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Widening the participation gap: The effect of educational track on reported voting in England



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the effect of tracked education in upper secondary on voting behaviour. It discusses two causal mechanisms that link tracked education to greater disparities of political participation: the curriculum and peer socialization. Data of Waves 1, 2, 5 and 7 of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) is used to assess the hypothesis that educational track has an independent effect on voting. Controlling for several pre- and post-track influences, the paper shows that students who have taken vocational courses in less prestigious schools indeed have lower reported voting levels at age 20 than those who have pursued an academic qualification (A levels) in prestigious schools. It is proposed that the effect of tracked education on political participation is likely to vary across Europe and that this variation may well be explained by differences across Europe in the extent to which the academic and vocational tracks are integrated, both in terms of the curriculum and in their social intake.

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Inequalities in political participation are seen as an unwanted phenomenon as it makes democratic government less responsive to the needs of the politically disengaged and thereby undermines the public legitimacy of liberal democracy (Bartels, 2008; Levinson, 2010). Given education's capacity to promote civic engagement (Emler & Frazer, 1999; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998), education could, in theory, equalize active citizenship. In practice, however, the allocation function of education, that is its task of preparing youngsters for specific positions in the labour market, is given higher priority. An important component of the allocation function is the assignment of youngsters into different educational tracks: (pre)vocational tracks which prepare youngsters for usually less prestigious, blue collar work and general/academic ones that prepare youngsters for higher status white collar professions. It is precisely this allocation into different tracks that has been argued to reinforce rather than mitigate the participation gap (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Ichilov, 1991; Van de Werfhorst, 2009). Broadly, the argument is that, while youngsters sorted into academic tracks are taught how to become politically engaged citizens and future leaders, those assigned to vocational tracks merely receive training aimed at producing loyal workers and uncritical followers (Dewey, 1966; Ichilov, 2002; Whitty, 1985). As a result of these different socialization experiences, youngsters in academic tracks will be more inclined to be interested in and to participate in politics than youngsters in vocational tracks.

Many studies using cross sectional data have indeed found much higher levels of political and civic engagement among students in the academic track, controlling for relevant individual and school-level variables (e.g., Ichilov, 1991; Janmaat, 2011; Lauglo & Øia, 2006; Stevens, 2002; Van de Werfhorst, 2007). However, analyses based on such data have difficulty

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establishing the net effect of particular phases of education, including that of tracked education. Studies using longitudinal data with time points preceding each phase are in a better position to do this. Such longitudinal data moreover enable an assessment of the durability of the impact of certain educational episodes (Paterson, 2009). The few studies using longitudinal data yielded contradictory findings. While Persson (2012), in a study among Swedish students in upper secondary, found no effect of track on political participation controlling for prior levels of participation, Eckstein, Noack, and Gniewosz (2012) in Germany found political engagement levels to rise amongst youngsters in the university-bound track and to decline amongst youngsters in the pre-vocational track.

To our knowledge, no study has yet examined the influence of track placement on political participation in England using longitudinal data. Some research has made use of panel data of the National Child Development Study, but these studies have investigated the effects of adult education (Bynner, Schuller, & Feinstein, 2003; Preston & Feinstein, 2004) and of distinct courses and subjects (Paterson, 2009). This study will build on this incipient line of inquiry by investigating the effect of educational track in upper secondary on reported voting among young people aged 20. It makes use of Waves 1, 2, 5 and 7 of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE).

Educational track and political participation

There are three reasons why tracking in upper secondary can be expected to influence political participation. The first two concern the curriculum and peer socialization, which have been proposed as causal mechanisms linking tracked education to widening participation gaps. The curriculum, as the first of these mechanisms, has been found to differ across tracks in the qualities that it promotes which are relevant for active citizenship, even if it does not include an explicit component of citizenship education. Ichilov (2002), for instance, found that the curriculum in academic tracks in Israel is oriented towards cognition, rationality, evaluation, active intervention and choice, while that of vocational tracks emphasizes duty, passivity and social skills. Similarly, the research of Ten Dam and Volman (2003) in the Netherlands shows that academic school types focused on the transmission of knowledge and the development of independent and critical thinking skills whereas pre-vocational schools devoted their social studies lessons on fostering social competences, appropriate behaviour and self-confidence. While the specific qualities fostered in the academic track encourage youngsters to become politically engaged citizens, those promoted in vocational tracks alienate adolescents from politics as they merely concern acceptance of and adaptation to the political decisions of others (Apple, 1990; Eckstein et al., 2012; Ichilov, 2002; Janmaat & Mons, 2011; Ten Dam & Volman, 2003; Van de Werfhorst, 2009).

The second causal mechanism, peer socialization, results from the allocation of students to different tracks on the basis of educational achievement. As achievement is so closely related to social background, allocation on the basis of achievement amounts to social sorting. Invariably, youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately end up in low status vocational tracks, while their more privileged peers enrol into academic tracks (Hallinan, 1994; Loveless, 1999). In theory, this social segregation across tracks need not be problematic if family socio-cultural capital did not matter for political engagement, but it does. Many studies have shown family SES to be one of the strongest predictors of future political participation (Achen, 2002; Beck & Jennings, 1982; Lauglo, 2011; Schulz, Ainly, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). As youngsters in vocational tracks have little opportunity to interact with children from more privileged class backgrounds, they are not likely to learn from their peers about the sense and benefits of political participation. These different peer influences across tracks will lead youngsters to develop different lifestyles with diverging norms, values, and status symbols (Ichilov, 2002; Janmaat & Mons, 2011; Van de Werfhorst, 2007). Typically, the world of politics is not considered to be 'cool' by youth in vocational tracks while it has positive connotations for students in academic tracks (Stevens, 2002). Thus these peer effects exert an independent influence by enhancing the political engagement of youngsters in academic tracks while lowering that of youngsters in vocational tracks. As students of low SES are overrepresented among the latter and those of high SES are overrepresented among the former, they as a rule only reinforce the engagement gap produced by family SES (Hoskins, Janmaat, Han, & Muijs, in press).

Since family SES along with other pre-track conditions, such as educational achievement, influence both educational trajectories and political participation (Paterson, 2009), it is vital to control for them (as we will do later on) in order to rule out the possibility that the effect of tracking merely reflects the influence of these pre-track characteristics.

Thirdly, tracking in *upper secondary* specifically is likely to leave a mark on political participation considering the age that youngsters are most receptive to educational content targeting political attitudes and behaviours. Research has found that late adolescence is the crucial formative period for these dispositions rather than early childhood (Goossens, 2001; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Watts, 1999). Thus citizenship education programs in upper secondary can be expected to be quite influential and possibly to have lasting effects on adult political participation.

Based on the discussion above we hypothesize that tracking in upper secondary has a significant independent impact on political participation controlling for pre- and post-track influences; youngsters enrolled in vocational tracks will show lower levels of participation than those enrolled in academic tracks.

Educational tracks in upper secondary in England

In England, whether students are enrolled in an academic or a vocational track is in first instance determined by the kind of qualification they are studying for. A and AS levels in a variety of subjects are typically considered academic qualifications

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