



Does education lead to higher generalized trust? The importance of quality of government



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ABSTRACT

Generalized trust has become a prominent concept at the nexus of several disciplines, and the wide differences in trust between different societies continue to puzzle the social sciences. In this study, we explore the effects of micro and macro level factors in explaining an individual's propensity to 'trust others'. We hypothesize that higher levels of education will lead to higher social trust in individuals, given that the context (country or regions within countries) in which they reside has a sufficiently impartial and non-corrupt institutional setting. However, the positive effect of education on trust among individuals is expected to be negligible in contexts with greater levels of corruption and favoritism toward certain people are more inclined to view the system as 'rigged' as they become more educated. This multi-level interaction effect is tested using original survey data of 85,000 individuals in 24 European countries. Using hierarchical modelling, we find strong support for our hypothesis. This effect is robust to a number of specifications, and even holds for regional variation of institutional quality (QoG) within countries – with the strongest effects being higher education – yet the country effects of QoG are strongest.

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1. Introduction: the trust-education puzzle

Generalized trust has become a prominent concept at the nexus of several disciplines, and the wide differences in trust between different societies continue to puzzle the social science. Based on a large number of surveys, study after study reports huge differences in the proportion of people that state that they believe that “most other people can be trusted”. Social trust can be defined as “a bet on the future contingent actions of others”¹; and is therefore also an important part of what has been conceptualized as social capital.² One reason for the great interest in the question of why trust varies to such a large extent is that there are by now considerable empirical support for the claim that a high level of social trust is beneficial for a number of outcomes that from most normative accounts are considered valuable. These are for example economic prosperity, life satisfaction, the quality of democratic institutions

and most standard measures of population health.³ This has of course spurred a huge debate about what generates (and destroys) social trust.⁴ A number of studies have pointed to historical and cultural factors that sometimes go back several centuries.⁵ This may very well be scientifically correct but from the perspective of making social science research policy relevant, this knowledge is of limited value for political leaders who – for the good reasons mentioned above – want to find ways how to increase the level of social trust in their societies. From a “relevance perspective”, we believe there are good reasons for researching the possible impact of contemporary factors that can be changed by political means.⁶ A number of such variables have also been put forward such as increasing the participation in voluntary associations,⁷ reducing corruption⁸ as well as expanding universal welfare state

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¹ Sztompka (1998), 21.

² Putnam et al. (1993).

³ Knack and Keefer (1997), Larsen (2013), Horváth (2012), Robbins (2012), Bjørnskov (2012), Rothstein (2011), Helliwell (2006).

⁴ Hooghe and Stolle (2003).

⁵ Putnam et al. (1993), Satyanath et al. (2013), Bergh and Bjørnskov (2011).

⁶ Rothstein (2015).

⁷ Putnam (2000).

⁸ Uslaner (2008).

programs.⁹ There is, however, one factor that has received especially strong support and that is education. For example, Uslaner states that “the single best predictor of social trust and virtually every type of participation is education”.¹⁰ In this paper, we examine a hitherto neglected condition for education to work for increasing social trust which is the quality of government (QoG) institutions.¹¹ Our main contribution is that at the individual level, the positive effects of education on generalized trust are only present when institutional quality is sufficiently high. Otherwise, the effect of education on trust becomes negligible, which calls into question the view that just increasing the time children spend in school can serve as a panacea for low trust environments.

On the empirical side, this proposition is tested using unique and by the authors newly collected survey data, for a sample of roughly 85,000 people in 24 European countries. The effects are tested using a multilevel model: individuals nested in regions, nested in countries. The findings, controlling for many individual and country level factors, show that the effect of education on generalized trust is highly conditioned by country levels of QoG. For example, at low levels of QoG, the models show no statistical differences in social trust between respondents of any level of education, while the trust gap between people of various levels of education increases significantly when we take institutional quality into account. We find that while the conditional effects of institutional quality are consistent for both regional and country levels, the latter has a noticeably stronger impact for increases at all levels of education. We also show that our empirical evidence is highly robust to alternative model specifications, data sources and the removal of outliers.

