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Article

Education and Political Participation

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EDUCATION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Introduction

In the light of a steady decline in voter turnout at the German national elections over the last 40 years (Bundeswahlleiter 2015), political journalists and researchers have started to look for explanations for increasing abstention from voting (e.g., Schäfer 2015). One prominent, if not the most prominent determinant of political participation, is the educational level of an individual. In view of this fact, researchers and politicians have long thought that improving the education level of the population would automatically lead to increasing political participation. However, political participation has declined in Germany and in many other developed countries, despite increasing education levels.

In this article, we begin by providing insights into the general developments in the relationship between education and political participation. Then, we present studies that aim to identify the causal effect of education on political participation. This overview shows that the association between education and political participation is still a hotly debated topic among researchers, raising several research questions that are still to be answered.

General developments in the relationship between education and voting

Research into the relationship between education and political participation yields seemingly opposing results. At the individual level, there are numerous studies showing a strong positive correlation between educational attainment and political participation (Lipset 1959; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000; Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012). Interestingly, these individual-level findings hardly transfer to the macro level. Although education levels increased worldwide after World War II, this development was not accompanied by a rise in voter turnout. Moreover, voter turnout in general elections is even decreasing in many Western societies, and this development is often especially pronounced among younger cohorts (Gray and Caul 2000; Putnam 2000; Kostadinova 2003; Sondheimer and Green 2010).

To observe more recent trends in voter turnout, we use data from the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a cross-national survey that was first conducted in 2002, and has given rise to seven survey waves to date. The ESS covers over 30 European countries and aims to measure the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of the population. The survey consists of a core module, which is repeated in every wave, and of several rotating modules. The core module contains detailed information about sociodemographic and household characteristics, as well as numerous questions about media usage, social trust, politics, subjective well-being and values, religion, and national and ethnic identity. The ESS is representative for each participating country, and its panel structure enables the analysis of longer-term trends.¹

Figure 1 shows the average turnout for national elections that individuals report in the ESS, by respondents' education level and birth cohorts. Consistent with the findings of the literature on this topic, individuals with higher education levels are on average more likely to participate in elections than individuals with lower education levels. This pattern holds for all birth cohorts. Figure 2 shows that the share of respondents with at least upper-secondary education rises with their year of birth, while the share of respondents who voted at the last national election is lower among younger birth cohorts. This is in line with the literature on this topic, which shows that abstention from voting is more prevalent among younger birth cohorts, although they are better educated. Figure 3 presents developments over time, also showing the increase in the education level of the population. The development in voter turnout has to be interpreted with some caution, however, since it is based on all countries from all waves, but national elections take place more infrequently than the ESS surveys. Therefore, voting behavior from different ESS waves could refer, in some cases, to the same national elections. If anything, the time series points to a slight decrease in voter turnout over time.

The results presented to date show that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to vote. However, this correlation does not yet prove that higher education causes higher political participation. This issue will be discussed in the next section.

¹ Like all social surveys, the ESS suffers from measurement error. But Pelkonen (2012) and Milligan, Moretti and Oreopoulos (2004), using different survey data, provide evidence that results on the relationship between education and voter turnout are not driven by measurement error.

