Education, Inequality, and Political Behavior FREE

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Summary

Educational level is one of the strongest factors in explaining how citizens behave in politics. Political scientists have shown time and again that the higher their level of formal education, the more people are interested in politics, the more they trust politicians, and the more they participate in politics. A strong educational gradient can be observed at almost every form of participation, and in many Western liberal democracies. Far less attention has been given to the political consequences of this gap in participation between the well- and the less-educated.

In the 21st century, educational level has turned out to be a driver behind the rise of new social and political divides in Western democracies. Increasingly, education is studied separately from class or income as a source of political attitudes, political behavior, and social and political inequalities. It is a very relevant factor to understand the contours of the contemporary political landscape in consolidated Western democracies. Traditional cleavages are eroding, and rising levels of education have been creating new social groups and new political inequalities between educational groups.

In many Western democracies, the well-educated have come to dominate democratic institutions. This rise of a political meritocracy has led to policy incongruences in favor of the well-educated and is a source of resentment among the lesser-educated. For example, education has been one of the main explanatory factors in the vote for Brexit, the support for Trump in the United States, and the election of Macron and the rise of the Yellow Vests movement in France.

Keywords: education, inequality, participation gaps, diploma democracy, political meritocracy, cleavage, cultural divide, civic education

Subjects: Groups and Identities, Political Sociology, Political Values, Beliefs, and Ideologies

The Increasing Political Visibility of Education

Education increases political participation.[1] Research on political participation has consistently revealed a robust and positive relationship between number of years of education and political participation in Western, consolidated democracies. In political research,

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education tends to be packaged together with other politically relevant characteristics, such as income, race, and gender. Much of the research has been concerned with drawing the causal relationships between education and political participation. This will be discussed in depth in the first part of the article. The section on "The Educational Gradient in Political Participation" summarizes the empirical evidence for the strong educational gradient in political behavior in Western democracies. The next section discusses the explanations for these educational inequalities in political participation. Is education a cause or a proxy?

Far less attention has been given to the political consequences of the gap in participation between the well- and the less-educated. Although education frequently appears on the political agenda as a policy issue, it is always considered a means to improve the position of groups that are otherwise socially or politically disadvantaged. One of the reasons for this is probably that, of all demographic characteristics that function as background variables, education has been politically the least visible. Political groups have been organized on the basis of gender, income, religion, race, and ethnicity, but not in terms of education level. Often this is expressed in the names of political parties and social movements. So far, education as a category has not mobilized a politically visible group with a clear shared interest, demanding equal rights or an improved position. There is no such thing as a "University Graduate Party" or a "Union for the Low Educated," in contrast to, for example, the "Labour Party," the "Christlich Sociale Union," or the "Lega Nord," whose names explicitly refer to the social groups they organize and represent. Educational levels as such are not very attractive labels for rallying supporters. "Lower-educated"—unlike, for example, "working class" in the past—is not a positive label for identification, because of the social stigma of inferiority that is attached to it. Likewise, the well-educated, because of the liberal ethos of egalitarianism, feel embarrassed to openly organize themselves on the basis of their higher qualifications.

In the 21st century education has become more visible, however. Increasingly, education is studied separately from class or income as a source of political attitudes, political behavior, and social and political inequalities. It is a very relevant factor to understand the contours of the contemporary political landscape in consolidated Western democracies. Traditional cleavages are eroding and rising levels of education have been creating new social groups and new political inequalities. Political scientists and sociologists have started to pay attention to the importance of education in the rise of new political and cultural conflicts in Western, postindustrial societies (Bornschier, 2010; Bovens & Wille, 2017; Houtman et al., 2008; Kriesi et al., 2008). This will be the topic of the second part of the article. The third section discusses the research regarding the political consequences of these educational inequalities. The section on "Education as a Cleavage" discusses how education has become a source of social and political divisions in advanced Western democracies. The final section discusses whether more schooling and civic education can help to close these gaps.

The Educational Gradient in Political Participation

Education as the Universal Solvent for the Puzzle of Participation

Educational level is one of the strongest factors in explaining how citizens behave in politics. It determines differences not only in political interest, but also in participation, and in political trust. Already in the first American studies of political behavior in the 1960s, formal education

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was identified as the chief explanatory variable (Almond & Verba, 1963). Philip Converse (1972, p. 324) even considered education to be the universal solvent for “the puzzle of political participation.” Political scientists have shown time and again that the higher their level of formal education, the more people are interested in politics, the more they trust politicians, and the more they participate in politics.

Political participation can take many forms. Together, these forms can be thought of as a participation pyramid in which acts vary in terms of their difficulty and can therefore be ranked from easy to difficult. Spectator activities, such as watching, reading, and talking about politics, form the base of the pyramid. Holding political office is at the peak of the pyramid. A strong educational gradient can be observed at almost every level of the participation pyramid, and in every Western democracy (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Dalton, 2017, pp. 44–48).

Spectator Activities

At the bottom of the political participation pyramid are the most rudimentary forms of political engagement. People are interested in politics, talk about it, comment on the news they have watched and the newspapers they have read, and give their personal views while discussing current affairs at birthday parties, in the pub, or on social media. Figure 1 shows that in Europe there are hardly any educational differences in media behavior for those who watch, listen, and read about politics for half an hour or more on an average weekday. The primary-educated are just as likely as those with a tertiary education to spend an extended period of time watching politics.

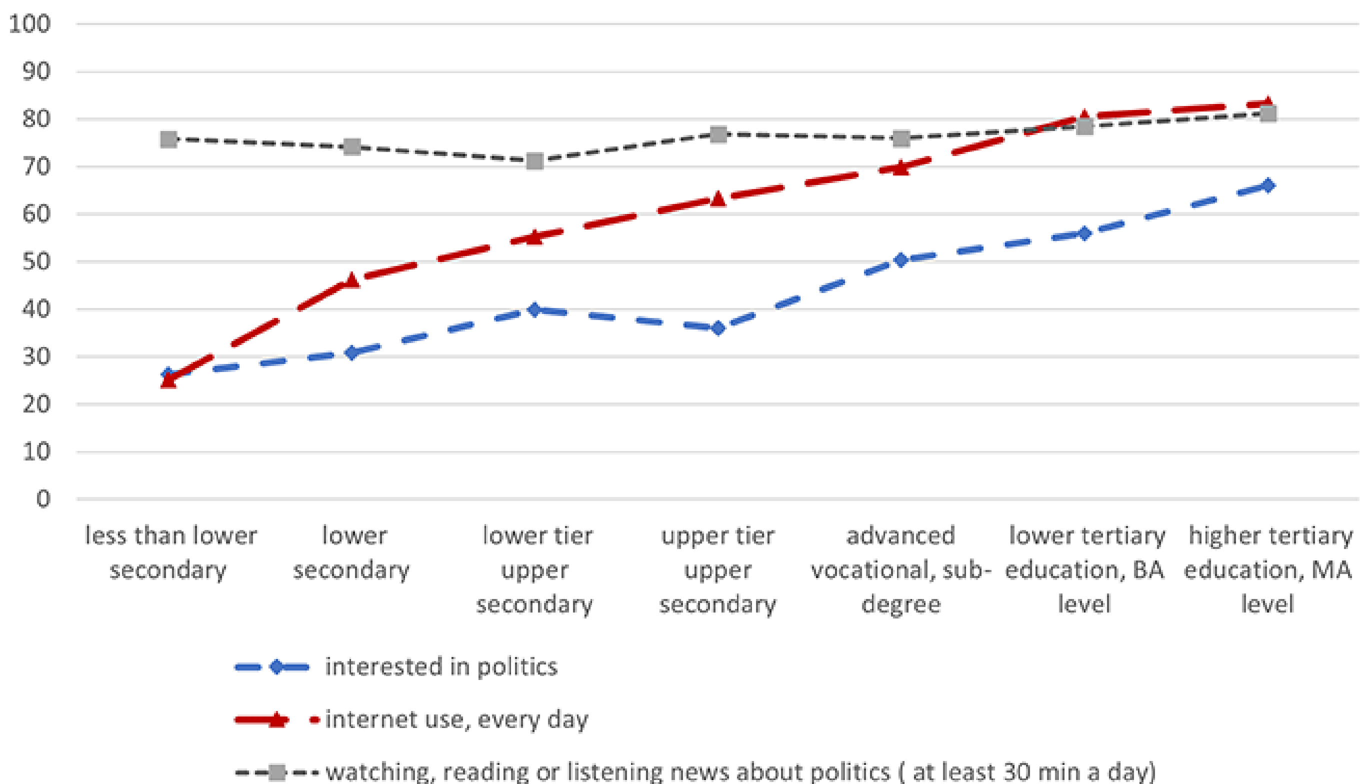

Figure 1. Education level and spectator activities in Europe (%).

