lower house MPs (Kjær and Pedersen 2004). The final dataset has a MP-year structure.<sup>8</sup>

The key dependent variable is whether an MP is a dynastic politician. A politician is coded

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<sup>8</sup>This is a potential source of statistical noise, as there will sometimes be several legislative elections held in the same calendar year, including in 1866, where one elections was held under the old voting rules and another under the new voting rules. However, this issues should matter less for average effects in later estimations.



as dynastic, if he is either the father, son or brother of another politician,<sup>9</sup> that is a person that has served/serves/will serve as an MP in either the upper or lower chamber. Consequently, in later analyses we are able to distinguish between dynastic "seniors" (fathers of other politicians), dynastic "juniors" (sons of other politicians) and dynastic siblings (brothers of other politicians). The source of this information is the short biographies of Danish MPs collected by Elberling and Elberling (1950). Furthermore, it is coded whether the politician belong to the Danish nobility<sup>10</sup> based on whether his family name appears in the 1900 version of the Danish Nobility's Yearbook in order to further investigate whether the non-democratic changes to the political institutions in 1866 had any impact on the political representation of this traditional elite.

Since the voting rules to the lower chamber is unchanged throughout the studied period, whereas the voting rules for the upper chamber changes from 1866 and onwards, we are able to use the lower chamber as a "control group" and estimate the effect of the autocratization of the upper chamber in a difference-in-difference logic. We thus estimate the following equation as a linear probability model.

$$Dynastic_{it} = \beta_1 Upper_{it} + \beta_2 Post1866_t + \beta_3 (Upper_{it} Post1866_t) + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where *Dynastic* is whether the whether MP *i* in year *t* is a dynastic politician (1 if yes, 0 if not), *Upper* is a dummy for whether whether this MP has a seat in the upper chamber as opposed to the lower chamber, while *Post1866* is a dummy which takes the value 1 after 1866 and 0 otherwise. The difference-in-difference estimate of interest is the interaction between the two latter variables. In some estimations, we include year-fixed effects  $\gamma_t$ , while  $\epsilon_{it}$  is the error term.

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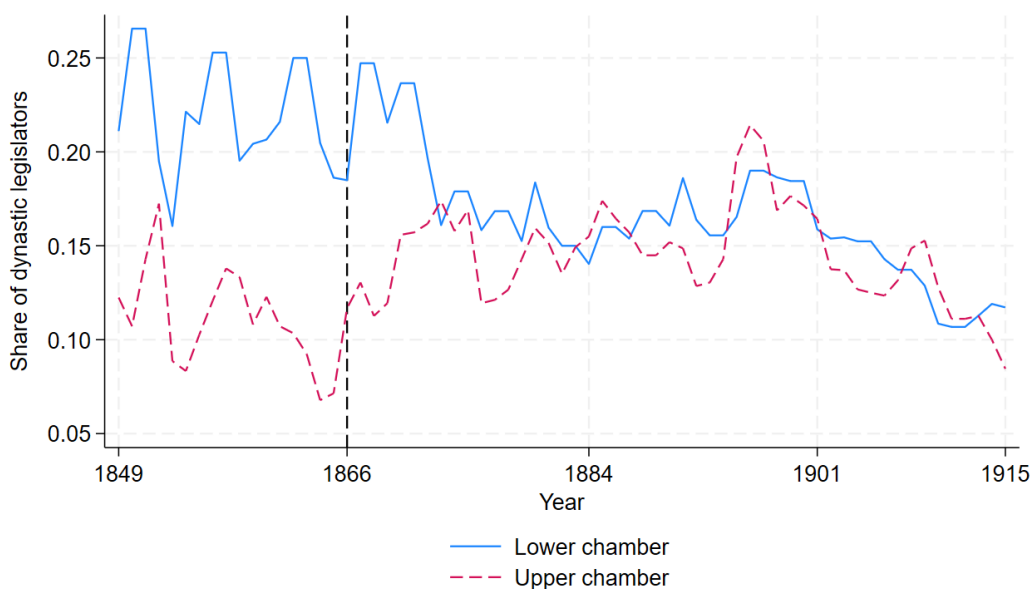
<sup>9</sup>All politicians in Danish parliament during this period were men.

<sup>10</sup>The Danish nobility had officially lost all their privileges with the 1849 constitution but had kept their titles and continued to play an important economic, cultural and social role in Danish society in the decades after (Jensen and Jespersen 2015, 24-31).

