



The impact of education on political ideology: Evidence from European compulsory education reforms



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ABSTRACT

Previous research documents a correlation between education and political ideology, usually indicating a positive relationship between education and left-wing political views. In this paper, I examine to what extent this association is causal. I merge political ideology data from 25 waves of Eurobarometer surveys with information on 18 educational reforms in 11 European countries. I then instrument for educational attainment with a regression discontinuity design that estimates the increase in education due to compulsory educational reforms. Notably, it appears that omitted variables bias is important here. I find a significant causal effect of education moving individuals to the right when properly addressing the endogeneity whereas there is a significant association between education and left-wing political ideology when treating education as exogenous. I find that on average, among the individuals compelled into additional education from these specific reforms, an additional year of education moves individuals to the right of the political continuum by about 5–6%. However, I also find no evidence of a causal effect on political ideology for a subgroup of countries.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have long been interested in the effect of education on political ideology. Most previous evidence suggests that education is associated with a more liberal ideology (Dunn, 2011; Weakliem, 2002). Moreover, it is often stated or implied that education *causes* individuals to move to the political left (for example, Dunn, 2011; Weakliem, 2002; Weil, 1985). However, to the author's knowledge, previous studies on political ideology have not dealt with the endogeneity of education. Specifically, previous cross-sectional research may suffer from omitted variables bias because there are likely unobserved factors that affect political ideology and lead individuals to attain higher levels of education. For example, innate personality characteristics or the political ideology of one's parents are unobserved and can affect both educational attainment and one's own political ideology. Perhaps more worrisome is that it is unclear what the direction of the bias in previous studies would be. There are plausible stories as to how these unobserved factors could push one either to the political right or to the left while simultaneously affecting educational attainment. Thus, previous studies are limited in their ability to inform us on what would happen to political ideology in an alternative world where individuals are compelled into more education.

In contrast, this paper contributes to the literature by estimating the causal effect of education on political ideology as measured by self-identified left-right placement. The analysis overcomes the endogeneity of education through leveraging changes in compulsory education laws in 20th century Europe. The key feature of these law changes is that individuals were forced into additional education rather than self-selecting into more education. This exogenous shift in educational attainment can then be utilized to identify the effect of education on the outcome of interest. This instrumental variables (IV) approach has now been firmly established in the literature and has been utilized to explain the impact of education on a wide variety of outcomes.

Recent research suggests that the left-right scale as a construct is problematic. Specifically, Bauer, Barbera, Ackermann, and Venetz (2015) argue that the left-right scale is a vague concept and empirical relationships will be biased as a result. In particular, the authors provide evidence that education is endogenous to self-placement on the left-right political scale in Germany. An omitted variable (the meaning that individuals attach to the concepts of political “left” and “right”) is correlated with education and self-placement on the left-right scale. In the typical analysis of the association between education and left-right identity, we would not know “whether education affects ideology directly or merely through the different associations it triggers within respondents” (Bauer et al., 2015). This is the benefit of the identification strategy regression employed in the present paper. Rather than simply

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using the reported level of education, I estimate educational attainment utilizing a regression discontinuity design (RDD) that exploits the timing of compulsory educational reforms. One group of individuals was born just prior to a reform and another group of individuals was born just after a reform. After controlling for cohort trends, unobserved characteristics such as conceptual associations should be on average the same across these two groups. Thus, I am plausibly able to overcome the omitted variables problem detailed in [Bauer et al. \(2015\)](#).

Supporting the concerns of [Bauer et al. \(2015\)](#), I do find that the observed association between education and left-right political identity from a standard OLS regression is quite different from the causal relationship estimated utilizing the fuzzy RDD. There is a small but highly statistically significant association between education and left-wing identity in the observational regressions that treat education as exogenous. However, once leveraging the educational reforms as instruments for endogenous educational attainment, I find that education significantly moves individuals to the right in their political identities. Among individuals who were affected by the educational reforms (the compliers), an additional year of education moves an individual to the right by approximately 0.2–0.4 points on a 10 point scale (4%–8% relative to sample mean) depending on the specification, with most estimates falling near 0.25 (5% relative to sample mean). I primarily utilize parametric specifications of a fuzzy RDD and find that the results are robust to linear and quadratic controls and to the sample bandwidth chosen. However, I also use nonparametric local linear regressions to confirm the results.

There are several theses from the political science and sociology literatures regarding the effect of educational attainment on political identity. As explained by [Dunn \(2011\)](#), these theories include “the self-interest thesis, the developmental thesis and the socialization thesis.” The self-interest thesis reasons that those who attain higher levels of education are likely to earn higher incomes, which attracts them to a right-wing identity out of self-interest. As explained by [Dunn \(2011\)](#), this thesis can explain the traditional European association of higher education leading to a right-wing identification. [Powdthavee and Oswald \(2014\)](#) provide an analytical framework in which a rational voter trades off a desire for low taxes with a desire for a public good. They show that an increase in income can theoretically affect left-right political affiliation for such a utility maximizing agent. [Powdthavee and Oswald \(2014\)](#) then provide evidence that an exogenous shock to income through winning the lottery leads to significant movement to the right in political affiliation in the UK, supporting the idea that individuals act out of self-interest when voting.