Figure 1

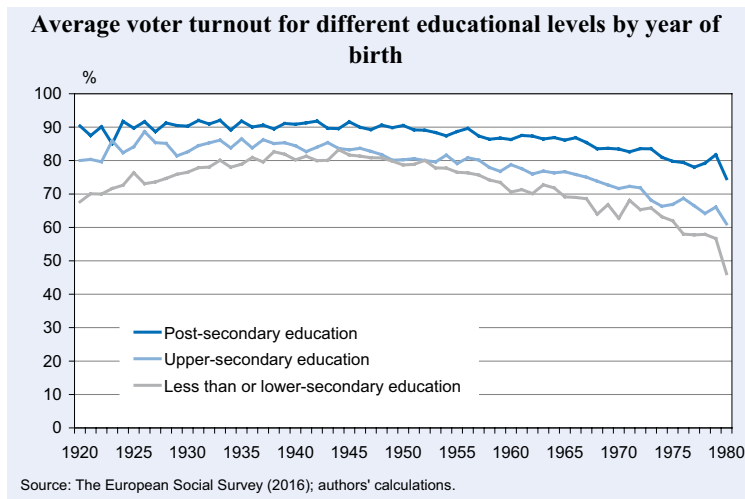


Figure 2

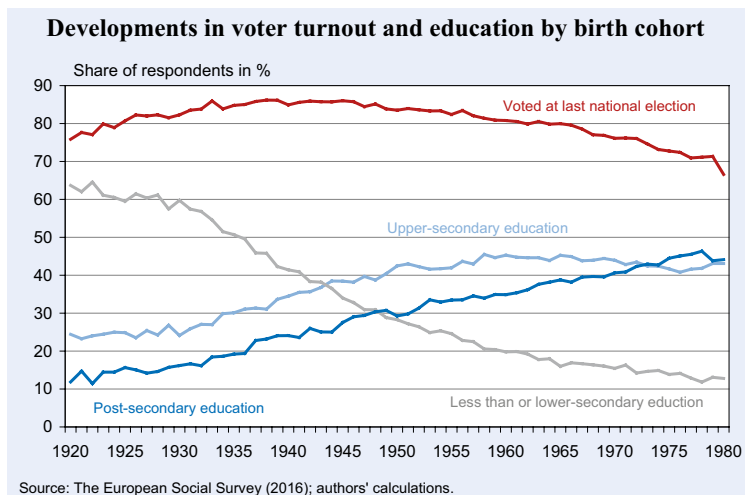
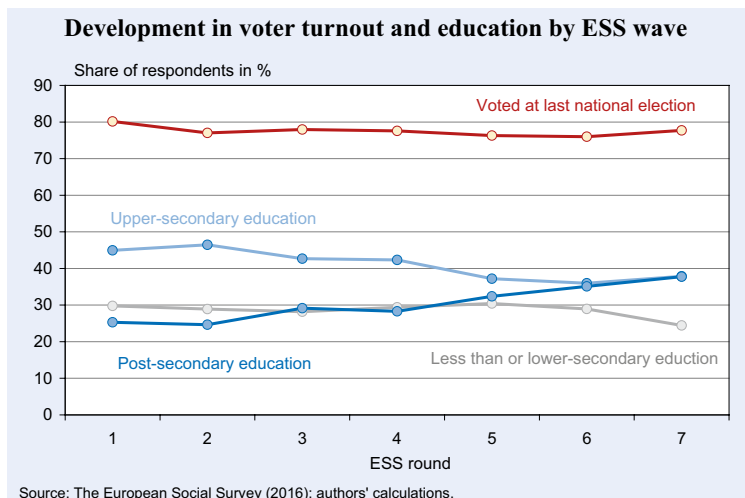


Figure 3



Education as a cause versus education as a proxy

As in empirical research in general, correlation does not necessarily imply causation. Different mechanisms could drive the relationship between education and political participation. Let us consider two different theoretical models.² First, the *absolute education model* considers education as a cause. The idea is that education increases the cognitive ability of individuals, which, in turn, increases civic skills and political knowledge. For example, well-educated individuals are better able to process the necessary information for political participation. Furthermore, courses on politics and citizenship in school may increase an individual's likelihood of voting. Second, the *pre-adult socialization model* is based on the idea that education is only a proxy for other underlying factors, such as the socio-economic status of the family, political socialization as a child, or individual traits like innate cognitive ability. These other factors could affect both the education level of the individual and his/her likelihood of participating in elections. In this model, education is not the cause of political participation. In empirical research, however, it is very difficult to distinguish between these two different models, and some researchers erroneously conclude from correlations that a higher level of education causes a greater degree of political participation.

² For more details on this and a third model, see, e.g., Persson (2015).