## 5 Results

We start out by showing the descriptive pattern in Figure 1, showing the share of dynastic politicians in the lower and upper chamber 1849-1915. Here, we see an indication that the 1866 constitution and its autocratizing reforms to the upper chamber voting system seems to have caused an increase in the share of dynastic politicians in the upper chamber relative to that of the lower chamber. Before the 1866 constitution, dynastic politicians actually seem to be more common in the lower chamber. Both chambers experience a jump in the period around the 1866 constitution, but the share of dynastic politicians dissipates much more quickly in the lower chamber, while the share of dynastic politicians is much more persistent in the upper chamber, leaving the two chambers with an equal share of dynastic politicians following the 1866 constitution.

**Figure 1:** Dynastic politicians and the 1866 constitution



This descriptive pattern is also reflected in our difference-in-difference regressions, which can be found in Table 1. The autocratizing reforms to the upper house voting system in 1866 seems to have - on average - increased the share of dynastic politicians in the upper chamber with 9 percentage points relative to the lower chamber. We thus find substantial evidence

**Table 1:** Dynastic politicians and the 1866 constitution, 1849-1915

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Upper Chamber	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.10 (0.04)**	-0.10 (0.04)**
Post-1866		-0.05 (0.03)	-0.10 (0.04)**
Upper Chamber × Post-1866		0.09 (0.05)*	0.09 (0.05)*
Mean DP = <1866	0.17	0.17	0.17
Year-fixed effects			✓
R-squared	0.00	0.01	0.01
Observations	11,921	11,921	11,921

Dependent variable is whether the MP is a dynastic politician.

Standard errors clustered by MP in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

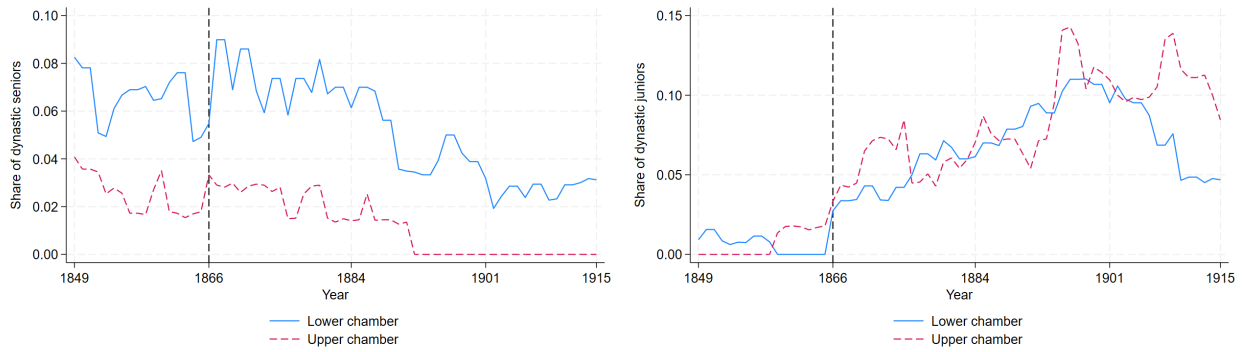
for our theoretical argument that the effect of democratizing reforms on the reduction of political dynasties are symmetric to autocratizing political reforms, which seem to increase the share of dynastic politicians.

## 5.1 What types of dynastic politicians?

In this section, we investigate further which types of dynastic politicians rose in the upper chamber as a consequence of the 1866 constitution.

Again, we start out by showing some descriptive patterns in Figures 2 and 3, where we look at the relative prevalence of dynastic "seniors" (fathers of other politicians), dynastic "juniors" and dynastic siblings (brothers of other politicians) in the upper and lower chamber. Figures 2a and 2b indicate that the 1866 constitution caused a short-lived relative increase in the dynastic "seniors" politicians both in the lower and in the upper chamber. However, this was followed a much greater rise and persistence of "dynastic" juniors in the upper chamber relative to the lower chamber some decades later, leaving the upper chamber with a relatively larger share of dynastic "junior" politicians relative to the lower chamber. The upper chamber also sees an increase in the share of dynastic sibling politicians following the 1866 constitution. However, their share eventually declines and end lower compared to the