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Source: European Social Survey (ESS) (2018) (N = 34.700). Countries in the ESS 2018: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia.

The education gap is much larger when it comes to being interested in politics and using the internet to become informed about politics. Those with a tertiary education are more likely to be interested in politics and to read about politics on the internet compared with those with primary or secondary education.

Voting

The differences between educational groups are much larger at the next level of the pyramid. Figures 2a and 2b show a clear educational gradient with regard to voting. In the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, the turnout of voters with at least a college degree was almost twice as high as that of voters with only a high school diploma.

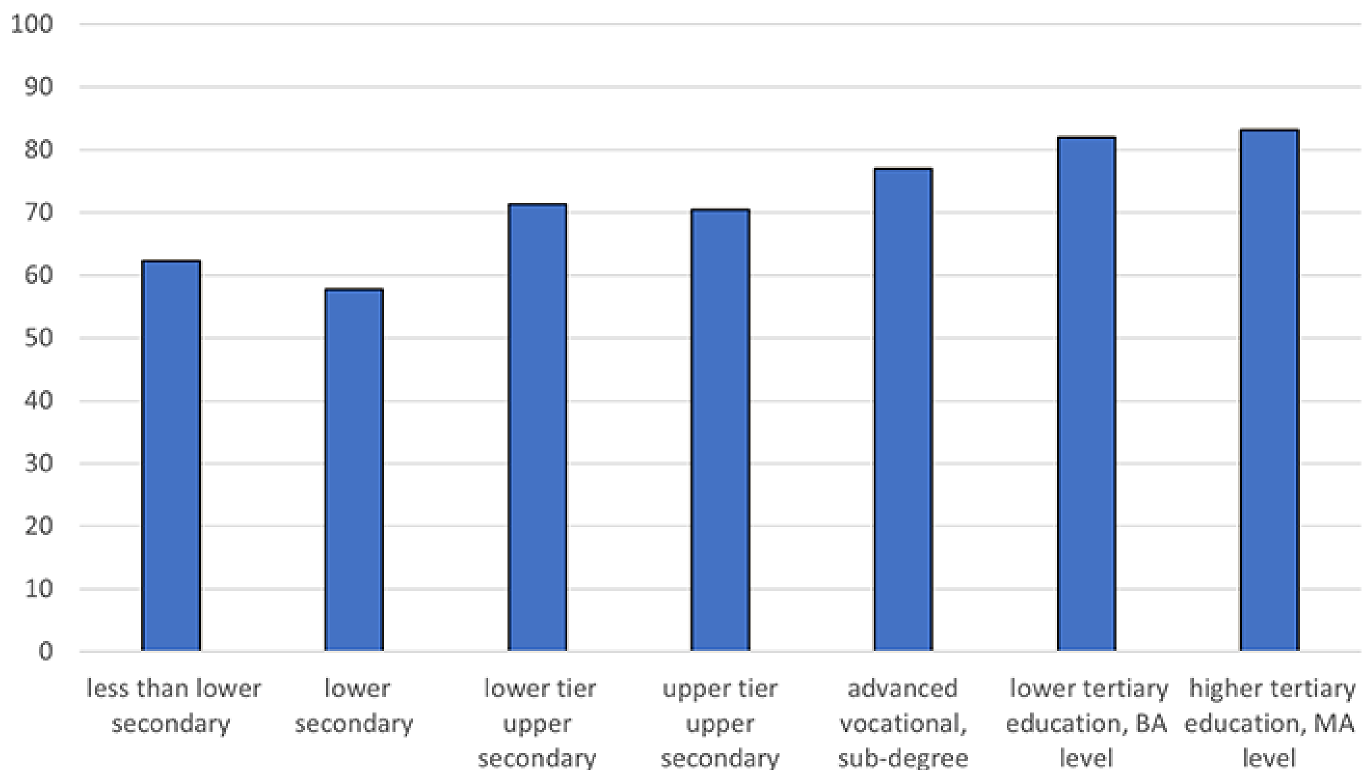

Figure 2a. Education level and voting in Europe (%).

Source: ESS (2018) (N = 34.700). Countries in the ESS (2018): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia.

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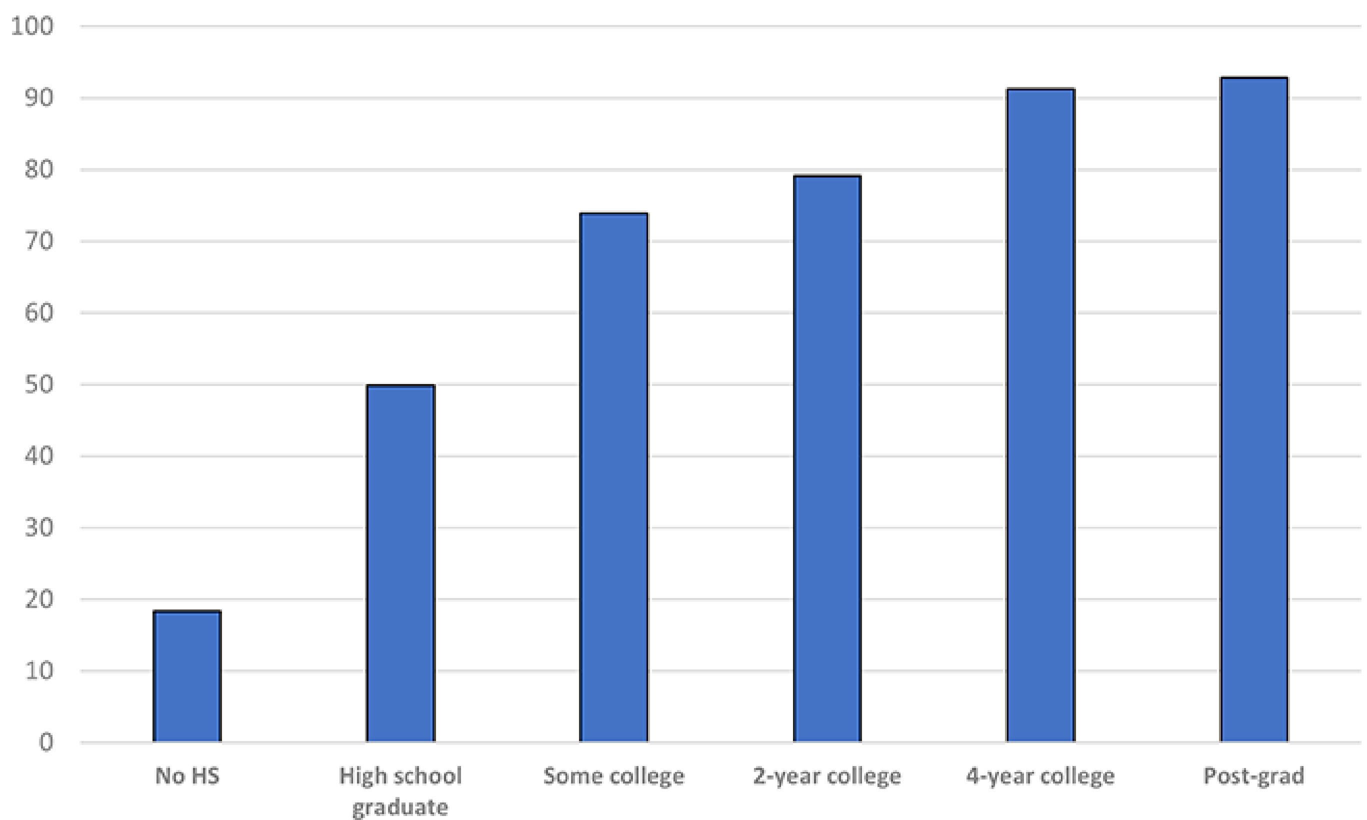

Figure 2b. Education level and voting in United States (%, presidential elections 2016).

Source: American National Election Studies (ANES) (2018) Pilot Study (N = 2500).

In the literature, education is considered to be one of the strongest predictors of voter turnout. A meta-analysis shows that in two thirds of the studies education is positively and significantly related to individual-level turnout (Smets & van Ham, 2013). At the same time, this positive relationship between education and voter turnout at the individual level is contradicted by a dynamic trend at the aggregate level: over time, rising levels of education in society did not increase aggregate turnout. On the contrary, the average turnout has declined in established democracies, from about 85% in 1960 and over 80% in 1980 to about 75% in 2011. Brody (1978) famously termed this inconsistency as the "puzzle of political participation."

