

# **A Brief Analysis of the Relationship between Educational Level and Political Views**

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SOCI 4308—Quantitative Research Methods

Mini Research Paper

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## Introduction

The following paper seeks to shed some light on the relationship between education and political views. In America, one's political views are often some of the strongest convictions held by an individual and are rooted in deeply held ideas of patriotism and even morality. The second variable, education, is one of the most important institutions in the socialization process and is essential in determining the direction of a nation with each following generation. In particular, the survival of the American democratic system relies primarily on the roles of education, family, and mass media. As a result, the bipartisan nature of its political system also hinges on these very institutions. Therefore, given the unequal levels of access to education in America, it is worth exploring exactly how educational level can serve as a predictor of one's political views.

## Literature Review

Within the bulk of research, it is apparent that there is a lack of attention to specifically how the level of education one receives relates to political party identification. Instead, the majority of the studies that were reviewed appear to focus on associations such as the way one's income inequality, socialization, and education play into the likelihood to participate in political elections or to be affiliated with certain political parties. While this does not speak definitively for the role of education in the specific voting habits of individuals, it does provide some insight into a number of alternative identifiers of political behavior.

Regardless of the different methods and variables used in each case, the consensus on what alters voting behavior remains rather consistent. As a whole, the body of research suggests that social inequalities play the largest role in predicting voting behavior. This notion is corroborated by Humphries, Muller and Schiller's research in 2013, using a longitudinal method to study data collected from Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement Study (AHAA)

administered between the years 1994 and 2002. What they determined from this information is that voter registration appears to be greater for individuals whose parents received higher levels of education. In addition, Humphries and her colleagues found that overall difficulty of the courses taken in high school can also serve as a predictor of future political participation (2013). While not an indication of how education affects political party affiliation specifically, this study reveals that educational prowess does have a positive effect on the democratic political process in general. However, further review reveals a way in which education may play a role in reinforcing specific political attitudes that are indicative of individual voting habits. More specifically, it was determined that “education may amplify the political expression of psychological dispositions—namely a tendency for those high in both authoritarian dispositions and education to zero in on support for right wing parties”, although it was not as heavily related to partisanship in those without college degrees (Federico and Tagar 2013:585, 591). In this case, the researchers conceptualize the term “authoritarian” as a mixture of “submission to ingroup authorities, aggression toward outgroups and deviants, and conventionalism”, and measures it as an index based on four forced-choice questions (2013:583, 587). This survey containing the four questions was administered through face-to-face interviews of respondents to the American National Election Studies (ANES) from the years 2004-2008, before and after each presidential election. In essence, the results of this study indicated a substantial relationship between educational level and political partisanship, but only for those raised on more conservative beliefs and subsequently received a college education. What this tells us is that the level of education one receives is only a significant indicator of political partisanship for those that are more conservative. Overall, this research does indicate some sort of direct relationship between education and politics.

When taking a look at additional research, we can see that income inequality also plays a major role in voting behavior. For example, according to the Current Population Survey (CPS), those who fall into the lower-income group are more likely to vote for the Democratic Party while in contrast, higher income Americans are more likely to vote for the Republican Party (Andrew, Kenworthy and Su 2010:1203, 1213). As well as looking at income inequality and partisan voting, this study also included education and religion in its analysis, which interestingly does not form a clear pattern of voting based in class and income inequality alone (Andrew et al. 2010:1214). Further research on the issue of inequality with respect to politics shows another very interesting pattern. In this case, the variables looked at include inequality and the polarization of electorates (the extent of the left-right political division). What is interesting about the findings of this study is that, what we normally would expect from a highly socioeconomically polarized society—that is, a society made up only of those that have access to desired resources (such as education), and those who do not—we do not see a high associated political polarization, but a lower level than we would see in a more equal society (Iverson and Soskice 2015:1807). This was said to be the case because those who are politically uninformed tend to position themselves in the middle and therefore, more political knowledge—due to lower levels of inequality—leads to more polarization. So, in essence, we can see that while income differentials can be indicative of political party affiliation, a relative lack of inequality and somewhat more educated society in America overall is what keeps the bipartisan system alive.

What the body of research as a whole tells us is that, education has an effect on the political process as well as assisting in the formulation of one's political ideals and attitudes toward the political process. Though we cannot clearly deduce from the research any clear

statement of how level of education can serve as a predictor of either liberal or conservative ideals, it would seem to be an indicator of this relationship that is the focal point of this study.

Given this information as reference, this study will explore the relationship between the highest level of education one has received and political views. The following details the hypothesis that will be tested:

H<sub>0</sub>: The percentage of respondents who identify as liberal, moderate, or conservative does not vary by their level of education.

H<sub>1</sub>: The percentage of respondents who identify as liberal, moderate, or conservative varies by their level of education.

## Methods

The data used in this study was obtained from the General Social Survey (GSS), which is conducted in 2010 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. This survey targets adults living in households in the United States and uses an area probability design that selects respondents from rural, urban and suburban populations at random to take part in the survey, which is strictly voluntary. Information is then obtained through face-to-face interviews by NORC and is maintained every year going back to 1972. The two main goals of this survey is both to collect basic research on the structure and development of American society, as well as distributing accurate information pertinent to the work of social scientists and the purposes of students and policy makers.

