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Examining the Impact of Electoral Politics on Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The correlation between education and political participation may not indicate causality by a number of factors: the first, and more argued one, is the existence of third variables that explain both variables simultaneously. Kam and Palmer (2008) argued that education is simply a proxy of preadult experiences and dispositions most of the time related to family background, such as values and personality, or even cognitive ability, that determine a high interest in politics and high preferences for education. Therefore the high correlation found in the literature is capturing the fact that education is simply a proxy for such characteristics. Even if education is truly causing participation, these non-observed characteristics would upwardly bias the estimations since they are correlated with both.

KEYWORDS: Electoral, Politics, Higher, Education, Correlation, Comparative

I. INTRODUCTION

Although educational institutions have historically sought to develop civic-minded and engaged citizens (Labaree, 1997), some scholars have questioned the causal relationship between college and political participation. They contend that this association may be spurious due to college-goers being more primed for political engagement than non-college-goers (Highton, 2009; Kam & Palmer, 2008; Tenn, 2007). This body of research, however, has generally ignored the possibility that the effects of college may systematically differ across the population. Another line of research, by contrast, suggests that the impact of college on various civic and socioeconomic outcomes may be strongest for those with lower propensities to attend college—i.e., individuals from more disadvantaged backgrounds and with lower academic ability and achievement (Brand, 2010; Brand & Xie, 2010; Brand et al. 2021; Card, 2001; Heckman et al., 2018; Skinner & Doyle, 2021). If the effect of college on voting follows this pattern of heterogeneity, expanding higher education may lead to greater political engagement among currently underrepresented citizens.[1,2,3] Closely related to heterogeneity in the effects of college are the mechanisms through which those effects operate. Scholars have advanced several theories for how higher education might increase voter turnout. Higher education might directly increase voting through socialization on campus (Bowman, 2011; Chatfield & Henderson, 2016; Glynn et al., 2009), the development of civic literacy (Cassel & Lo, 1997; Galston, 2001; Hillygus, 2005), and politically-engaged social networks (Hansen & Tyner, 2019; Kingston et al., 2003; Rolfe, 2012). Alternatively, a college education may increase voting indirectly, primarily by boosting an individual's SES, thereby increasing access to occupational networks that foster political engagement (Brady et al., 1995; Cassel & Lo, 1997; Kingston et al., 2003). Scholars have also identified bachelor's degree completion as a key pathway through which individuals realize the returns to higher education (Hout, 2012). Individuals who attend college may need to complete a degree to realize the civic returns.

Disentangling the contributions of these direct and indirect effects of college on voting provides insight into the relationship between the pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits of college enrollment. For example, if the voting returns to college depend heavily on post-college socioeconomic attainment, voter turnout should increase most among the subset of college-goers who experience the largest SES returns to higher education. Thus, assessing the degree to which SES mediates the effect of college is essential to understanding not only the extent to which higher education might increase voter turnout but also how it shapes participatory inequality. The proposed direct (Galston, 2001; Hillygus, 2005) and indirect (Brady et al., 1995; Kingston et al., 2003) pathways may operate more strongly among disadvantaged college-goers. First, colleges' civic missions and liberal education may be particularly consequential for first-generation and lower-income college students, whose social and cultural background may not have as expressly cultivated the commitment to political engagement as that of their more advantaged peers. Higher education may also counter sociopolitical factors and social messaging that suggest to disadvantaged citizens that their votes are inconsequential (Bartels, 2018; Wolak, 2018). Second, if college enhances the SES of individuals from disadvantaged origins to a greater extent than their more advantaged peers (Brand [forthcoming]; Brand & Xie, 2010; Brand et

al. 2021; Card, 2001; Heckman et al., 2018), the former group will likewise benefit more from the indirect effects of college.

To date, few studies have jointly considered the direct and indirect pathways through which college affects voting or explored how those pathways vary across the population. Using a novel approach to causal mediation analysis that can accommodate multiple, causally dependent mediators (Zhou & Yamamoto, 2022), this study examines the total, direct, and indirect effects of 4-year college attendance on self-reported voting. We also investigate how these effects vary across individuals with different propensities of attending college. Thus, we show not only the degree to which the civic returns to college attendance depend on degree attainment and socioeconomic returns, but also how this dependence differs between individuals with different characteristics. We use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and 1997 cohorts. The former allows individuals two decades to realize the socioeconomic returns to college, thus providing a credible assessment of the mediating role of SES in the effect of college on self-reported voting. The latter offers a comparison of the total, direct, and indirect effects through completion for a more recent cohort.