One of the reasons for this puzzling outcome may be that participation has become increasingly unequal. Due to the falling turnout level, participation is growing more unequal as, particularly, the most disadvantaged groups are failing to vote (Schäfer & Streeck, 2013). Voters with more education participate more frequently: "these differences tend to grow larger as turnout declines, because lower overall participation rates go along with more unequal participation" (Schäfer & Streeck, 2013, p. 13). Educational inequality in electoral participation has indeed risen in the past decades. An analysis of 94 electoral surveys in eight Western European countries between 1956 and 2009 shows that the difference in national election turnout has increased between the half of the population with the lowest level of education and the half with the highest (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015). This increase in unequal turnout levels varies across countries. In some countries, such as Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Italy, inequality in participation is clearly on the rise. In the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands, no such long-term increase in educational inequality in voter turnout levels has occurred.

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The existence of variation across countries implies that “unequal participation is not universal” (Gallego, 2015, p. 33) or unavoidable. The educational differences in turnout depend on different conditions. First, the type of election is important. Nationwide elections are the most salient ones for most citizens, with participation and turnout rates that are much higher than those in regional, local, or European elections. Elections for the latter institutions have thus been categorized as “second order.” A key explanation for the lower rates of participation, and larger participation gaps, is the subordinate role played by these “second-order” elections. There is less at stake than at national elections, they have less political salience than national elections, and consequently voters have less incentive to vote. This also implies that looking at national elections only underestimates the existence of educational gaps (Schäfer & Streeck, 2013, pp. 11–12).

Next are the contextual characteristics. Voter turnout is more equal where voting is easy (Gallego, 2015). Education is less related to the probability to vote where the ballots are simple, where registration is state initiated, and where the number of electoral parties is small. Those factors effectively counterbalance the lack of individual resources. Importantly, these findings suggest that differences in the turnout rates of different groups can be reduced by making the electoral procedure very easy, or by introducing compulsory voting.

Non-Electoral Activities

Participation patterns in Western democracies have changed considerably since the turn of the century. During the early 1970s, the political science literature expanded the scope of the political participation research to include “protest” forms of participation, such as demonstrations, the organization of petitions, and strikes. Figures 3a and 3b display the relationship between educational level and a number of non-electoral participation modes in nearly 20 European democracies and in the United States, both in 2018. Nearly every participation mode is positively related to education. The gap is the highest with regard to signing a petition, which is a rather traditional form of non-electoral participation. However, the gap is also large with regard to more novel forms of participation.

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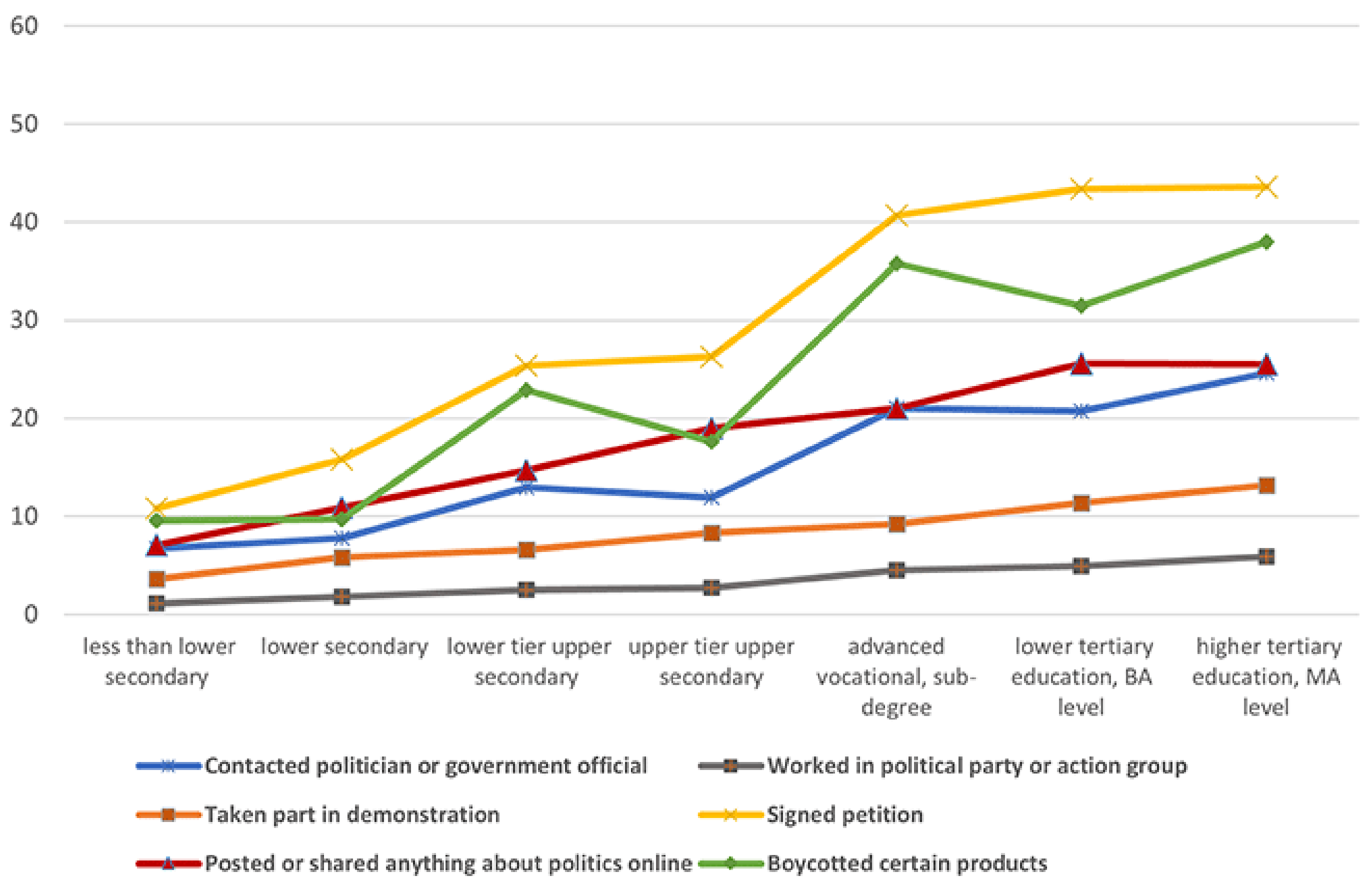

Figure 3a. Education level and non-electoral participation in Europe (%).

Source: ESS (2018) (N= 34.700). Countries in the ESS (2018): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia.

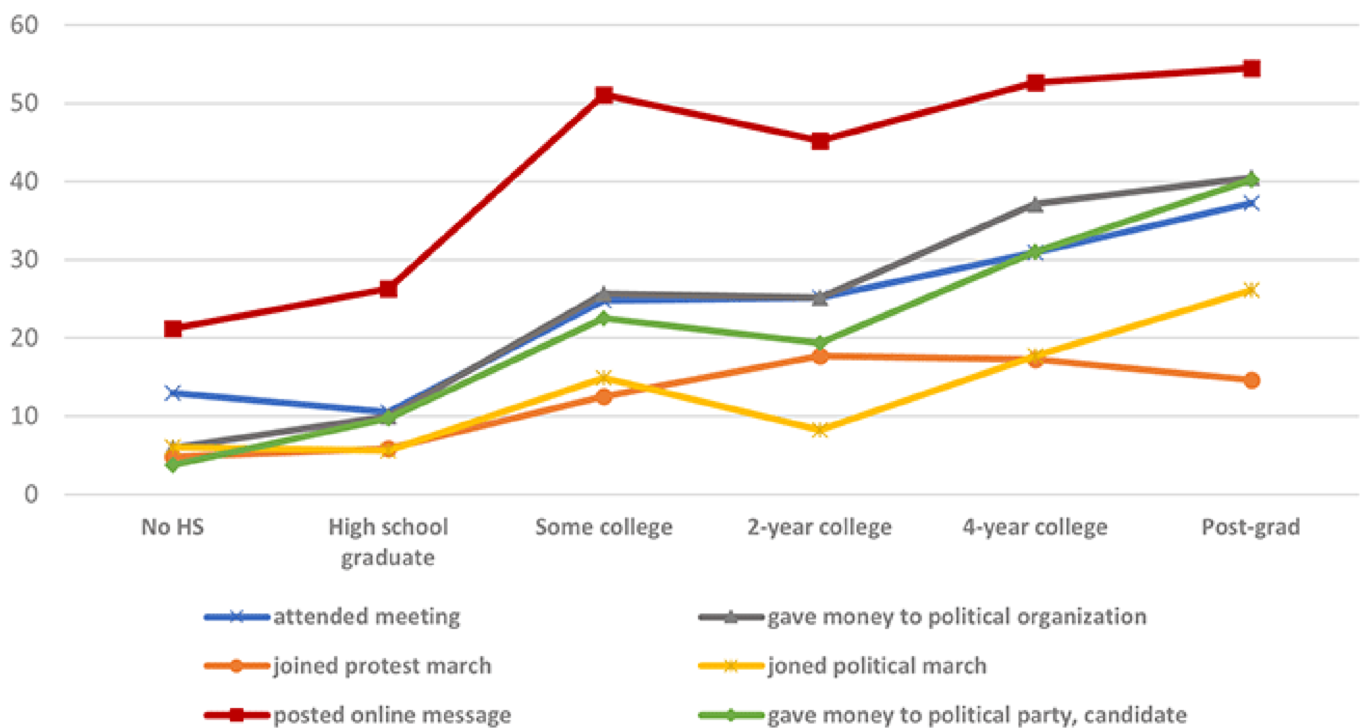

Figure 3b. Education level and non-electoral participation in United States (%).