**Figure 2:** 1866 constitutions and type of dynastic politicians

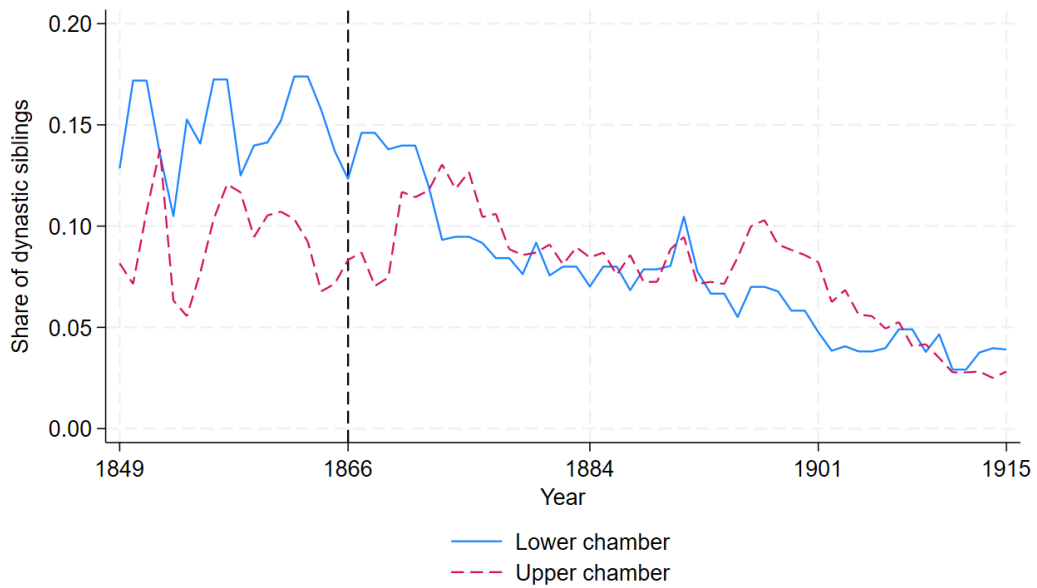


(a) Dynastic seniors

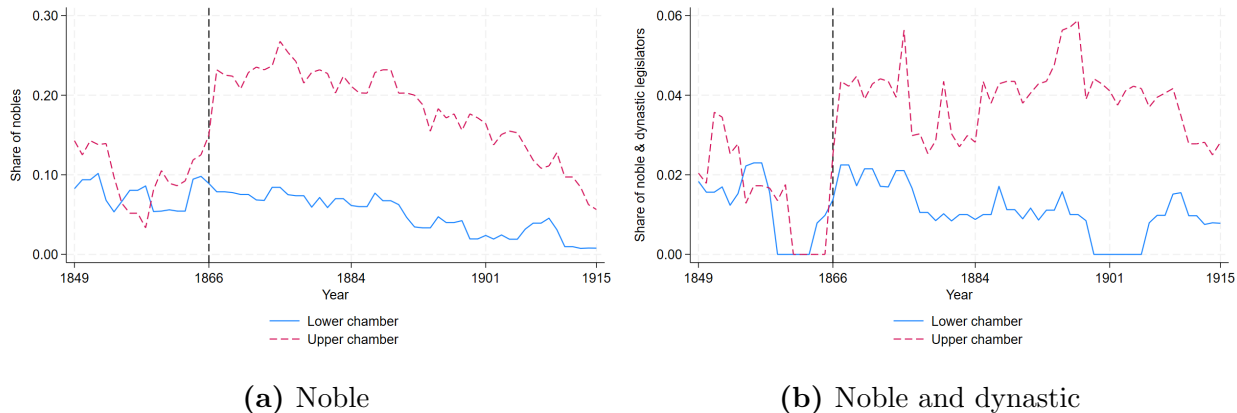
(b) Dynastic juniors

lower chamber at the time of Danish democratization in 1915.

**Figure 3:** Dynastic politicians (siblings) and the 1866 constitution



**Figure 4:** The 1866 constitutions and representation of the nobility in the Danish parliament



Additionally, as evident from Figures 3a and 3b, the 1866 constitution also seems to have increased the relative prevalence of the Danish nobility in the upper chamber relative to the lower chamber.<sup>11</sup> This includes noble politicians with political-dynastic links,<sup>12</sup> whose rise in the upper chamber also seems to be more persistent than noble politicians in general. These dynastic-noble politicians, who seem to have risen around and after the 1866 constitution include some of the most prominent political figures during this period, including the prime minister from 1865-1870 count Christian Emil Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs and his son Mogens Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs, who also played an important part of Danish politics in the decades around Danish democratization and was (after the death of his father) the largest landowner in Denmark (Jesper and Clemmensen 2017).

The results from the descriptive figures above are also largely found in the similar difference-in-difference regression in Table 2. However, not all of the estimates are statistically significant.

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<sup>11</sup>However, a slight pre-trend in the rise of noble representation in the upper chamber before the 1866 is visible.

<sup>12</sup>Where the pre-trend seems less severe.

**Table 2:** Effect of 1866 constitution of type of politician

	Dynastic senior	Dynastic junior	Dynastic sibling	Noble	Noble and dynastic
Upper Chamber	-0.04 (0.02)*	0.00 (0.01)	-0.06 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (0.01)
Post-1866	-0.05 (0.03)*	0.05 (0.02)***	-0.10 (0.03)***	-0.11 (0.03)**	-0.01 (0.01)
Upper Chamber × Post-1866	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	0.11 (0.04)**	0.02 (0.02)
Mean DP =<1866	0.05	0.01	0.12	0.09	0.01
Year-fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	11,921	11,921	11,921	11,921	11,921
R-squared	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.05	0.01

Dependent variables in top row.