Our study yields several noteworthy findings. First, the direct effects of college attendance on self-reported voting are larger than the indirect effects through degree completion or SES attainment. Moreover, both the total and direct effects of college attendance are strongest for low-propensity individuals, suggesting a pattern of “negative selection.” The contribution of this study is thus three-fold. First, we contribute to the debate on the civic benefits of higher education by providing strong evidence that 4-year college attendance increases political participation and that the effects are largest among more disadvantaged youth, i.e., those who are least likely to attend college. Second, using a novel approach to causal mediation analysis, we advance understanding of the mechanisms by which college increases political participation. Finally, our results suggest that the civic returns to college are not contingent upon the socioeconomic returns or even degree completion and that an expansion of higher education has the potential to narrow the socioeconomic gap in political participation and influence.

II. DISCUSSION

The most prominent explanation for the link between education and political participation can be called the civic education theory. The civic education hypothesis is rooted in the belief that education provides both the skills necessary to become politically engaged and the knowledge to understand and accept democratic principles. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argue that the well-educated participate at higher rates because their schooling provided them with the “skills people need to understand the abstract subject of politics, to follow the political campaign, and to research and evaluate the issues and candidates. [4,5,6]In addition, because of their schooling, the well educated are better able to handle the bureaucratic requirements of registration and voting” (p. 136). Put simply, education lowers the material and cognitive costs of participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Undeniably, the fundamentals of education are important. Democratic citizens need some minimal understanding of the political system in which they express preferences and elect representatives to know even basic information like when and where to cast a ballot. If individuals cannot read, it is difficult to fill out the ballot or to write a letter to their elected representative. Yet, beyond the fundamentals of reading and writing—an 8th grade or even high school education—it is less clear why further schooling should influence democratic behavior. The civic education hypothesis suggests that additional years of education can continue to equip citizens with political information that further eases the costs of political engagement. While literacy may be necessary for casting a ballot, it is perhaps not sufficient for reasoned and deliberative decision making by a voter. Higher education imparts the knowledge, skills, and political familiarity that help in navigating the political world. In addition to teaching concrete information about the political process, higher education might help citizens understand the relationship between political action and the preservation of a democratic system (Galston, 2001; Niemi and Junn, 1998; TorneyPurta, Schwille, and Amadeo, 1999). Not all formal schooling is expected to develop these skills equally well, however. Implicit in this literature is the notion that education (beyond the three “Rs”) is influential in shaping political engagement in so much as that schooling includes civic education (Levine and Lopez, 2004). A computer science course is unlikely to impart the verbal acuity necessary to engage in political discourse; a biology course does not typically give cause to encourage political attentiveness. It is a civic or social science curriculum that imparts the skills and resources necessary to be active in the political realm. For instance, Niemi and Junn (1998) conclude that a civics curriculum enhances what and how much students know about American government and politics, even controlling for individual motivation and family socialization effects. Thus, according to the civic education hypothesis, education—specifically a civic education—expands the capacity of citizens to engage in self-rule by teaching citizens the behaviors and knowledge necessary for identifying political preferences,



understanding politics, and pursuing political interests. Yet, this hypothesis has recently come under scrutiny, and an alternative hypothesis linking education and democratic behavior has been offered.[7,8,9]