Source: the ANES (2018) Pilot Study (N = 2500).

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Figure 3a shows that joining *boycotts* in particular has become popular with the tertiary-educated. Buying fair trade and environmentally friendly products instead of regular brands has turned consumption into a public issue and a venue for individual political action. These protest forms of political participation are carried out mostly by a well-educated middle class.

The tertiary-educated also engage much more often in online participation. The use of the internet and social media has become a popular form of political mobilization and participation—the so-called *internet activism* and *e-participation*. The use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Google Plus, Instagram, or Twitter has spawned new opportunities for communication and information-sharing among citizens, and between citizens and elected politicians. These range from circulating a petition among friends, linking and liking political content, to connecting with issue-oriented groups that support a specific cause or following the posts of politicians or other public figures.

Further visible in figures 3a and 3b is that the inclination to take part in a street protest is less affected by an individual's level of education compared with other forms of political participation. While political inequality in general has increased, the differences between the highly educated and the lesser educated regarding participation in street protests have narrowed (Schlozman et al., 2012, pp. 122–124). The education gap in protest activity has closed since the 1990s and protest and demonstrations have "normalized." Yet those with greater resources still tend to protest more, particularly in times of crisis (Quaranta, 2018; Rodon & Guinjoan, 2018). In times of poor economic performance, high-status citizens prefer to mobilize in protest actions to voice their preferences, because they perceive voting as a less effective means of representation: "In the United Kingdom and in Spain, for instance, the social groups more likely to engage in contentious politics mobilization against austerity measures were not the disadvantaged but highly educated citizens with relatively more resources" (Quaranta, 2018, p. 338).

A rather novel form of participation—not listed in figures 3a and 3b—is participating in deliberative settings. Governments and public institutions are increasingly embedding "public participation" in public policymaking by means of citizens assemblies, deliberative public meetings, and online public dialogues. This has increased the number of channels for citizen participation. Deliberative protagonists advocate the idea of strong "participatory democracy" as an alternative to "thin democracy." Analyses of different forms of citizen participation reveal that the more demanding the act of participation is, in terms of the required skills and commitment, the more likely it is that it will be disproportionately engaged in by people with a tertiary educational attainment. Studies into deliberative forms of policymaking have repeatedly demonstrated that highly educated men have more influence than other citizens (Spruyt et al., 2020). University graduates are overrepresented in these arenas, they take the floor more easily, and they are listened to more often than other participants because of their rhetorical skills.

Political Party and Civil Society Membership

For much of the 20th century, political parties were the most important vehicles for political participation in modern democracies. But party membership has shrunk in Europe since the 1980s, and at an especially fast rate in the first decade of this century. An increasing volume of literature based on intraparty surveys shows that party members are relatively

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unrepresentative when it comes to educational background. The modern political party has become a party of, and for, well-educated professionals. Very few members nowadays only have primary or secondary qualifications and the university educated are overrepresented among the members. Yet the differences between parties are large. Members of the social-liberal and green parties tend to have the highest educational attainment levels. In Germany, for example, no less than two thirds of the members of the Grüne, and more than half of Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) members, fall into the category of the well-educated. This is different for the Christlich Demokratische Union(CDU) and the Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU), where members with low educational qualifications still account for almost half of their membership. In Belgium, almost 75% of the grassroots members of Ecolo, the green party, hold a higher education qualification at degree level, and in the Netherlands, the well-educated account for over 80% of the membership of social-liberal parties such as D66 and GroenLinks.

Civil society sometimes is perceived as the backbone of democracy. Civil society organizations have been regarded as important training grounds for citizenship and democracy—Alexis De Tocqueville called them "schools of democracy." However, civil society organizations have been fundamentally transformed in Western democracies. Mass political parties, unions, churches, and women's groups have seen declining levels of participation across Western democracies, but new social movements, pressure groups, nongovernmental organizations, and advocacy groups have dramatically expanded their numbers and membership since the early 1970s. Many of these new civic groups are run by highly educated professionals and they recruit their members and acquire their financial donations almost exclusively from the well-educated strata of society. Figure 4 shows rather large educational gradients for almost all types of civil society organizations in contemporary Western democracies.

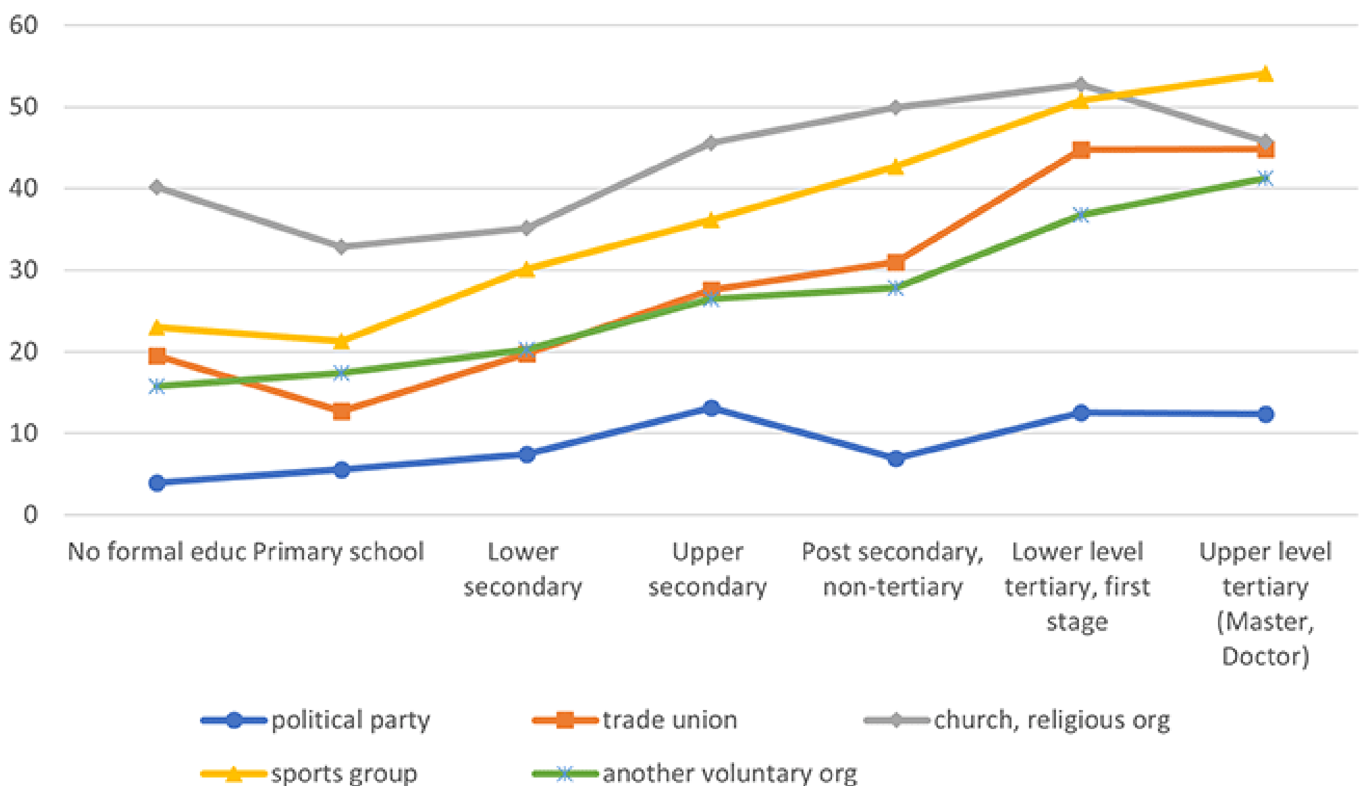

Figure 4. Education level and membership civil society organizations in Western democracies (%).

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Source: International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (2014), data from the 2014 Citizenship module (N = 15.000 env.). Countries included: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great-Britain, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, United States.

