



How does education affect adolescents' political development? ☆



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ABSTRACT

This paper employs a between-grades regression discontinuity design to estimate the causal effect of education on political knowledge, intention to participate and democratic values. Using data on attitudes and knowledge among about 30,000 students from Greece, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden, we employ a fuzzy regression discontinuity design in which we exploit the exogenous variation related to school entry age. By comparing students who are born around the New Year cut-off point we estimate the causal effect of the ninth year of schooling. Results show that an additional year of schooling has no detectable effect on political knowledge, democratic values or political participation.

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1. Introduction

Years of education is a standard control variable in political science research that is regularly found to be positively correlated with outcomes such as political knowledge and participation. Indeed, one of the most well established findings in the political behavior literature is that citizens with higher education generally have greater political knowledge, higher levels of political participation and a stronger commitment to democratic core values (e.g. Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2012; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). However, few studies have been able to actually estimate the causal impact of an additional year of schooling. Even fewer studies have been able to trace the psychological developmental process that students are

going through as they progress through the educational system.

While most previous studies have employed research designs and methods providing little opportunity for considering the causal effect of education, a number of recent studies have used more refined methodological approaches (see Persson 2015 for an overview). These studies have primarily focused on political participation have employed techniques such as instrumental variable approaches (e.g., Berinsky & Lenz, 2011), field experiments (e.g., Green, Aronow, Bergan, Greene, Paris, & Weinberger, 2011; Sondheimer & Green, 2010), and matching analyses on panel data (e.g., Kam & Palmer, 2008; Persson, 2014a; Tenn, 2007). This paper adds another approach to the estimation of causal effects of education to this field, i.e. a between-grades regression discontinuity design that is explicitly aimed at estimating the causal effect of *an additional year* of education. We use survey data on attitudes and knowledge among about 30,000 students from Greece, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden, collected in the eighth and ninth grades. In these countries, children start school at an age determined by the calendar year in which they were born. By comparing students who were born around

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the New Year cut-off point, i.e. whose age difference is negligible while their educational attainment differs by one year, we estimate the causal effect of the ninth year of schooling. The regression discontinuity design, exploiting the exogenous variation related to school entry age, is an identification strategy that has not previously been used to estimate effects of education in this area. However, the approach has been used in educational research to test the impact of education on outcomes such as student achievement (Cahan & Davis, 1987; Kyriakides & Luyten, 2009; Luyten, 2006; Luyten & Veldkamp, 2011).

With the research design employed in this paper we can test whether one additional year of education (the ninth year of schooling) affects civic knowledge, intentions to participate in politics and democratic values. Within the political science literature on education effects, three models dominate the discussion: the absolute education model, the relative education model and the pre-adult socialization model. The absolute education model claims that education has a direct causal effect on civic outcomes such as tolerance, democratic norm adherence and political participation, attentiveness, and knowledge. According to this model, the causal influence of education on civic outcomes is mediated by civic skills and cognitive ability (cf. Condon, 2015). Nie et al. (1996) refer to this mechanism as a 'cognitive pathway', i.e. what individuals learn in school has positive effects on their cognitive ability with downstream effects on a wide array of political attitudes and behaviors (cf. Jackson, 1995; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). If this model is correct we should expect to see positive effects of an additional year of education on the outcomes under study. Indeed, if they actually learn something in social science education during the ninth year, it would be reasonable to expect that it at least affect political knowledge.

According to the second model that is interchangeably referred to as the relative education model, or the sorting model, education has a more indirect effect on civic outcomes. The argument states that educational attainment will positively influence individuals' social and economic status—i.e. occupational prominence, wealth, income, and membership in voluntary associations. These intervening factors will in turn determine social and political network centrality. Thus, individuals with higher relative education will be more closely connected and exposed to networks that boost participation, encourage commitment to democratic values and expose individuals to information that increases knowledge. Hence, the education effect runs through a 'positional pathway' in which social status functions as the causal mechanism (Campbell, 2009; Nie et al., 1996; Tenn, 2005; Persson, 2014b). Since we estimate the impact of education while students are still in school we cannot rule out the possibility that education has effects via a 'positional pathway' after students have left school. While we cannot strictly test any causal mechanism, any significant results are likely driven by cognitive and psychological process at play while students make progress through the educational institutions.

Although the absolute and the relative models differ with respect to the specific mechanism linking education and civic outcomes they are still united by the belief that the relationship between the two constructs is

causal in nature. The pre-adult socialization model offers a revisionist account of this belief. This model suggests that the relationship between education and civic outcomes—be that via the cognitive or the positional pathway—is confounded by pre-adult factors influencing both educational choices and political traits such as participation, knowledge and democratic values. More exactly, according to this approach education is a proxy for factors such as family socio-economic status, the political socialization in the home environment and individual differences in cognitive ability and personality traits, and *not* a cause of civic outcomes (cf. Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Kam & Palmer, 2008; Langton & Jennings, 1968; Luskin, 1990). Since such factors are often not included in studies of the returns to education, the estimated effects of education on civic outcomes are most likely upwardly biased in the bulk of previous research. To overcome this problem a number of recent studies have employed research designs and statistical techniques appropriate for testing whether the education-civic outcome link is causal or not. Using changes in compulsory schooling laws across different regions and different periods in time as an instrument for educational attainment Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos (2004) find a strong positive effect on voter turnout in the US but not in the UK. In the same fashion, Dee (2004) employs the variation in compulsory schooling laws across US states to estimate the effect of education on turnout. Moreover, he also uses the distance to colleges as an instrument for education. Both instruments yield the same result: education is positively and significantly related to voter turnout. Berinsky and Lenz (2011) instead use the Vietnam-era draft to instrument for college education and find no evidence that education positively influences voter turnout.

Another set of studies have used matching techniques to evaluate the relationship between education and political outcomes. After matching on a range of pre-adult experiences and influences Kam and Palmer (2008) find no significant differences in political participation (they use an index of different participatory acts) between college attendees and non-attendees in two US samples. However, using the same data but slightly different matching techniques Henderson and Chatfield (2011) instead report a positive and significant effect of college attendance on voter turnout. In contrast, Persson (2014a) reaches similar results to those of Kam and Palmer (2008) using data from a British cohort study. After matching on a rich set of variables such as childhood cognitive ability and family socio-economic status, the effect of education on political participation is insignificant.

Finally, a number of studies have used field experiments to account for pre-adult confounders. Sondheimer and Green (2010) exploit three experiments in which educational attainment was randomly assigned through different interventions such as smaller classes, extra mentoring and pre-school activities. They find that treated individuals have a higher probability of graduating from high school, which leads to significant increases in turnout rates. Green et al. (2011) represents the study in which the outcomes under study are most similar to this study, i.e. they focus on civic knowledge and political tolerance. In a study

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