2. Education and social trust: theory and evidence

With respect to the relationship between education and social trust, the literature has for the most part held an optimistic view.¹² Several theoretical reasons for why education should increase the level of social trust has been presented. At the individual level, it has been argued that education may make people better informed and improves skills for handling information which should increase their social trust.¹³ Several studies argue that it increases one’s contact with more diversity and cosmopolitanism and leads to more tolerance and less suspicion of others.¹⁴ Another argument is that participation in higher education creates a “climate of trust” that creates a virtues circle for trust. The authors state that “If individuals know that higher education levels make others more likely to be trusting (. . .), then they are in turn more likely to trust others”.¹⁵ A similar argument is that college education increases the individual’s social trust because it makes these individuals “open-minded to accept otherness from heterogeneous groups, and inspiring consensus on normative values”.¹⁶

At the aggregate level it has been argued that better educated citizens are more likely to complain to government authorities about misconduct which will increase the quality of government operations, reduce corruption which in its turn have a positive effect on social trust.¹⁷ Another, more historical argument is that the introduction of free universal education that started in the 19th

century in most western countries lead to the growth of identification with the nation state.¹⁸ Widespread public education created hitherto unknown “strong bonds to unknown co-nationals working in the wheat fields thousands of miles away . . . ties of loyalty to strangers who do not share one’s attributes or milieu . . .”.¹⁹ As one astute analysis of France puts it, mass public education made “peasants into Frenchmen”.²⁰ Education made subjects into citizens, thereby increasing the demands and expectations about honesty both in government and from other people in general.²¹ In addition, universal education lead to increased social and economic equality and as Uslaner has argued, equality is a central factor behind social trust.²²

Empirical evidence has for the most part been supportive for these theoretical claims.²³ However, the relationship tends to vary depending on the country context²⁴ thus presenting us with an empirical puzzle—why does education have a positive impact on generalized trust in some societies but not others. In a *meta-analysis* of 154 estimated results from 28 empirical studies of the effect of education on social trust concluded that one additional years of education “increases individual social trust by 4,6% of its standard deviation” (Huang et al., 2011, 292). Results from countries like the UK, USA and Denmark confirm the results that education spurs social trust.²⁵ Another study found that while education has little effect on participation in voluntary organizations, it has a strong effect on trust in the U.K.²⁶ However, in a study based on data from 1999 and comparing seven countries (East-Germany, West-Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, South-Korea, Spain, Switzerland), Delhey and Newton found that education only had an effect on social trust in two countries in their study (West-Germany and Switzerland). Similarly, in a study using World Value Study survey data for sixty countries, these authors found that education became insignificant after controlling for Protestantism and ethnic diversity.²⁷ An analysis based on data from 2002 and 2007 for 21 European countries also shows that the positive effect of education on social trust is not universal.²⁸

Our argument is that the problem with results pointing in many different directions may be due to the fact that what is measured as “education” is only the time (years) children and young people are attending school, not what takes place in the schools during this time. It should be obvious that the quality and thereby impact of education can vary enormously in different schools and educational systems due to for example economic resources and the competence as well as the ambition of teachers and school leaders. The impact of education should also vary due to people’s experience of the moral standard of the educational system. Because all educational systems entail considerable space for discretionary power in the implementation process, they are vulnerable to many forms of favoritism. This is where the QoG variables enter. In many countries, corruption and other forms of unethical behavior that deviates from the norm of impartiality in the exercise of public power turn out to be pervasive in the educational system.²⁹ According to the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, 16 percent of respondents in the 96 countries surveyed

¹⁸ Darden (2014).

¹⁹ Darden (2014).

²⁰ Weber (1976).

²¹ Uslaner and Rothstein (2015).

²² Uslaner (2002).

²³ Huang et al. (2011, 2012), Putnam (2000), Helliwell and Putnam (2007).

²⁴ Delhey and Newton (2005).

²⁵ Brehm and Rahn (1997), Alesina and La Ferrara (2002).

²⁶ Huang et al. (2011).

²⁷ Delhey and Newton (2005).

²⁸ Borgonovi (2012).

²⁹ Botero et al. (2013), Borusiak (2013), Mungiu-Pippidi and Dusu (2011), Rothstein and Teorell (2008).

⁹ Rothstein and Uslaner (2005).

¹⁰ Uslaner (1999), 134, Putnam (2000), Helliwell and Putnam (2007).

¹¹ Rothstein (2011), Rothstein and Teorell (2008).

¹² Huang et al. (2011, 2012), Putnam (2000), Helliwell and Putnam (2007).

¹³ Keefer and Knack (2005).

¹⁴ Sullivan et al. (1982).

¹⁵ Helliwell and Putnam (2007), 17.

¹⁶ Huang et al. (2011), 306.

¹⁷ Botero et al. (2013).

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