From this perspective, civil society organizations are not the "schools of democracy" they were proclaimed to be. And as "pools of democracy," they tend to be rather narrow and closed off, since they contain a relatively small and confined sample of the citizenry—they are "pools of diploma democracy."

Political Office

The educational gradient is particularly strong with regard to holding political office, such as membership of Parliament or Congress. In Western Europe, citizens with primary and secondary qualifications have all but disappeared from parliaments, including the European Parliament. After the introduction of universal suffrage at the beginning of the 20th century, more than half of the members of most parliaments in Europe only had primary or secondary qualifications. After World War II, the number of members of parliament (MPs) with tertiary educational qualifications started to increase, first gradually and then sharply from the 1970s onwards. In 2017, in most Western European parliaments up to 90% of the MPs had the equivalent of at least a college degree (Bovens & Wille, 2017, pp. 113–118) (figures 5a and 5b).

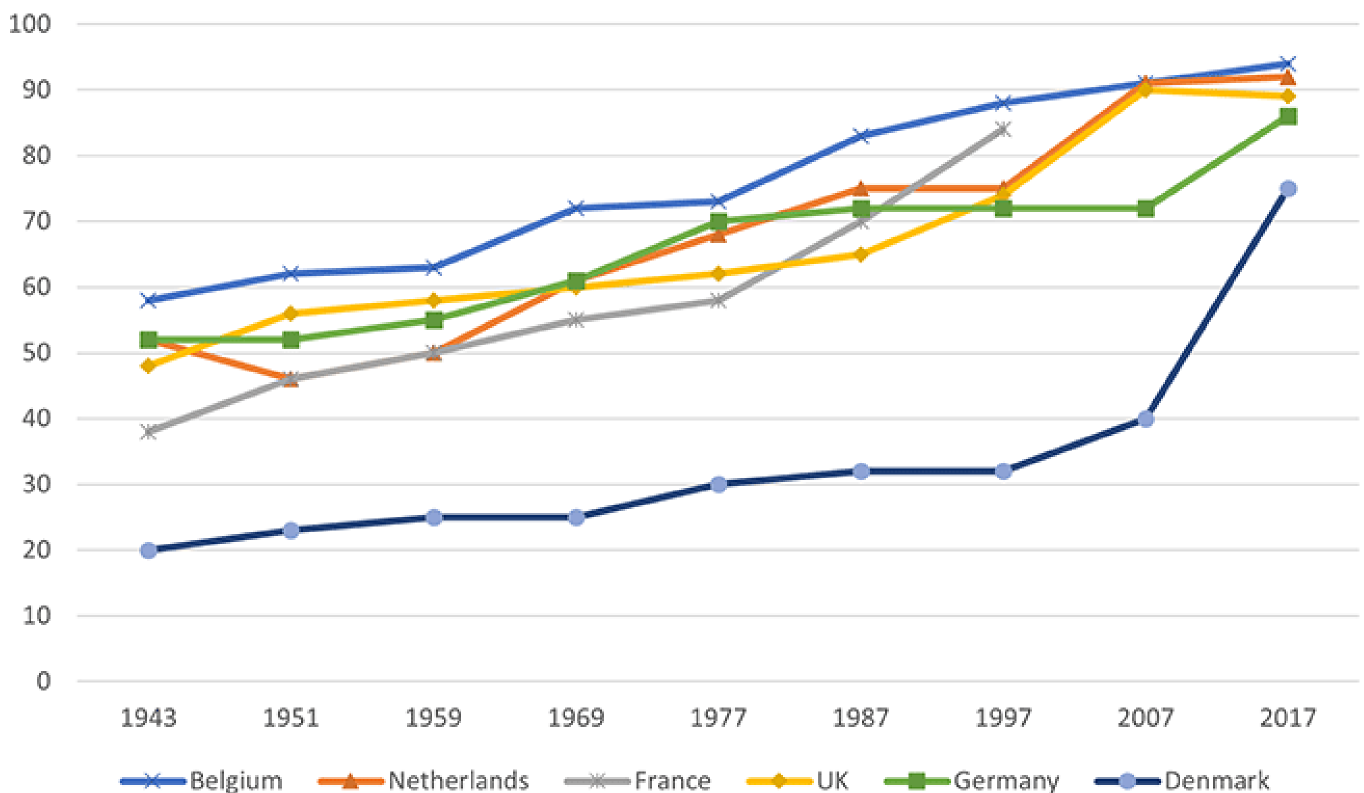

Figure 5a. Members of national parliaments in Europe with tertiary education 1943–2017 (%).

Source: Bovens and Wille (2017, p. 114).

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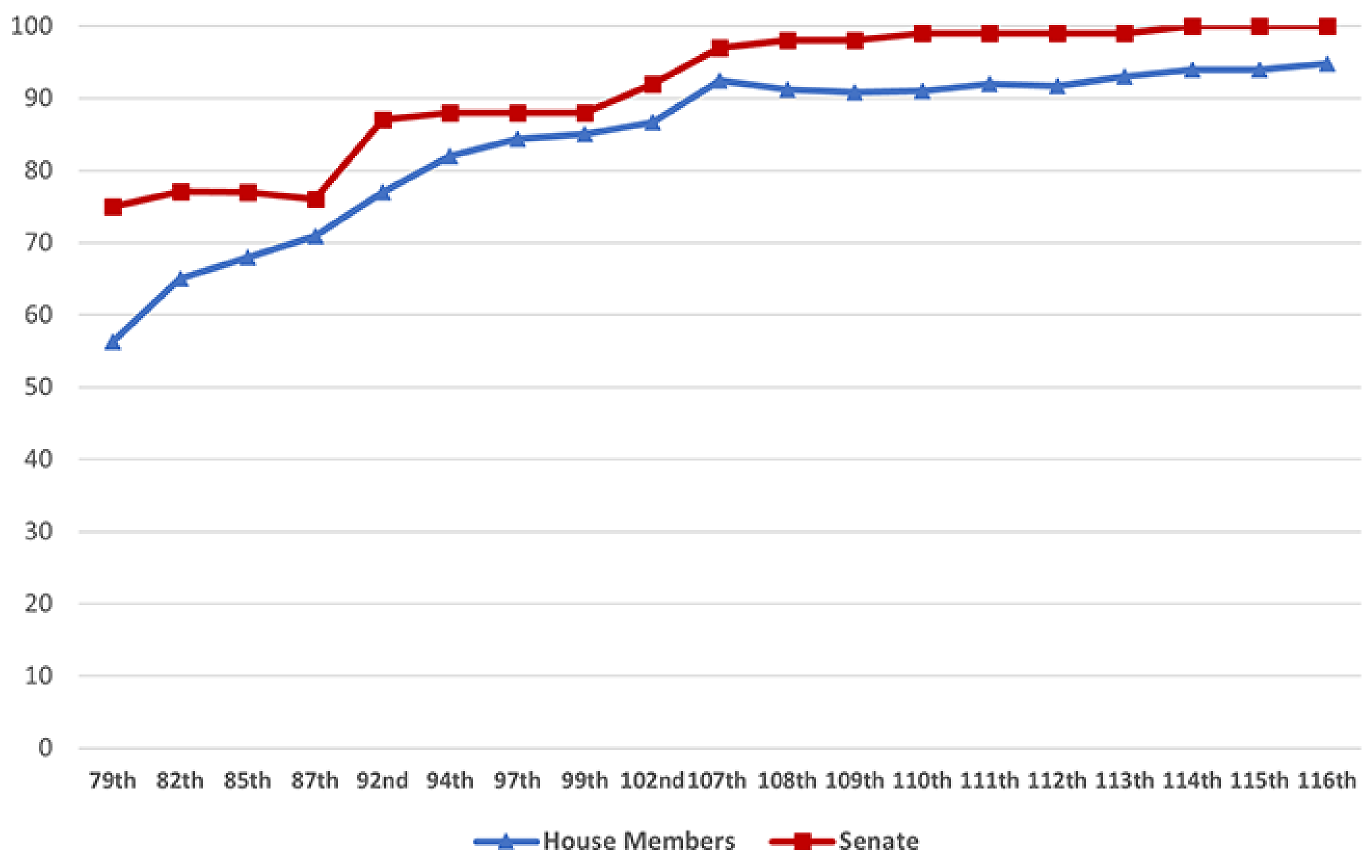

Figure 5b. Members of U.S. Congress with a bachelor's degree, 1945–2020 (%).

Source: Congressional Research Service, compiled from different reports.

In the United States, a similar pattern can be observed. After World War II, 56% of House members and 75% of senators had college degrees. In 2019, 96% of House members and all senators had a bachelor's degree or higher. This means that almost all members of Congress went to college. On top of that, 68% of House members and 77% of senators held educational degrees beyond a bachelor's degree. All these rates are much higher than among the overall U.S. population. In 2017, around a third (34%) of American adults ages 25 and older said they had completed a bachelor's degree or more (Maning, 2018).