Recent research on the causal effects of education

Much of the research conducted over the last 15 years tries to find evidence in favor of or against the view that education is a direct cause of political participation. In a hypothetical world, one could run an experiment that randomly assigns a lot of education to some individuals and little education to others.³ One could subsequently investigate whether individuals that received more education are more likely to vote than individuals who received less education. If this were to prove the case, one could establish that education does indeed have a causal effect on political participation. Obviously, such an experiment cannot be run in practice. Researchers instead look for events that come as close as possible to such an experiment. We will now present two groups of studies that aim to identify the causal impact of education on political participation.

The first group of studies analyzes field experiments or exploits natural experiments. The basic idea is that sometimes educational reforms or institutional features provide a setting that comes close to a real experiment. One prominent example that was used in several studies is the change in the amount of compulsory schooling individuals have to obtain. For example, in Denmark individuals only had to obtain seven years of compulsory schooling until 1971. After 1971, individuals received nine years of compulsory schooling. Such a reform can be analyzed with different econometric methods and is able to provide causal estimates, particularly in cases where the reform has been introduced gradually in different regions of a country, as was the case in Germany and Finland, for example. Pelkonen (2012) studies the effects of such an educational reform in Norway and finds that education has no significant effects on different types of political participation. Siedler (2010) analyzes an educational reform in Germany and also finds little evidence of a causal effect. Berinsky and Lenz (2011) use the natural experiment of military conscription that took place during the Vietnam War, leading to different levels of education among young males. They similarly find that education has no effect on political participation. Exploiting changes in compulsory schooling laws, Milligan, Moretti and Oreopoulos (2004) find positive causal effects for the United States, but not for the United Kingdom. Dee (2004) also finds evidence of causal effects in the United States, using school-leaving laws and the geographical distance to higher education institutions as a natural experiment. Sondheim and

Green (2010) also find that education has positive causal effects on political participation when using results from three different field experiments. However, these field experiments do not include many individuals, and they are focused on individuals with a low socio-economic status, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to the entire population.

Many studies focus on only one country, and it is not clear why education has significant causal effects on political participation in some countries, but not in others. One study tries to provide more general results by estimating the effects of compulsory schooling reforms for a whole group of European countries (Borgonovi, d'Hombres and Hoskins 2010). The authors use data from the European Social Survey and combine that with information about compulsory schooling reforms in European countries from Brunello, Fort and Weber (2009). They find that education has no effect on voter turnout, but do find positive effects on the acquisition of information on politics.

The second group of studies tries to estimate causal effects via so-called matching procedures. These studies are based on panel data, that is, repeated observations of the same individuals. The basic idea behind matching is to pair people (i.e., to find “matches”) who are very similar with respect to their socio-economic characteristics, but who differ in their education level, and then to compare the participation outcomes for these matched individuals. While there is an ongoing debate over which exact matching procedure performs best, and if matching is indeed able to yield causal estimates at all, the results are not very promising for the education-as-a-cause view. Several papers do not find any significant differences in political participation between higher- and lower-educated individuals (Kam and Palmer 2008, 2011; Henderson and Chatfield 2011; Persson 2014). Only one study that uses a matching procedure finds some evidence that post-secondary education might have a causal effect on political participation (Mayer 2011).

To sum up, results on the causal effects of education on political participation are mixed. Hence, more research on this topic is needed.

Conclusion

In this article, we provide evidence on the correlation between education and political participation in Europe. The rising educational level in a population over time is

³ See, for example, Angrist and Pischke (2015) on why experiments allow identifying causal effects.

typically not followed by the same development in voter turnout. Younger cohorts, in particular, seem to stay away from the polls. At an individual level, however, we observe that people with more education are more likely to vote. The existing literature tries to find evidence that this relationship is driven by a causal effect of education. The results with regard to this question are rather mixed and therefore provide only limited hope that further increasing education levels will also increase voter turnout. Of course, there are forms of political participation other than voter turnout that might be especially attractive for younger people. Voting is nevertheless crucial to a functioning democracy.

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