

Out of The Classroom and Into the Voting Booth? Analyzing the Effects of Education on Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Political theorists and philosophers have long believed that formal education is vital for preparing a citizenry to meaningfully participate in democratic society; it is through formal education that individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and relationships that allow them to be effective contributors to their democracy. Several empirical studies have gauged whether formal education exerts this intended effect and nearly all of them have concluded that formal education has a strong positive relationship with political participation. Unfortunately, two features of these studies severely limit our understanding of the full relationship between these factors. First, these studies exclusively operationalize education as the number of years of formal schooling completed. Second, this scholarship assumes an individual's educational attainment to be exogenous. Taken together, these features of previous research distort the relationship between education and political participation because they exclude whole dimensions of education from being able to theoretically affect political participation and thus result in an incomplete understanding of this important relationship.

My dissertation begins by developing a comprehensive theory of the wide-ranging effects of education on individuals' understanding of—and participation in—politics. To provide a brief summary of its key features, the theory draws on existing scholarship in hypothesizing that educational attainment affects political participation through the twin mechanisms of increased knowledge and skills and increased socioeconomic status. However, unlike previous work, educational attainment is presumed to not only affect, but also be affected by each of these factors. In addition, educational attainment is hypothesized to be affected by educational policies, practices, and context. These factors—policies, practices, and context—are also expected to affect the level of individuals' civics-related knowledge and skills. Finally, underlying the whole framework is the consideration of causal heterogeneity, which is theorized to occur along several dimensions, including 1) the mode of political participation, 2) the level of educational attainment, 3) the level of knowledge and skills, and 4) the socioeconomic characteristics of individuals.

I test this theory in several stages. The first stage of testing uses restricted-use data from the 2006 administration of the NAEP Civics assessment to analyze how school policies, practices, and context affect the average level of civic knowledge and skills among American youth and adolescents. Employing a variety of empirical approaches—including difference-in-differences analysis and inverse probability of treatment weighting—my results indicate that state-level civics graduation credit requirements have no effect on civics achievement, but that civics coursetaking and instruction have a positive effect. In addition, the opportunity to participate applied civic activities—debate, mock trial, and student government—can have a positive effect on students' levels of civic knowledge and skills, but this is not always the case.

After examining the effect of educational policies, practice, and context on civic knowledge and skills, I use information from two datasets—High School & Beyond and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy—to analyze the link between an individual’s level of knowledge and skills obtained through schooling and his or her participation in the political process. The results in this chapter are among the first empirical tests of the long-held belief in political science that schooling increases political participation by increasing individuals’ levels of knowledge and skills. Preliminary findings suggest that some dimensions of knowledge and skills have a larger effect on levels of political participation than others.

My final set of empirical tests explores how educational attainment affects political participation through the mechanism of increased socioeconomic status. Using the sociological literature on status attainment as a theoretical basis, I analyze the extent to which the attainment-related effects of education operate as a step function, as opposed to linearly; the effects are likely to be largest upon completion of educational milestones, such as high school graduation and earning of a bachelor’s degree. I perform this analysis using samples from several longitudinal datasets, including NELS:88, High School & Beyond, and ELS:2002.

By providing a better understanding of the relationship between education and an individual’s participation in the political process, this research provides evidence-based conclusions about the particular policies, procedures, and practices that are most effective in preparing individuals to be active contributors to a democratic society. Given the political and economic challenges that our nation is likely to face in the future, it is vital that all young people are educated in a manner allows them to understand and engage the dialogue and debate over the future direction of our nation.