Reverse Pattern in Illiberal Democracies

This positive correlation between years of formal education and many forms of political participation is not universal. It depends on the type of political regime. It is typical for consolidated, liberal, Western democracies with a high institutional quality. In illiberal, authoritarian democracies, a reverse pattern can be observed. Modern authoritarian regimes often combine autocratic rule with formal electoral institutions, such as periodic national elections. These elections are not free and fair and mainly serve to legitimize the incumbent regime. In such a context, better-educated citizens are more likely to exercise deliberate political disengagement (Croke et al., 2016). Better-educated citizens tend to be more critical of the incumbent regime and do not want to legitimize it via political participation. They rather choose to withdraw from the political realm. Nonparticipation then serves as a nonviolent form of protest. A case in point has been Zimbabwe during the rule of Robert Mugabe, a paradigmatic electoral authoritarian regime.

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Likewise, corruption thwarts many of the positive effects of education with regard to politics (Agerberg, 2019). When corruption is high, the positive relationship between education and participation is completely absent or even negative, which affects the patterns of political participation among these citizens. The relationship between education and political attitudes and behavior is conditional on institutional quality (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012).

Limitations in the Empirical Research on the Education Gap

Most of what is known about the education gap in participation is based on survey research. Most studies focus on political acts that are undertaken by many citizens, such as voting, protesting, and signing petitions; that is, the emphasis has been on various types of mass political participation. Forms of political participation at the top of the pyramid, such as running for or holding political office, receive less attention because of lack of adequate data. This makes it difficult to describe the educational gap by comparing the political candidates with the overall population. Moreover, surveys generally overestimate the overall level of participation due to both the misreporting and nonresponse bias. One should be very cautious about making long-term claims and drawing conclusions on the basis of the survey data on participation, because of the typical limits of longitudinal design validity.

The difficulty of studying the long-term impact of education on political participation is that these survey data are time-structured data with respect to education.[2] First, the level of educational attainment of the population has increased since the early 1970s. Second, response rates have declined, leading to a biased overrepresentation of higher-educated respondents in the survey research. Changes in the composition of the sample do affect its validity for estimating the educational gap. A strong sampling bias toward those with a higher education in survey data may lead to an underestimation of the impact of education. It also neglects the independent impact of rising education levels on participation. A Finnish study of both respondents and nonrespondents shows that nonresponse bias leads not only to a larger overestimation of the overall level of participation, but also to an underestimation of educational (and social class, and income-related) differences in the propensity to participate (Lahtinen et al., 2019). This implies that socioeconomic inequality in political participation is a more pressing social problem than evidence may indicate.

Another problem with a longitudinal research design is that not only the educational composition of the population has noticeably changed, but also the educational system and the meaning of being well- and lower-educated. Given the importance of schooling, governments keep on modernizing their education systems by replacing and abolishing different school types. Consequently, different cohorts of respondents have been exposed to different school systems. The problem of registering longitudinal changes in the educational gap is the enormous diversity in school types over time. This means that valid and meaningful comparisons across periods are hard to make.

This problem with cross-wave validity affects the measurement of political participation to an even greater extent. Political activities such as joining a demonstration or joining a civic action group, which had become part of the standard political action repertory in the 1980s, were wearing thin in the 1990s. Newly emerging participation styles, such as use of the internet, texting, email petitions, and interactive and deliberative policymaking, were replacing the old forms of political participation—and precisely these new forms were avidly

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adopted by the more highly educated population groups. Hence studying changes in the educational gap in political participation, and making valid comparisons through time, on the basis of the survey data is very difficult, especially where participation in such noninstitutionalized forms of political activity is concerned.

Explaining the Educational Gradient: Cause or Proxy?

How to explain these large educational differences in participation? The relationship between educational differences and political participation has generated a large volume of literature. One of the relevant issues is whether the length of formal education is a direct cause of participation or only a proxy for other factors, such as social network position, cognitive ability, or socialization. But it is difficult to disentangle the effect of education from the effect of all other factors that may influence both educational choices and political activity (Kam & Palmer, 2008).

Education as a Cause

Numerous studies have supported the strong causal relationship between educational attainment and political participation. At least three different sets of explanations are given for this robust relationship.

First, education is an extremely powerful predictor of civic *engagement*. This a necessary condition for involvement in political activities. As Verba et al. (1995, p. 354) put it, “political participation is the result of political engagement.” Higher education stimulates interest in politics and the self-assurance that impels people to be engaged in politics.

Second, education provides individuals with *political knowledge*. Education improves cognitive capacity—the ability to gather information on a variety of subjects, organize information, and efficiently process information (Campbell, 2006, p. 59). Better-informed citizens are more likely to participate in politics. They are better able to discern their self-interests and to connect these to specific opinions and political preferences (Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Third, education enhances participation by developing *skills* that are relevant to politics (Verba et al., 1995, p. 305). Civic skills, the communication and organizational abilities that allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life, constitute an important resource for political participation. The most relevant skills in relation to democratic citizenship are verbal and cognitive proficiency, because democratic politics largely relies on the utilization of information and the manipulation of language through argument and debate. Civic skills are acquired throughout life, at home and, especially, in school. Colleges and graduate schools provide extensive training in writing papers, presenting arguments, and engaging in debates. Yet these can be very intimidating activities for people with vocational training. An academic education also provides high-impact knowledge and experiences in and outside the classroom, such as internships or study abroad, that increase political engagement (Perrin & Gillis, 2019). A study of Swedish MPs (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019) shows that the ability to handle large amounts of information is the most important academic skill for parliamentary work, with the particular orientation, specialization, and content of education

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being less significant. Higher education functions as a political resource for meeting political responsibilities since MPs must be able to read through a large amount of material not only in parliamentary committees and party groups but also in monitoring the media.

Education as a Proxy

The idea that education in itself causes participation has been progressively challenged. One critique contends that relative, rather than absolute, education levels are most important for both aggregate participation levels and inequality in participation (Persson, 2014; Tenn, 2005). Because education is the key to success in the labor force, the argument goes, an individual's education is only meaningful in a comparative sense. A related critique of the conventional view is that the apparent relationship between education and participation is, in point of fact, spurious. Advocates of this theory assert that education is a proxy for preadult characteristics that, in fact, affect participation levels (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Kam & Palmer, 2008; Persson, 2015). They argue that earlier studies showing an impact of education on political participation have overlooked that people who attain higher levels of education systematically differ from those who do not, in various unobserved ways. Compared with highly educated people, those with less education are more likely to come from financially and culturally disadvantaged families and from families in which the parents themselves were also less likely to be socially active. Once these influences are taken into account, education is left with no independent effect.

More-educated individuals also sort into more high-status and politically connected *networks* (Nie et al., 1996). These networks expose them to political cues and often function as recruitment networks for political positions, even when these networks have no connection to politics. Since the social networks of the less well-educated mostly include people with similar levels of education, and since they are less integrated in civil society organizations, they are less likely than people with higher levels of education to encounter the stimulus needed to embark on political activities. The development of an educational cleavage implies that the impact of education will become more and more indirect, and that the differences in, for example, the structure of social networks, which are highly correlated with education, have an independent influence on political behavior.

The jury is still out on the causal impact of education on political participation. Some studies show that the positive relationship between education and participation is limited or even nonexistent (Persson et al., 2016). Other studies show that the causal impact of education on participation persists, even when confounding unobservables are taken into account (Dinesen et al., 2016; Mayer, 2011; Sondheimer & Green, 2010). In any case, the debate shows that various preadult factors have to be taken into account to avoid confounding the relationship.

The Consequences of Education Gaps in Politics

Citizens with the highest levels of formal education are most likely to participate in politics and make their needs and preferences known to government officials. This can have consequences for three basic elements of democracy: representation, responsiveness, and legitimacy.

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Representation Bias

Descriptive representation matters for heuristic and democratic reasons. Voters use the social background of politicians as a heuristic shortcut to estimate a candidate's policy preferences: "all else being equal, people with a given social characteristic prefer candidates or leaders who share that characteristic: women are more likely than men to vote for female candidates, and black people are more likely than white people to vote for black candidates" (Heath, 2015, p. 176). When voters evaluate a politician, they make inferences, often unconsciously, about his or her policy positions based on the politician's race, gender, religion, or education. "There is good evidence, from Britain and elsewhere, that citizens generally want representatives who are 'like them,' either in appearance or thought, who are local, and who have experienced what they have experienced" (Allen & Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, 2015, p. 2). Survey experiments in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Argentina show that hypothetical candidates from the working class are considered equally qualified, and just as likely to get votes, as affluent and well-educated candidates (Carnes & Lupu, 2016). The Pew Research Center (2015) finds for the United States that clear majorities of those with only some college experience (55%) and those with no more than a high school diploma (58%) say ordinary Americans would do a better job solving the country's problems than elected officials. This implies that the overrepresentation of university graduates in political office is simply not in line with the preferences of large parts of the electorate.

