

back to the end of the eighteenth century (the ENS was founded in 1793), when the ideals of the revolution demanded a new breed of enlightened administrators. These people were meant to be selected on merit to replace the traditional aristocracy. The current British version looks more like a throwback to an earlier eighteenth-century form of politics, when merit mattered less than privilege and family ties. British politics is in the hands of a narrow elite who happen to share the right background. Where you start out matters more than where you want to end up.

However, this is not simply a Tory phenomenon. The leadership of the Labour party is also made up of individuals who are connected to each other by ties of family and education. Labour politics has been dominated in recent years by the rivalry between two brothers – David and Ed Miliband – who were both brought up doing politics by their Marxist academic father, Ralph Miliband. The Marxism didn’t stick, but the connection with the world of politics did (both boys were mingling with the high-ups in the Labour Party from their teenage years). In future, Labour politics may be dominated by another family: the husband and wife team of Ed Balls and Yvette Cooper, currently Ed Miliband’s nearest rivals (now that his brother has gone off to New York in a sulk). Nor is this simply a British phenomenon. Family ties play an increasingly prominent role in American politics. The next presidential election could be between the two clans who continue to dominate American political life: Hillary Clinton vs. Jeb Bush, the wife of one president vs. the son and

brother of two more. People are already speculating about some future contest between Chelsea Clinton, daughter of Hillary, and George P. Bush, son of Jeb. At the state level, many families have a strong hold on the top jobs, from the Cuomos in New York (the current governor is the son of a former governor) to the Browns in California (ditto). The children of politicians are as likely to become politicians as they have ever been.

The new aristocracy is not just made up of the traditional propertied elites using politics to preserve their own wealth and status. This is a phenomenon that cuts across party lines and ideological divisions: political families don’t necessarily defend the rights of the privileged few. (The most aristocratic of all, the Kennedys, were also among the most progressive.) The narrowing of the political class through family ties is a function of the professionalisation of politics and the increasingly high barriers to entry. Politics has become a specialised business, and the best way to get good at it is to do a lot of it. It helps to start early. It also helps to have connections with anyone who can give you a head start. At the same time, politics has become a widely despised profession. (A recent survey suggested that most American parents would rather their children did almost anything else.) So it helps to have parents or siblings who can encourage you to give it a go, notwithstanding what the rest of the world thinks. Politics is hardly unique in this respect. Lots of children end up doing what their parents did, simply for reasons of familiarity. My father is an academic sociologist, and