Standard errors clustered by MP in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

All in all, we find substantial evidence that the elite-biased voting rights reforms to the upper chamber of the Danish parliament - as a consequence of the 1866 constitution - increased the share of dynastic politicians in the upper chamber relative to the lower chamber, and that these autocratizing political reforms also seemed to have increased the political representation of the members of traditional elites as represented by the Danish nobility.

## 5.2 The role of royally appointed MPs

The question naturally arises for which aspects of the autocratization reforms of the 1866 constitution were responsible for the apparent increase in the representation of the Danish nobility in the upper chamber of parliament. It would seem obvious that the Danish nobility would have been able to capitalize on their traditional connection to the Danish king (Wendel-Hansen and Møller 2013), and thus that royally appointed MPs in the upper chamber would have been the main institution behind the increased political representation of the nobility in the upper chamber following the 1866 constitution.

To investigate this issue, in Table 3, we first investigate, using only the the upper chamber after 1866 as the sample, whether our two nobility dummies affect the likelihood that the

MP is royally appointed.<sup>13</sup> Neither noble status or the combination of being a member of the nobility with political-dynastic links do not in itself to statistically significantly increase in the chance that the MP is royally appointed.

In columns 3 and 4 of Table 3, we further investigate these issues by excluding royally appointed MPs and redo the difference-in-difference analysis with "noble" and "noble and dynastic" as the dependent variable. While the difference-in-difference estimate is still positive and statistically significant for an MP's "noble status" this is not the case for the "noble and dynastic" status. But the the difference-in-difference coefficient remains roughly of the same size as in Table 2.

Consequently, the rise of the Danish nobility in the upper chamber of the Danish parliament after the 1866 constitution does not seem to be due to the institution of royally appointed MPs. Rather the nobility's increased presence in the Danish parliament's upper chamber seemed to have originated in the two-class voting system, where landed estate owners (of which many were noblemen) were extremely privileged (Jensen and Jespersen 2015, 27).

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<sup>13</sup>Based on the list provided in Nordengaard (1949). One royally appointed MP (Christian Sørensen) could not be located in the dataset.

**Table 3:** Royally appointed MPs and the Danish nobility

	Royal appointed MP	Royal appointed MP	Noble	Noble and dynastic
Noble	0.10 (0.07)			
Noble and dynastic		0.04 (0.17)		
Upper Chamber			0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.01)
Post-1866			-0.11 (0.03)***	-0.02 (0.01)
Upper Chamber × Post-1866			0.10 (0.04)**	0.02 (0.02)
Sample restriction	Post-1866 & upper chamber	Post-1866 & upper chamber	Excluding royal MPs	Excluding royal MPs
Year-fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,547	3,547	11,306	11,306
R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.01

Dependent variables in top row.

Standard errors clustered by MP in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

## 6 Conclusion

Democratization is often thought to decrease the prevalence of political dynasties. In this article, we have shown that this effect is symmetrical to autocratization. By exploiting the changes to the 1866 Danish Parliament's upper chamber's voting rules which introduced a two-class voting system as well as royally appointed MPs, we have shown that this undemocratic reform increased the share of dynastic politicians in the upper chamber relative to the lower chamber, where voting rules was unchanged. We also find that these autocratizing reforms increased the political representation of traditional elites in the form of the Danish nobility.

The results raises several questions with regards to the study political dynasties, political representation of (traditional) elites as well as autocratization/democratic backsliding. First and foremost, would we expect a similar increased representation of political dynasties and traditional elites in other countries/time periods undergoing similar types of non-democratic political development? While the type of autocratization studied in this article has been



related to voting rules and political representation, modern autocrats tend to rely on other tools for extending their grip on power and lowering political competition (Guriev and Treisman 2022). But do these differences have implications for the prevalence as well as the type of dynastic politicians? Additionally, the focus in this article has been on parliamentary representation but would the results extend to cabinet posts and other types of non-legislative political positions? Finally, we have studied a period of Danish (and European) political history where only men could hold (elected) political office, but we know from modern studies of political dynasties that political-dynastic dynamics also matter for female political representation (Folke, Rickne and Smith 2021; Julien Labonne and Querubin 2021; Baturio and Gray 2018). Consequently, a potential gender-specific aspect of autocratization effects on political dynasties is a very important question. Future research could fruitfully engage with all of these issues.

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# Appendix