Social Network Hypothesis The civic education hypothesis suggests that increasing education in the population should produce a more informed and engaged electorate. Yet, we are all familiar with the aggregate trends that find a dramatic increase in educational attainment since the 1960s coupled with a simultaneous decline in political engagement (Brody, 1998). Developed in part as an explanation of this “puzzle of participation,” the social network hypothesis offers an alternative explanation for the cross-sectional relationship between education and participation. Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) argue that education is a determinant of political engagement not so much for its intrinsic skill-building value, but rather, because education predicts an individual’s social network position.⁴ Nie et al. (1996, p. 189) argue: “So long as the number of seats in the political theater remains fixed and education continues to play a strong role in determining social network position, the amount of inequality in the participatory hierarchy should remain constant regardless of the degree of increase in educational attainment over time.” In other words, education works as a social sorting mechanism. Those with higher levels of education are substantially more likely to be found closer to the center of politically important social networks, while those with less education are much more likely to be found at the periphery. Nie et al., contend that “formal education is important to the characteristics of political engagement because it sorts citizens into positions in the social and political hierarchy that facilitates political engagement to a greater or lesser degree” (1996, p. 17). In other words, education places citizens either closer to or further from the center of critical social and political networks that, in turn, affect levels of political participation. Proximity to those who make policy decisions, along with accessibility to sources of relevant political information, is simply easier and less costly for those well-connected individuals. Given that voting has fewer social barriers than more difficult political activities, the link between social network centrality and turnout seems somewhat more tenuous. Nonetheless, Nie et al., argue that social networks can either encourage or discourage voter turnout. More educated individuals may have friends who engage them in political conversation; and they are more likely to be mobilized by campaigns or candidates. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Verba et al. (1995) conclude that politically active individuals tend to be those who are mobilized by the political elite, and, not surprisingly, political elites tend to target those individuals at the center of social networks. Besides the civic education hypothesis and social network hypothesis, one other explanation—what I call the political meritocracy hypothesis—has been offered to account for the strong correlation between years of education and political engagement. Political Meritocracy Hypothesis Perhaps the single challenge to the assumption that education increases political engagement comes from a variant of the “IQ meritocracy” hypothesis.⁵ Put simply, this hypothesis suggests that intelligence begets educational attainment, not the other way around. Formal schooling separates individuals with a high degree of innate intelligence from those with lesser levels—the most cognitively proficient students are those who excel in grammar school, graduate from high school, and continue to college and beyond. Extended to political behavior, this hypothesis challenges the relationship between education and characteristics of democratic citizenship. The political meritocracy hypothesis does not question that a positive correlation exists between education and participation, but it does dispute the conclusion that education causes democratic behavior. According to this argument, there exists a spurious relationship between education and democratic behavior—intelligence produces both. In other words, brighter individuals tend to go further in school and also to participate at higher rates. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argue, “Why does education matter so much [in explaining political participation]?...education predicts political involvement in America because it is primarily a proxy for cognitive ability”(p. 253). Luskin (1990) concludes that once intelligence and other variables are taken into account, education has no effect on political sophistication: The simplest explanation is the paucity of controls. The studies showing an education effect do not always partial on interest, and never on intelligence or occupation qua political impingement. So ‘education’s’ effect may really be intelligence’s, occupation’s, and interest’s. Education may be taking credit for the other variables’ work. Students must pick up some political information in school, but apparently do not wind up knowing much or more, other things being equal, the longer they spend there. (p. 349) In other words, intelligence, rather than education, is the more important determinant of political sophistication. And political sophistication in turn engenders political participation. Hess and Torney (1967) similarly find in a study of elementary age children that more intelligent children of all socioeconomic classes were more likely to discuss, read about, and participate in political activities than were less intelligent children. Neuman (1986, p. 261) concludes that “the evidence supports the idea of an independent cognitive effect” as part of the proved link between socioeconomic status and political participation. In the next section, I will operationalize these competing hypotheses, and empirically test them using a unique data set collected by the NCES.[10,11,12]

III. RESULTS

A crucial moment in representative democracies - where elected officials make decisions on behalf of the people – is how these officials are being elected. This translation of the citizen’s votes into representative seats is performed by the electoral system. Hence, the electoral system is one of the most fundamental elements of representative democracy. Which dimensions of the electoral system, then, are the most important? The case of proportionality, for example, has many aspects; how proportional, strictly speaking, is a proportional system? Is proportionality something to strive for or avoid because of the risk of producing weak governments? In this memo we shall, very briefly, run through the major electoral systems and then mention some of the properties that constitute an electoral system. Apart from the effects of electoral system mentioned above there are some issues connected to representation in parliament worth discussing. The question of social representation can not directly be seen as consequences of electoral system, but the implications are nevertheless of great importance for the performance of a parliamentary democracy.

The question in what way the MPs reflects the electorate in socio-economic terms is well documented, especially when it comes to countries like Sweden and England. The findings are quite easy to summarise. Legislators around the world are recruited first and foremost from the privileged, as they tend to come from a more affluent background and to be better educated than the voters they represent (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981; Norris and Lovenduski 1995).[13,14,15]

However, most of the studies concerning social group affiliation try to explain why patterns of recruitment look as they do, when instead it is as important to analyse the effects of different recruitment patterns. Therefore it could be of great value, not only to promote research on how social representation has changed, but also how social recruitment, or gender recruitment for that matter, can explain what attitudes or position of influence representative hold (Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Wängnerud 1998).

Political interference in higher education, we are told, is increasing. The partisan divide in views on higher education, we hear, is deepening. Campuses “are driving political division.” The diploma divide lies “at the heart of this country’s many divisions.”

Is it the case, as a recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education seems to suggest, that colleges and universities were venerated in the past and that only since the 1960s they became punching bags or political cannon fodder, caught (to mix metaphors) in the crosshairs of conservative ideologues?
Of course not.

