

Why Education Matters for Democracy

Lindsay Paterson

Key points

- Education is the basis of democracy. People need skills and knowledge to be able to take part in civic life and to debate big political issues with each other.
- There are now doubts about this link because of a paradox. As higher education has expanded massively, democracy has seemed to be in crisis. Is the age-old connection between education and the quality of democracy being eroded?
- Using a wide range of survey evidence from Britain, this briefing shows that these doubts are misplaced. Education really is important democratically. Higher education does make people more liberal, more politically optimistic, and more inclined to participate in society.
- What matters is the kind of education which people study. Civic life benefits from citizens who have learned, through education, to think independently.

Introduction

Does education make us more civilised? Optimistic social reformers have believed that it does. And yet democracy seems to be in poor shape. Politicians are held in low regard, and voting in elections appears to be pointless.

Research under the auspices of AQMeN has looked at these questions using some of the best available data sources in the UK.

Why this question is important

Questions about education and civic values have always been asked, but have cropped up again in the last couple of decades because of a paradox. The citizens of the democracies have never been better educated. Yet their political participation and political interest have never been so low. If education really does make a difference, why is this so?

The optimistic answer is that education teaches people to be more discerning. That makes them more sceptical of politicians (and hence also of voting), but does not



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mean that they are less engaged in new kinds of civic ways.

The pessimistic view is that education buys civic prestige just as it buys occupational status. Education might be a 'positional good', enabling the highly educated to appear to be upstanding social leaders.

What kinds of evidence?

We look at this in two ways. One relates to social attitudes. Does education influence people's views? The other is in terms of civic participation. Does education incline people to take part in things – such as voting or being active in campaigning organisations?

Applied Quantitative Methods Network

AQMeN is a Research Centre developing a dynamic and pioneering set of inter-disciplinary projects to improve understanding of current social issues in the UK.

Social attitudes are measured on three scales (Box 1).

- The first is about attitudes to civil liberties. For example, people who disagree that ‘people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’ would tend to be liberal. People’s values on the scale are achieved by adding up their scores on each individual question. **High values mean liberal.**
- The same approach is used for the second scale, which measures people’s views on the role of government versus the role of markets. **High values mean right-wing.**
- The third scale measures attitudes to the political system. **High values mean optimism.**

There are two measures of participation. One is voting in elections to the UK Parliament. The other is a summary of whether people are members of organisations – political parties, environmental organisations, other charities, school-related organisations, residents’ associations, or trade unions.

Box 1: Scales of social attitudes

Liberal-Authoritarian (high = liberal)

People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences. For some crimes the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence.

Schools should teach children to obey authority.

Young people today don’t have enough respect for traditional British values.

Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards.

The law should be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong.

Left-right (high = right)

Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth.

There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.

Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.

Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off.

Big business benefits owners at the expense of the workers.

Political cynicism (high = optimistic)

It does not really make much difference which political party is in power in Britain.

None of the political parties would do anything to benefit me.

Those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly

Politicians are mainly in politics for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community.

Notes: All questions were answered on a five-point range from ‘strongly agree’ (scored as value 1) to ‘strongly disagree’ (value 5). Not all questions were asked in all the surveys. See Paterson (2014).

So the question is whether education is associated with social views or with participation. The evidence comes from three main sources. The first is the British and Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys, which collect views annually from representative samples of the British and Scottish populations. The second is the National Child Development Study which has been following everyone born in Britain in a single week in 1958. The third is the British Household Panel Study, which has annually interviewed a large sample of people in Britain since the early 1990s.

We concentrate here on the educational effects of having a higher education qualification, because the growing proportion of people with that attainment is the main educational change of the last half century. We look at data during the recent expansion – the two decades starting from the mid-1980s.

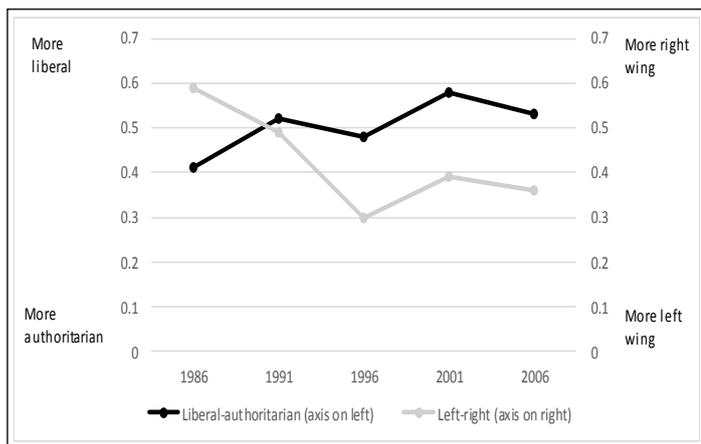
What does the evidence tell us?

Figures 1 and 2 show evidence about education’s effect on social attitudes, and how that changed in Britain in a period when the percentage of the population with a higher education qualification grew from 19% in 1986 to 29% in 2005. They each show the change in the scale that is associated with having a higher-education qualification. Thus a positive value means that higher education leads to people being higher up the scale.

- Figure 1 (dark grey line) shows that being well-educated was associated with being liberal. There is a weak tendency for that association to strengthen over the years.
- Figure 2 shows that being well-educated was associated with being more optimistic about the political system. This tendency weakened over time.
- Figure 1 (light grey line) shows that being well-educated was associated with being right-wing. This tendency weakened until the mid-1990s and then stabilised.

