

“Revolutionary Transition: Inheritance Change and Fertility Decline”

Victor Gay

(Joint with Paula E. Gobbi and Marc Goñi)

Abstract

We test Le Play's (1884) hypothesis that the French Revolution contributed to France's early fertility decline. In 1793, a series of inheritance reforms abolished local inheritance practices, imposing equal division of assets among all children. We develop a theoretical framework that predicts a decline in fertility following these reforms because of indivisibility constraints in parents' assets. We test this hypothesis with a newly created map of pre-Revolution local inheritance practices and demographic data from the Henry database and from crowdsourced genealogies in Geni.com. We provide difference-in-differences and regression-discontinuity estimates based on comparing cohorts of fertile age and cohorts too old to be fertile in 1793 between municipalities where the reforms altered and did not alter the existing inheritance practices. We find that the 1793 inheritance reforms reduced completed fertility by half to one child, closed the pre-reform fertility gap between different inheritance regions, and sharply accelerated France's early fertility transition.