

Adrien Montalbo (IESEG School of Management)

‘Education supply and economic growth in nineteenth-century France’

The role played by education in the transition from stagnation to growth has been highly debated. Two questions related to this debate remain open: did education impact the economic take-off of countries and their move towards a sustained economic growth? What level of education was the most relevant during this transition process? In this article, I investigate these two questions by studying the effect of primary schooling on the economic development of French municipalities during the nineteenth century and up to World War I. To do so, I rely on a quasi-natural experiment, the Guizot law of 1833. This piece of legislation made mandatory for each municipality over 500 inhabitants to open and fund a primary school for boys. This law constitutes the first coercive measure on schooling supply undertaken by the French state. Just before the law was passed, a national survey on primary schooling was undertaken under the supervision of François Guizot, the Minister of Instruction. All primary schools were to be inspected by the 490 inspectors sent throughout France. This survey contains very precise information on the location of schools, their characteristics, as well as the characteristics of teachers. By selecting municipalities with no school in 1833 and by implementing a regression discontinuity around the 500-inhabitant threshold defined by the law, I measure the impact on a positive shock on schooling supply on the subsequent economic development of municipalities. To do so, I collected data on the amount of taxes collected within municipalities in 1881 and 1911. I argue that these taxes represent a good proxy for economic resources. My final sample covers 22 departments, which represents around one-fourth of the entire country. I identify a positive impact of primary instruction on the subsequent growth of municipalities, as being affected by the Guizot law induced an increase of two-thirds of a standard deviation in resources for municipalities close to the threshold. Therefore, primary schooling, and the acquisition of elementary skills, played a major role in the development of French municipalities during the century of industrialisation and modernisation. More generally, these findings reveal a positive impact of basic education during the transition from stagnation to growth.