



Educational trajectories and inequalities of political engagement among adolescents in England



Bryony Hoskins ^{a,*}, Jan Germen Janmaat ^b

^a Roehampton University, UK

^b University College London, Institute of Education, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 October 2014

Received in revised form 7 October 2015

Accepted 5 November 2015

Available online 19 November 2015

Keywords:

Inequalities

Political participation

Voting

Protest

Education

Selection

Qualification

Democracy

Logistic regression

Austerity

ABSTRACT

Through analysing longitudinal data this article explores the effect of education trajectories between the ages 14–19 on voting and protesting at age 20 taking into account both type of education (vocational/academic) and level of qualifications (Levels 1–3). We find that these trajectories exert an independent effect on both outcomes. Gaining low level qualifications (up to Level 2) and in particular low level vocational qualifications diminishes the chances of political participation relative to Level 3 and academic qualifications. Whilst a wider range of qualifications are conducive to voting, only Level 3 academic qualifications support protesting relative to other qualifications. Post-14 education thus seems to make protesting more of an elite affair. Considering that the vast majority of students in the vocational and lower-level pathways come from low SES families, the undermining influence of these pathways on political participation will be felt disproportionately among the group of socially disadvantaged students.

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1. Introduction

Democracy is based on the fundamental principle of equal participation of all citizens. However, inequalities in political engagement based on levels of wealth, education and age have been clearly established (Verba et al., 1995; Torney-Purta, 2002; Teorell et al., 2007; Gallego, 2007; Stolle and Hooge, 2009; Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Sloam, 2013). Disparities in political engagement are said to lead to public policy that favours the elite and enhances social exclusion (Gallego, 2007). In the context of long-term austerity, when current and successive governments continue to face difficult questions about who receives public funding or experiences increases in taxation, it is imperative that all socio-economic groups are equally heard. The 2010 UK general election was held in the thick of the current economic crisis and the resulting coalition between the conservatives and liberal democrats adopted austerity policies that disproportionately affected the most vulnerable groups, namely low income (Browne and Elming, 2015) and young people (Sloam, 2014). In this election there was about a 20% difference in voter turnout between the highest and lowest socio-economic groups (Ipsos Mori, 2010). Voter turnout for the lowest social groups has been in decline between the 1995 and 2010 general elections, decreasing by 20% whilst voter turnout for the highest socio-economic group has only declined by 7% (McKnight and Tsang, 2013). These trends suggest that the UK is

* Corresponding author. Department of Sociology, University of Roehampton, London SW15 5PJ, UK.
E-mail address: Bryony.Hoskins@Roehampton.ac.uk (B. Hoskins).

heading in the direction towards the high levels of inequality in voting patterns found in the US (Schlozman and Brady, 2012) and that research is urgently needed to find out how this process of political alienation is occurring. Could it be that low level qualifications (up to Level 2) and in particular low level vocational qualifications are not supporting young people's political voice relative to other qualifications?

These immediate concerns add to more long-term anxieties regarding youth apathy and voice in political decision making (Sloam, 2013). In the 2010 UK general election there was about a 30% difference in voter turnouts between the 18–24 and the 55–64 age group (Ipsos Mori, 2010). The decline in youth voter turnout in general elections in the UK has been about 30% since the 1970s bringing the differences to a similar level to that of the US and making the UK show a much wider gap than its European neighbours such as Germany (Sloam, 2013). Nevertheless, younger age groups do engage more in protest activities than older generations and these levels have shown some increase in recent years in the UK, even if this has not brought the UK figures to same level as those of the US or of other European countries (Sloam, 2013). Yet, while young people may thus be compensating their low levels of electoral participation with somewhat higher levels of participation in protest activities, the latter, as a more intensive form of participation, also shows higher rates of inequality based on wealth and education than the more conventional forms of participation in most western European countries (Mariën et al., 2010).

Education has been advocated as the one of the main solutions for increasing political engagement (Nie et al., 1996; Niemi and Junn, 1998; Emler and Frazer, 1999), yet paradoxically education has also been identified as the source of recreating and reproducing socioeconomic inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bernstein and Class, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Coleman, 1968).

In this article we focus on the educational pathways of young people aged 14–19 in England and examine their effects on political participation. As in many other countries, the English education system begins to branch out at this age, offering adolescents a variety of educational programmes differing in both type/track (academic or vocational) and levels of attainment in education. However, the majority of research that examines the effect of education on political engagement have failed to address the nuances of education trajectories and only taken into account either the years of education/educational attainment or the type of education. Research into the economic outcomes of education (Dearden et al., 2004; Jenkins et al., 2007) have demonstrated the importance of combining both educational attainment and type of education as it enabled the scholars to identify the negative effects on earnings of Levels 1 and 2 vocational qualifications in contrast to the positive effects of earnings of Level 3 vocational qualifications. The research on economic outcomes has given weight to policy arguments that many of the low level vocational qualifications were not providing the education needed for the labour market (Wolf, 2011).

Interestingly, the effect of each of these components (attainment and type) on political participation has received ample academic attention. Those focussing on the effect of educational attainment, for instance, include Dee (2004); Galston (2001); Niemi and Junn (1998); Mariën et al. (2010); Verba et al. (1995), while Ichilov (1991); Lauglo and Øia (2006); van de Werfhorst (2007); Paterson (2009); Hoskins et al. (forthcoming); Janmaat et al. (2014) are examples of studies examining the impact of type or track. However, scholars have rarely examined both components. van de Werfhorst (2007) and Paterson (2009) used measures that capture some of this precision, but they have not examined which of the two components has the strongest effect on political engagement, and they have not focused on late adolescence as a crucial formative period. As several studies have identified this period as a stage in life when political attitudes and behaviours take on a definite shape (Watts, 1999; Jennings and Stoker, 2004; Goossens, 2001; Amnå et al., 2009; Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, 2008), there is every reason to focus in on the educational options available to this age group. The period between the ages of 14 and 19 is when the vast majority of young people in England undertake study to obtain formal qualifications and these educational outcomes have profound effects on future socio-economic status and economic earnings (Wolf, 2011).

Another shortcoming in the current literature is the scarcity of studies using longitudinal data which include measurements of the dependent variable prior to the educational phase or intervention of interest to explore the effects of education on political engagement. Such studies are in a better position to determine the direction of causality than studies relying on cross-sectional data or on longitudinal data without prior measures of the outcome (Persson, 2012). Although studies using experimental designs do generally include such prior measurements (e.g. Sondheimer and Green, 2010) the scale of the experiments on which these studies are based is usually very small, which means that the findings of these studies are limited in scope. There is thus a great need for studies based on larger and preferably nationally representative longitudinal samples. Such studies would allow for a better and more wide-ranging, although by no means conclusive, assessment of the net effect of a particular phase of education and of the durability of this effect (Paterson, 2009; Janmaat, Mostafa and Hoskins forthcoming). This article meets both criteria as it uses data of the nationally representative Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) that includes measures of intentions to vote and intentions to protest at age 13, that is, attitudes measured prior to the specific education episode that we are examining, as well as the dependent variables of reported voting and protesting at age 20.

This article seeks to contribute to the debates on the mechanisms within the education system that exacerbate social stratification and inequalities in political engagement in democracy. We seek to test if inequalities in political engagement (voting and protest) are widened under different education trajectories. In particular we seek to ascertain whether low level qualifications in vocational tracks are sufficiently supporting young people's political voice.

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