

## Educational Level and Voting Behavior

IN THE UNITED States, education is one of the most important predictors of turnout and partisanship. Education enhances people's normative commitment toward the act of voting, as well as their political skills and interest, which in turn lead to a higher turnout. The interests and values of people with more education are different from those of people with less education, and these differences are reflected in the way they vote. People with more education have a higher sense of civic duty, and a stronger allegiance to the political system. Voting is a crucial means to fulfilling this duty and affirming their allegiance. Additionally, education provides various political resources needed by voters in order to make informed choices. Moreover, in the United States, where the burden of registration falls on the voters, the process raises additional obstacles, ones that an educated person will find easier to overcome. In the United States, people with a college degree are twice as likely to vote than people with only a grammar school degree or less.

One important difference between the United States and other Western democracies is the lack of a significant socialist party, with strong ties to organized labor, to offer an institutional mechanism to mobilize the vote of the working class, thus compensating for lower levels of education. This can explain why the effect of education on turnout, observed in the United States, is absent in countries such as Britain, France, and Germany, which have this type of socialist party. On the other hand, education impacts turnout significantly in post-Communist countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Russia. In these cases, the lower turnout among less-educated voters can be attributed to the failure of the post-Communist left to organize and mobilize the working class.

Education is not only important for turnout, it is equally important as a determinant of policy preferences and partisan choice. In the past, education was positively related to support for right-wing or conservative parties, and this was true in both the United States and other democracies. At that time, the correlation between education and class or socioeconomic status was higher than it is now, though it is likely that this correlation was largely spurious: the better educated were also richer, and wealth was more important than



*Educational level attained is one of the best predictors of voter turnout and partisanship.*

education in explaining the preference of these people for candidates and parties opposing redistribution of income. Income and education must be treated as separate attributes, with distinct impacts on the vote, rather than aggregated in an overall measure of socioeconomic status or class. If separated, it becomes clear why, in the last few decades, many middle-class voters have shifted their support in favor of the Democratic Party, while a substantial number of upper-class voters have made a move in the opposite direction.

The explanation lies in the increased salience of social issues, how the two major parties positioned themselves vis-à-vis these issues, and the voters' response to these developments. Policies related to abortion, the death penalty, gun control, or affirmative action have created a "New Politics" line of division between the parties, as opposed to the "Old Politics" dimension of purely economic conflicts, with Republicans in the conservative position and Democrats in the liberal position. In recent years, Americans have become slightly more conservative on economic issues, which worked to the Republicans' advantage. However, as Americans became better educated, they tended to be more liberal on social issues. The ambiguous relationship between education and the vote was illustrated in the last presidential election, when George W. Bush received 6 percent more votes than John Kerry among high school graduates, but Kerry had an 11 percent advantage over Bush among people with a graduate degree.

In other Western democracies such as Germany or France, parties endorsing New Left policies draw disproportionate support from highly-educated voters. Across advanced industrial democracies, the left is more liberal than the right on both economic and social issues. This is in contrast to the situation found in post-Communist countries such as Romania and Russia, where moderate right-wing parties tend to be more liberal on social issues than left-wing parties. Consequently, the moderate right receives a much higher level of support from well-educated people compared with the left.

**SEE ALSO:** Conservatism; Liberalism; Voter Knowledge/Ignorance; Voter Registration.

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## Efficacy, Political

**POLITICAL EFFICACY** IS the subjective level of competence of an actor to engage in political life. To be politically efficacious is to be sufficiently knowledgeable and self-confident to exert a meaningful impact upon the political system, the regime, or the government. It is also to anticipate that such political institutions are fair and broadly responsive to the input of political demands. While the concept has been assessed at the individual level, it is also possible to refer to the political efficacy of a collectivity. Politically efficacious citizens believe that they can exert an impact, that they have the personal capacity to do so, and that the targeted authorities will pay attention.

The concept emerges from the empirical political science of the 1950s, and became best known through the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their comparative study of political cultures, *The Civic Culture* (1965). As part of a cross-national survey of individual political cognitions, affects, and evaluations, Almond

and Verba referred to political efficacy as "subjective political competence." They regarded satisfactory levels of political efficacy as indicators of the more advanced political cultures, known as civic cultures, in which substantial numbers of people were fully participant in the democratic process, rather than isolated or merely obedient to its authoritative outputs.

Critics of the original concept have since divided it into two more meaningful scales: internal efficacy and external efficacy. Internal efficacy relates to the extent to which an individual feels politically skilled and empowered. External efficacy is an assessment of the fairness of political procedures and outcomes, and needs to be distinguished from political trust, which assesses the extent to which leaders respond to political demands. External political efficacy and political trust are conceptually close and are highly correlated in most studies.

Contemporary scales of external political efficacy are based on questions that tap into the extent to which people believe they have a say in what the government does, the extent to which they believe public officials care what they think, and the extent to which elected officials and governments are responsive to their input. Contemporary scales of internal political efficacy seek to uncover the extent to which individuals believe they understand politics, their feelings of qualification to be involved in political life, their assessment of their potential for public service, and their self-assessed level of political information. Internal efficacy varies among individuals, and is positively related to political knowledge, political interest, and political participation as individual-level variables, and to socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity as social structural variables. While internal efficacy has remained constant, external efficacy has been declining.

**SEE ALSO:** Political Cynicism; Political Culture; Trust in Government.

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