Policy Incongruences

The massive overrepresentation of university graduates in parliaments and Congress can also be a source of serious policy incongruences (Hakhverdian, 2015). Different levels of education nowadays correlate with diverging political preferences, particularly with regard to salient cultural issues, such as the European Union, immigration, and national identity. When it comes to education, studies in various European countries have shown that party positions are much more congruent with the views of higher-educated citizens than the views of those with lower levels of education. For example, policy congruence with regard to multicultural issues in the Netherlands is 94% between MPs and well-educated voters, but only 59% with the less-educated voters (Schakel & Hakhverdian, 2018). The association between support for policy change and actual change is much stronger for highly educated citizens than for low- and middle-educated citizens, and only the highly educated appear to have any independent influence on policy. This inequality extends to both the economic and cultural dimensions of political competition (Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020). This indicates that political representation is biased toward those with the highest level of education.

This bias in substantive representation is also visible in the United States. American politics has shifted away from a political process that is largely shaped by electoral majorities, toward a political system dominated by well-organized political elites. Since the 1990s, the responsiveness to the mass public has deteriorated and policy most often reflects the preferences of business interests and the wealthy (Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2012). Even the Democratic Party has become a party of elite professionals, which results in a representation system in which the interests of the "well-graduated" middle class are well represented (Frank, 2016).

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Distrust

It should come as no surprise then that the well-educated citizens are politically confident. They express trust in the national and European political institutions, and they feel included in the political process. They take for granted that they are listened to and that their interests are taken care of. Less well-educated citizens, on the other hand, show high levels of social distrust and political cynicism.

Figure 6 shows how, across Europe, the lesser-educated have low confidence in their ability to influence politics and in the responsiveness of the political system to their interests and views. They think MPs and parties are uninterested in their opinions. They feel they are not being listened to by politicians and that politics ignores the opinions of the common person. Given the composition of present-day political parliaments, these feelings of distrust and alienation should not come as a surprise.

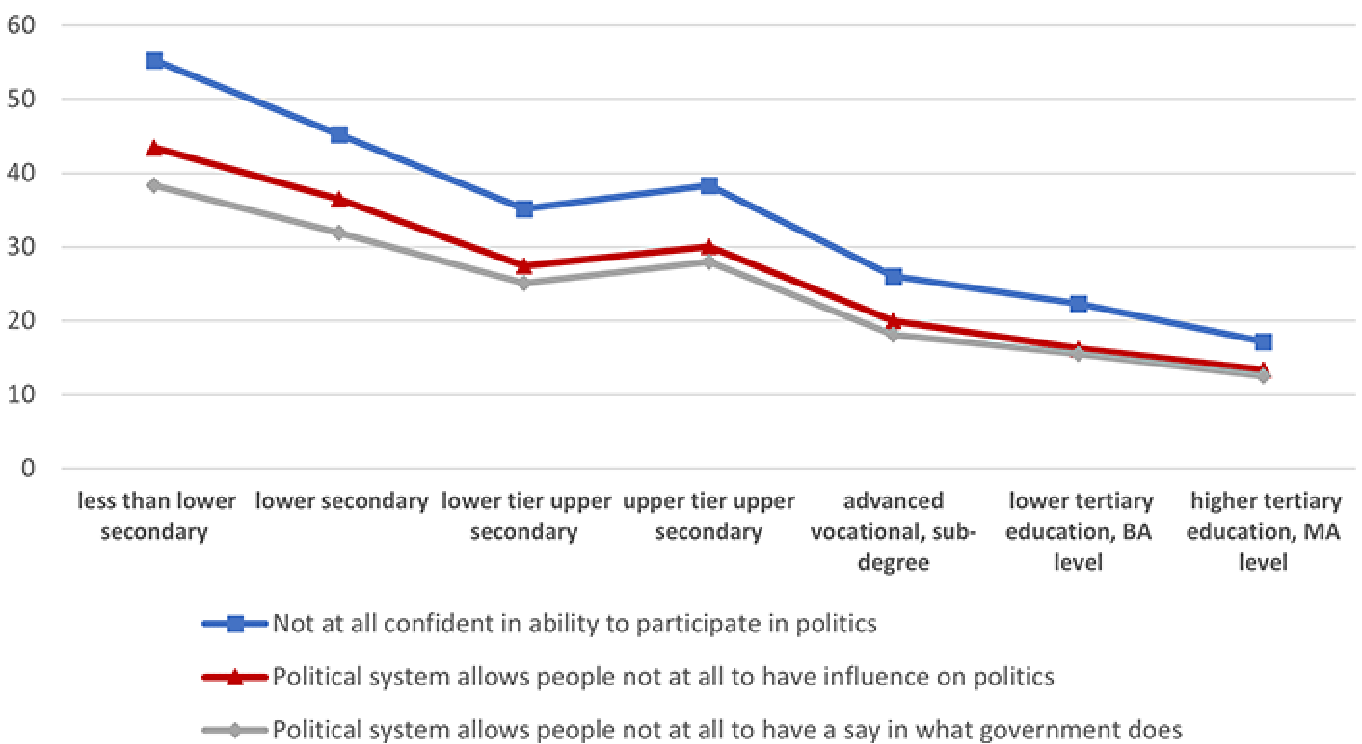

Figure 6. Education and lack of confidence in responsiveness political system in Europe.

Source: ESS (2018) (N = 34.700). Countries in the ESS (2018): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia.

Sociological studies (Noordzij et al., 2019; Spruyt et al., 2020) indicate that the education gap in trust in politicians is not only related to the differences in political efficacy but must be understood as a broader status-based cultural conflict. The less-educated "feel symbolically excluded from politics because the culturally elitist standard, i.e., the 'superiority signaling' or 'status signaling' of establishment politicians, denotes their opposing lifestyle and attitudes as inferior" (Noordzij et al., 2019, p. 2). The high-status signals of establishment politicians spur opposition among low-status groups who feel that their lifestyle and opinions are not really respected and are regarded with contempt.

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In the United States, cultural factors and white racial resentment and ethnonationalism also divide the educational groups. The more education Americans have, and the greater their household income, the greater the likelihood they are high on the *personal* trust spectrum. Those with less income and education are markedly more likely to be low trusters (Pew, 2019).

Education as a Cleavage

Education as a Basis for New Social Divisions

Educational expansion, together with secularization, increased social mobility, and affluence, have weakened the distinctiveness of class and the salience of religious identities. Class and religion are no longer the only sources of identity but are cross-cut by other sources of political attitudes and preferences (Evans & De Graaf, 2013, pp. 4–5). In knowledge economies, levels of formal education not only determine to a large extent socioeconomic positions, they also affect attitudes and political preference formation. This is particularly salient in light of the fact that, since the "educational revolution" of the 1970s, the number of tertiary-educated citizens has risen enormously and in many Western European countries now equals the number of citizens with primary education. In Western Europe, well-educated and less well-educated individuals exhibit significant differences in attitudes and preferences regarding cultural issues such as immigration, racial and ethnic diversity, and European unification. Some even argue that educational differences constitute the basis for a new type of social and political cleavage in European societies (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Stubager, 2010). Educational groups exhibit collective identities and to some degree also perceive an antagonism with each other in terms of interests and attitudes (Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015). The higher-educated, despite their supposed tolerance, hold more negative attitudes toward less-educated people than toward highly educated people (Kuppens et al., 2015).

In the United States, the educational expansion has resulted in a similar social and cultural divide between college-educated professionals and workers without a college degree (Murray, 2012). The former are defined by educational attainment, professional productivity, and shared cultural norms, and the latter by insecure jobs, a breakdown of traditional values such as marriage, and widespread political and social disengagement. This new educational divide provides large advantages to the children of the professional class and makes it ever harder for working-class kids to work their way up (Putnam, 2016). It is also visible in a growing resentment toward universities and higher education among blue-collar workers (Kramer, 2016).