I was a bit surprised to read a piece in The Chronicle by the country’s foremost authority on McCarthyism and the universities entitled “The 50-Year War on Higher Education.” As her own books demonstrate, political attacks on higher education date back much further.[16,17]

McCarthyism aside, just think of the gay purges at the Universities of Texas, Missouri and Wisconsin during the 1940s or the late-19th- and early-20th-century attacks on academic freedom that gave rise to the American Association of University Professors.

A truncated view of history blinds us to an unsettling reality: that criticisms of colleges and universities as bastions of elitism and as threats to social order are as old as the counternarrative that celebrates higher education as a founts of truth, preservers of wisdom and cultural achievement, and drivers of social mobility.

I sometimes quip that American society suffers from selective amnesia. There’s a tendency to forget how few Americans attended college even in the relatively recent past and how low the graduation rate was. (There’s a reason why the UT alumni association is called the Texas Exes; you could join even if you never got a diploma.)

For many of today’s undergraduates’ parents, going to college was something only upper-middle-class young people did.

And even in the 1990s, going out of state or even to a private college or university was surprisingly rare. Private four-year schools were still largely the preserve of the children of professionals, executives or business owners. The college-going market had not yet been nationalized, let alone nearly universalized.[18]

I fear that the true political threat to universities comes less from ideologues than from a diminishing faith among broad segments of the public in the power of higher education to transform lives, open doors and open minds. It's that loss of faith that gives traction to the recent political attacks.

Nor should our colleges and universities and lobbying organization be blind to the mounting concerns among Jewish and Asian Americans, who have been among the strongest advocates for higher ed's value, that their children are increasingly unwelcomed on the more selective campuses. Heterodox liberals, too, decry self-censorship on campus and administrators' failure to aggressively defend academic freedom, not just in Florida but in the Northeast. Double standards about academic integrity and plagiarism don't help.

The "war" on colleges and universities takes many forms. It can be found, of course, in explicit attacks on tenure and on faculty members' free speech. But it can also take somewhat more subtle forms: in doubts about the value of the humanities disciplines (you'll recall President Obama's reservations about the worth of degrees in art history) and in the fears that universities have grown less open to unfettered inquiry and thought.

But if you were to ask me, the biggest threat comes from mounting anxieties about college's return on investment: that the cost of attendance is too high, completion rates are too low and learning and employment outcomes too uncertain and that society needs to embrace faster, cheaper—and less rigorous and well-rounded—paths into the workforce.

When campuses offer credit-bearing courses on Harry Styles, we shouldn't be surprised that our curriculum is regarded as frivolous and trivial. When a campus like my alma mater pits itself against a long-standing local business, don't be shocked to discover even the most liberal townies turning against the campus.

Higher education leaders need to condemn the increasingly widespread narrative that "not all high schoolers need to go to college." That's just a way to keep whole segments of this society down. But our sector's spokespeople cannot do this with a straight face when nearly half of those who go to a two- or four-year school fail to graduate and when 40 percent of those who do graduate find themselves underemployed, with the negative long-term consequences that result.

There is no reason why as a nation we can't find a way to deliver a traditional campus experience with quality and care and at reasonable cost. Even if it this is hugely expensive, the potential ROI is huge—and goes well beyond just creating productive future workers.

All those who wish to go to college should be able to go—and receive a real college education, not an unbundled or self-paced simulacrum.

Our colleges and universities want to be admired. But on what grounds? The answers aren't a mystery.

Because our institutions promote expertise and solutions to social problems, advance social mobility, and contribute to a more inclusive society. And, yes, because these institutions venerate the love of learning and produce graduates who are culturally literate, civically knowledgeable and have pondered the biggest issues of our time and all time, involving aesthetics, divinity, evil, free will, identity, justice, morality, human nature and the meaning of life.

If we want our institutions to be better loved than government, technology companies, foundations or churches, then we need to be clearer about our true contributions to society—beyond the number of people we employ, the number of businesses we patronize or the amount of research dollars we bring in.

That would require more visible connections with high schools. More community outreach. Greater efforts to invite the community to campus. And, above all, providing an education that not only prepares graduates to enter into rewarding careers, but to lead meaningful and productive adult lives.[19,20]

IV. CONCLUSIONS


The educational model we have embraced, which consists of a smorgasbord of disconnected courses coupled with very limited advising and mentoring and graduation requirements that can be met in multiple ways without much attention



to learning and skills outcomes, works well for some students, but certainly not for all. It maximizes options, flexibility and serendipity but makes little effort to help students or their families understand the purposes of a college education that goes beyond career preparation.[21,22,23]

Yes, colleges must stop trying to appease their political opponents. But doing that effectively will require our institutions to demonstrating that our deeds match our words: that we truly are doing everything in our power to bring students to success and to genuinely serve our communities.[24]

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