Thus the conclusion on attitudes is not straightforward. Perhaps the weakening over time in the link between education and political optimism does tend to support the idea of education as a positional good. Being educated does not so strongly lead to identification with the political system when being educated is less rare. And perhaps that might explain the changing link between being educated and being right-wing, although why the change should come to a halt half-way through the period is not clear.

Figure 1: Effect of higher education on scales of liberal and authoritarian views, and of left-wing or right-wing views



Notes: Data are from the British Social Attitudes Survey. High values on the scales mean more liberal (dark grey line) or more right-wing (light grey line). The lines show the effect on the scale of having a higher-education qualification compared to having no qualifications at all.

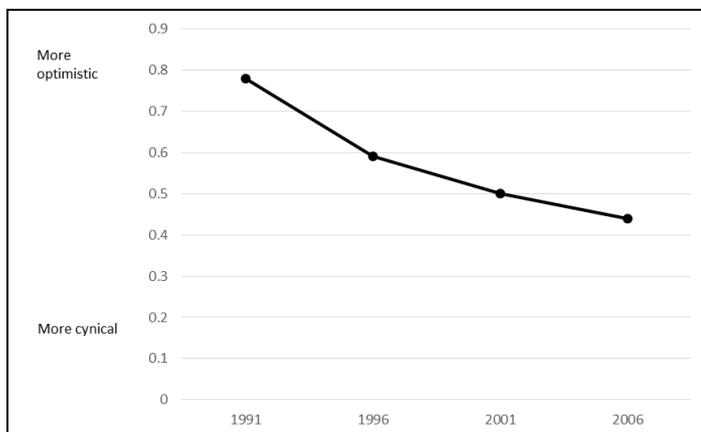


Figure 2: Effect of higher education on scale of political optimism and political cynicism

Notes: Data are from the British Social Attitudes Survey. High values on the scale mean more optimistic. The graph shows the effect on the scale of having a higher-education qualification compared to having no qualifications at all. (The relevant questions were not asked in the survey before 1991.)

But there is no such tendency on the liberal-authoritarian scale. Education seems to make people liberal regardless of how many educated people there are. On social participation, the tendency was also in the opposite direction to the pessimistic predictions. Having a higher education degree was associated with being 2.2% more likely to vote in the 1987 general election, 4.8% in 1997, 6.3% in 2001 and 7.5% in 2005. From the National Child Development Study, holding a higher-education degree was linked to being 28% more likely to be a member of an organisation at age 33 in 1991, and 33% more likely a decade later.

So – as with being liberal – a tendency to take part in society is not merely a way of advertising a superior education.

Political context matters

Other factors matter, too. One is context. People’s views and participation are partly shaped by other people.

Two examples show this. One concerns views about the position of women in society. In the British Household Panel Study, people were asked for their views about women’s rights which were then constructed into a scale.

At first sight, there was a clear effect of education. People with a university degree were more favourable to women’s rights than people without. But that concealed an important factor – age. Young people supported women’s rights more than older people, and young people were more likely to have a degree than older people. When age was taken into account, there was no educational effect. So attitudes to women’s rights have probably been shaped mainly by the generation in which people grew up, not by their education directly.

A second example of context relates to devolution in the UK. In Scotland, there is an educational effect on voting just as there is elsewhere. But the educational effect is less for the elections to the Scottish Parliament than it is for Scottish voting in elections to the UK Parliament.

There is not a single education effect on political engagement: it depends on what the engagement is with.

What is learned matters

There is a final, major complication. Some kinds of education are more important in a civic sense than others. Academic education – especially in the humanities and social sciences – has stronger civic effects than vocational education. Academic higher education makes people less politically cynical. It strongly induces them to be more to the right politically. And it inclines them to join organisations. In all these respects, the effect of vocational education is much weaker.

One explanation of these curricular effects lies in how people learn. Earlier research (summarised by Paterson 2014, para. 1.3f) had shown that people who learn to be critical thinkers are more civic. The analysis in this project found that the effects of being an independent



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learner last a long time. The National Child Development Study has regularly asked its respondents whether they read books for pleasure. Figure 3 shows that reading is strongly associated with being more liberal, less politically cynical, and more likely to join an organisation. What's more, the effect of reading books is stronger than the effect of using a computer regularly.

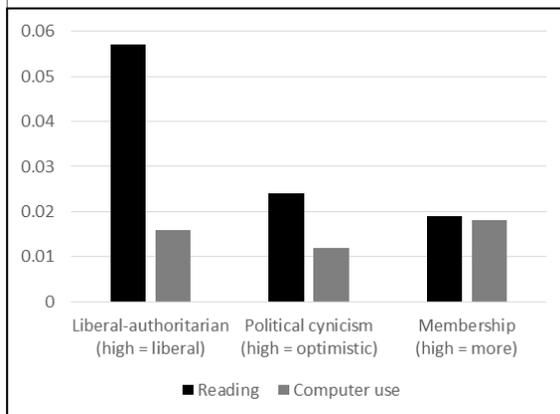


Figure 3: Effect of reading for pleasure and of computer use on scales of views and on participation

Notes: Data are from the National Child Development Survey, ages 42-46. The graph shows the effect of the reading and computer-use scales – for example, of moving from reading or using a computer once per week to reading or computer use at least 4 times per week.

Conclusions

Education is important democratically. It is more than just a 'positional good'. Educated people don't just take part because it gives them social status. Their education really does make them more socially and economically liberal, more optimistic about politics and more inclined to participate in civic organisations.

So education may indeed be the bedrock of democracy. But education is not a magical solution to democracy's problems. Learning to think for yourself is the hope of any decent education, and independent thought is the responsibility of any decent citizen. The civic effects of education depend on what learners do with it.

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