Education as a Basis for New Political Divisions

Education level is also an important variable regarding the rise of a new cultural conflict dimension in Western politics. Traditionally, most voters in Western European democracies could be positioned along a social-economic, left–right dimension and along a religious–secular dimension. In addition to these traditional conflict dimensions, which reach back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new cultural conflict dimension has manifested itself in the 21st century. The crucial themes along this cultural dimension are immigration, globalization, and European integration. This new division between what could be called

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"cosmopolitans" and "nationalists" has emerged gradually, fueled by the waves of non-Western immigration and in Europe by the process of European unification. Located on one side of this new line of conflict are the citizens who accept social and cultural heterogeneity and who favor, or at least condone, multiculturalism. These tend to be the more highly educated. On the other side are citizens who are highly critical of multiculturalism and who prefer a more homogeneous national culture. These are predominantly citizens with primary or secondary education levels.

This educational divide also manifests itself in structural changes in the political landscape in Western democracies. While party systems continue to bear the footprint of class and religious cleavages, a restructuring of political space occurred as a consequence of the mobilization of the new social movements of the left in the 1970s and 1980s in Western democracies (Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012). New actors with new types of preferences entered the political stage.

On one side of the new cultural dimension of conflict we have seen the emergence of green and social-liberal parties in the late 20th century, such as Groen! and Ecolo in Belgium, Les Verts in France, the Greens in Germany, D66 and GroenLinks in the Netherlands, and the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom, to name but a few. In all countries, the green and social-liberal parties predominantly attract voters from the high end of the education spectrum.

On the other side of this cultural conflict, a remarkable change in the political landscape has been visible with the emergence of right-wing nationalist parties such as the FPÖ in Austria, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Danish People's Party, the True Finns party, France's Front National, AfD and Pegida in Germany, Lega Nord in Italy, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats, and UKIP in the United Kingdom. These nationalist parties tend to draw large proportions of the primary- and secondary-educated voters, and relatively few tertiary-educated voters. This is particularly the case in Western and Northern European countries, such as Denmark, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. It is not the case in in Eastern European countries, such as Hungary and Poland (Bornschier, 2010).

A New Diploma Divide in the Political Landscape

Thus, in Europe, the expansion of higher education has broadened the political base for the New Left, and the rising salience of cultural issues has triggered the emergence of nationalist parties. As a result, the well-educated tend to vote for the New Left, whereas those with lower education levels provide disproportionate support for the radical right.

In the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, for example, the Leave vote was much higher in those regions of England populated by citizens with low education qualifications, and much lower in those regions with a larger number of university graduates: "fifteen of the 20 'least educated' areas voted to leave the EU while every single one of the 20 'most educated' areas voted to remain" (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, pp. 1–2). Likewise, in the 2017 French presidential elections education level was a very strong predictor of the Emmanuel Macron vote. In the top 10% of the most-educated regions, Macron won no less than 84% of the vote, as opposed to only 53% in the least-educated regions (Financial Times, 2017). The

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Yellow Vests movement, which initially started as a protest against a government plan to raise the gas tax but turned into a broad and violent antigovernment movement, fits this pattern. It consisted largely of working-class and lower middle-class citizens, often from more peripheral areas, who opposed the Parisian, professional political elites.

A similar trend has reshaped American politics since the early 1970s. "Class inversion" has muddled the Republican and Democratic parties' core coalitions of support (Stonecash, 2017, pp. 30–31). Those with high school diplomas or less have moved to the Republican Party, and college graduates have become more Democratic. Data from the Pew Research Center (2018) indicate that this educational division resulted in a shift in the political landscape in which a record share of college graduates align with Democrats and voters with no college experience have been moving toward the Republican Party.

The U.S. presidential election of 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was marked by an educational divide that was far wider than in previous presidential elections (Pew, 2016). Registered voters with at least a college degree favored Clinton over Trump by 23 percentage points (52% for Clinton vs. 29% for Trump). Trump's campaign exploited divisions that have been growing within the electorate for decades: "The most dramatic shift in voting patterns in the election involved the growing alignment of partisanship with education among white voters. White voters with college degrees shifted toward the Democratic Party while white voters without college degrees shifted toward the Republican Party" (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 149). Large differences in voting preferences between people with more and less educational attainment were also evident in the 2018 congressional elections. As *The Atlantic* wrote on November 7, 2018: "It's an unprecedented divide, and is in fact a complete departure from the diploma divide of the past. Non-college-educated white voters used to solidly belong to Democrats, and college-educated white voters to Republicans. Several events over the past six decades have caused these allegiances to switch, the most recent being the candidacy, election, and presidency of Donald Trump."

Issues of immigration and trade, and even climate change, have been repackaged into a cultural-resentment frame (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). It should be noted that this is not a "class inversion" in traditional socioeconomic terms, but rather in educational terms. The education gap grew in 2016 primarily among middle- and high-income households. Educational attainment has become more important than income to explain political preferences in presidential elections: "College attainment is becoming more and more of a dividing line in presidential elections—but simply conflating not having a college degree with being 'working class' obscures the important reality that many people without college degrees are quite well off, and those affluent people are increasingly important to the Republican electoral coalition" (Carnes & Lupu, 2020, p. 44).

Education as a Remedy for Participatory Inequalities

More Education?

If education is the universal solvent for the puzzle of political participation, why not increase the education levels of as many citizens as possible? Educational experience is a main source of political information for most citizens. In school, we learn political facts and how to think

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and talk about them. More extensive education provides citizens with relevant knowledge and skills, plus the attitudes and dispositions of effective citizenship. A possible venue for remedying educational inequalities and divides in politics would thus be to provide more extensive education to all citizens. The more highly educated citizens are, the better.

However, raising the general level of education is not a catch-all solution to fill the gap between the less- and the well-educated in political engagement. First of all, there is the risk of educational inflation. Education, by its very nature, is meritocratic. The gap between the well-educated and the less well-educated may very well remain, but at a higher level. The well-educated may start to acquire extra qualifications, beyond college, such as graduate degrees and international diplomas. Moreover, education is a positional good, and raising the general level of education will not help to open up political office to the least-educated. As long as the number of positions in the political networks and in the representative arenas remains more or less constant, the educational environment will become increasingly competitive. As a result, an ever-increasing amount of education will be required to qualify for political office. The least-educated—soon to be those citizens with secondary qualifications only—will simply be crowded out by the increasing number of peers with graduate or even postgraduate qualifications.

Second, there is the broader issue of whether education is a cause or only a proxy. If education is a direct cause of different levels of participation, then it makes sense to search for educational remedies, such as extending compulsory education. However, it may well be that, in many respects, education is only a proxy. Advocates of this theory assert that preadult characteristics, such as family background, in fact affect participation levels and they find no effect of extra years of schooling (Persson, 2015; Persson et al., 2016).

More Intensive Civic Education

Introducing more intensive civic education courses into the secondary school curriculum would appear to be another sensible option. Civic education as such is not a positional good, and introducing more intensive civic education programs across the board would raise the levels of civic engagement and civic skills of all segments of the population. This would not alter the dominance of the well-educated in political office, as the crowding-out effects would still be seen. However, it may provide less well-educated citizens with more of a stimulus for engagement, as well as the skills to operate in the expanding variety of participatory and deliberative arenas. Moreover, better information and education about politics may reduce some of the negativity about politics.

There is indeed empirical evidence that well-designed, school-based courses in civic education can have a positive effect on the civic dispositions of students (Neundorf et al., 2016). It can increase their levels of political tolerance and can equip them with the civic knowledge and the participatory skills necessary for informed and effective citizenship. A review of evaluations of civic education in the United States points out that civic education has the potential to reduce political inequality, but the conditions that make such programs effective are numerous and not easily met (Schlozman et al., 2012, p. 569). Furthermore, a very comprehensive, cross-national study into the effects of citizenship education on adult

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participation in a diverse set of 28 countries showed that civic education programs had an effect on democratic norms, political participation, and political values, although the influences varied considerably across countries (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

For teenagers, learning by doing has a more positive effect on political engagement than learning by listening. In England, Avril Keating and Jan Janmaat (2016, pp. 419–422) found that school-based political activities at the formative age of 15 or 16 can continue to influence political behavior at a later age. Moreover, they concluded that it was an even "more potent driver of political participation than formal citizenship education." Teenagers who participated in school councils, mock elections, and debating teams were more likely to vote, to sign a petition, or to contact an MP or local councilor, even after leaving school. This was independent of their family background and latent political interest. These positive outcomes notwithstanding, Keating and Janmaat end their paper on a sobering note: "Schools play a role in political socialisation, but often a relatively small one … families, the media, political parties and other mobilisation agents also play important roles" (2016, p. 425). Moreover, in the United Kingdom access to these civic learning opportunities is very unequal. Many children from working-class families do not get to experience these school-based political activities to the same degree as children from more well-off families (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019, p. 218). Civic education is relevant, but it is not the universal solvent for educational inequalities in political participation.

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Notes

1. This section is based in part on Bovens and Wille (2010).

2. This paragraph and the next are taken, in large part, from Bovens and Wille (2012).

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