In contrast, the developmental thesis predicts that more education will lead to more of a left-wing political identity. In this thesis, education expands one’s perspective and stimulates cognitive growth, leading to a more liberal ideology ([Phelan, Link, Stueve, & Moore, 1995](#)). Finally, the socialization thesis maintains that political attitudes are transmitted to students through social learning processes. Students learn about society’s attitudes through the behaviors that are modeled and reinforced in the educational system. A leading specific example of the socialization thesis is [Weakliem’s \(2002\)](#) core values thesis. In this theory, education serves to increase the commitment to society’s core values and institutions. Thus, more education would tend to move individuals to the right in predominantly conservative societies and to the left in predominantly liberal societies.

Concerning the aforementioned theories, the primary finding in this paper that increased educational attainment tends to move individuals to the right of the political spectrum could be consistent with either the self-interest thesis or the socialization thesis and is inconsistent with the developmental thesis. Closer examination of individual countries reveals most support for the self-interest the-

sis. Specifically, education tends to have a stronger causal effect on political ideology in countries where previous research has shown the reforms to be effective in increasing earnings and no causal effect in countries where research has shown the reforms to not affect earnings.

Aside from the contribution to the literature on the relationship between educational attainment and political attitudes, this paper adds to the growing literature concerning non-pecuniary effects of education. Most often, researchers use changes in compulsory education laws as a source of exogenous variation to identify the effects of interest. Much of this compulsory education literature has focused on labor market outcomes such as income and employment ([Aakvik, Salvanes, & Vaage, 2010](#); [Acemoglu and Angrist, 2001](#); [Angrist & Krueger, 1991](#); [Brunello, Fort, & Weber, 2009](#); [Meghir and Palme, 2005](#); [Oreopoulos, 2006a, b](#)). More recently, non-pecuniary effects of education are receiving more attention ([Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011](#)). For example, increases in education have been shown to reduce crime ([Hjalmarsson, Holmlund, & Lindquist, 2015](#); [Lochner and Moretti, 2004](#); [Machin, Marie, & Vujic, 2011](#)), reduce teenage births ([Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2008](#)), improve health outcomes¹ ([Gathmann, Jürges, & Reinhold, 2015](#); [Lleras-Muney, 2005](#); [van Kippersluis, O’Donnell, & van Doorslaer, 2011](#)), and increase pro-environmental behavior ([Meyer, 2015](#)).

In the political realm, [Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos \(2004\)](#) and [Dee \(2004\)](#) find that increases in education cause political involvement and voting to increase. However, there are also mixed results in this area. [Siedler \(2010\)](#) finds little evidence of a causal effect of education on political behavior in Germany. [Borgonovi, d’Hombres, and Hoskins \(2010\)](#) pool reforms from 15 European countries and find that education increases political information acquisition but has no effect on voter turnout. [Di Pietro and Delprato \(2009\)](#) examine the effects of a compulsory education reform in Italy on a number of civic outcomes. The authors find a positive and significant effect on interest in politics, a negative and significant effect on the stated justifiability of not returning lost money to an owner and insignificant effects on the justifiability of not paying a ticket on a public transport vehicle and of not leaving one’s name for the owner of a car one accidentally scraped, and an insignificant effect on the stated importance of the problem of tax evasion. Most recently, [Persson, Lindgren, and Oskarsson \(2016\)](#), leverage exogenous variation in school entry age in Greece, Norway, Slovenia, and Sweden to estimate the causal effect of the ninth year of education; the authors find no significant effect on political participation, democratic values, or political knowledge.

More generally, this study contributes to the literature that analyzes the determinants of voting intentions and support for politicians. Most of this work concentrates on how economic conditions affect voting intentions—often termed economic voting. For example, [Veiga and Veiga \(2004\)](#) find that economic conditions are important in determining support for right-wing and left-wing governments in Portugal. [Sakurai and Menezes-Filho \(2008\)](#) and [Cassette, Farvaque, and Hericourt \(2013\)](#) examine how local public spending affect municipal elections in Brazil and France, respectively. Yet, the approach in the present paper differs because it concentrates on a key individual-level determinant of political identity rather than national or local factors. The present results do suggest, however, that voting behavior could be influenced by public policies that change the level of required education. For example, any public policies that reduce the number of high school

¹ Some studies find no effects of education on health ([Albouy and Lequien, 2009](#); [Clark and Royer, 2013](#)) or inconclusive effects ([Arendt, 2005](#)). [James \(2015\)](#) finds effects for some health outcomes but not for others and [Brunello et al. \(2013\)](#) find an effect for females but no effect for males.

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