The two variables chosen from the GSS 2010 data for the purposes of this study operate on an either nominal or ordinal level of measurement. The independent variable indicates the educational level of the respondent at the nominal level of measurement. The answer choices for this variable ranged from those who received a little bit of high school to those who obtained a

graduate degree. For this question, all of the participants gave a valid response--meaning that none of the respondents opted out of giving an answer to the question. Further information regarding the distribution of responses are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1—Number and Percentage of Responses for Independent Variable

|                                | Number of Responses | Percent of Responses |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Highest Degree Received</b> |                     |                      |
| Little High School             | 305                 | 14.9%                |
| High School Degree             | 1001                | 49.0%                |
| Junior College Degree          | 145                 | 7.1%                 |
| Bachelor Degree                | 375                 | 18.3%                |
| Graduate Degree                | 218                 | 10.7%                |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>2044</b>         | <b>100%</b>          |

For the dependent variable used in this study, the surveyors asked each respondent the level at which they considered themselves either Liberal or Conservative in their political views. This was originally measured at the ordinal level, in which the answer choices included: “Extremely Liberal”, “Liberal”, “Slightly Liberal”, “Moderate”, “Slightly Conservative”, “Conservative”, and “Extremely Conservative”. For the purposes of this study, this variable was modified to consolidate the answer choices into just “Liberal”, “Moderate”, or “Conservative”, while being careful not to eliminate any valid responses. This was done so as to refrain from muddying up the findings of the study by making unnecessary distinctions between “slight” and “extremely strong” liberals or conservatives. These distinctions may be useful when addressing other sociological questions, but for the purpose of this study it is extraneous information. A univariate analysis was then conducted for the modified variable and it was found to have an adequate response rate for the purpose of this study, at just over 96%. Table 2 details the distribution of responses therein.

Table 2—Number and Percentage of Responses for Dependent Variable

|  | Number of Responses | Percent of Responses |
|--|---------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Is Respondent Liberal or Conservative</b> |                     |                      |
| Liberal                                      | 567                 | 28.7%                |
| Moderate                                     | 746                 | 37.8%                |
| Conservative                                 | 660                 | 33.5%                |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>1973</b>         | <b>100%</b>          |

Given the level of measurement for both variables, it was determined that the most useful information regarding the relationship between the two would present itself through a Chi-square analysis. A Chi-square test produces a cross-tabulation table that compares percentages across categories, with the dependent variable along the rows and the independent variable along the columns. This table tells us the percentage of those belonging to one group or category that also belong to another group or category, from which we can determine some sort of relationship. This test will be conducted using the data analysis program SPSS, which automatically sets the level of significance at 0.05 and is deemed suitable for the purposes of the analysis.

**Findings**

Referring back to the tables presented in the methods section, in Table 1 representing the distribution of the level of education, we can see that the a strong majority of the respondents only received a high school degree which accounted for 49% of the distribution. Coming in second behind it was the “Bachelor Degree” category, of which 18.3% of respondents fell into.

With reference to the univariate analysis of the respondents political views shown in Table 2, the percent distribution of the variables seems relatively equal when compared to level of education, ranging from 28.7% identifying as “Liberal” to 37.8% identifying as “Moderate” with conservatives falling in between at 33.5% of respondents. This information shows that each



category in this variable will be equally represented in the results of the chi-square analysis shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3—Chi-Square: Observed Frequencies and Percentage of Political Views by Level of Education

|                 |              | Highest Level of Education |                           |                           |                           |                           | Total                      |
|-----------------|--------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
|                 |              | Little High School         | High School               | Junior College            | Bachelor                  | Graduate                  |                            |
| Political Views | Liberal      | 84<br>31.1%                | 240<br>24.6%              | 28<br>20.0%               | 129<br>34.7%              | 86<br>39.8%               | <b>567</b><br><b>28.7%</b> |
|                 | Moderate     | 103<br>38.1%               | 424<br>43.5%              | 57<br>40.7%               | 106<br>28.5%              | 56<br>25.9%               | <b>746</b><br><b>37.8%</b> |
|                 | Conservative | 83<br>30.7%                | 311<br>31.9%              | 55<br>39.3%               | 137<br>36.8%              | 74<br>34.3%               | <b>660</b><br><b>33.5%</b> |
|                 | Total        | <b>270</b><br><b>100%</b>  | <b>975</b><br><b>100%</b> | <b>140</b><br><b>100%</b> | <b>372</b><br><b>100%</b> | <b>216</b><br><b>100%</b> | <b>1973</b><br><b>100%</b> |

Pearson Chi-Square = 53.072

df = 8

$p \leq 0.05$

$p = 0.00$

The chi-square analysis test results in the table above indicates that the relationship herein has a significance of 0.00 with a level of significance for this test set at 0.05 ( $0.00 < 0.05$ ). Therefore the relationship between the two variables is significant, so we must reject the null and accept the research hypothesis: The percentage of respondents who identify as liberal, moderate, or conservative varies by their level of education. Because the p-value is significant at the 0.05

level, there is a 95% chance that this relationship is not due to chance. Based on the information in the table, it appears that as one goes through more schooling they become more likely to lean either to the right or to the left. For instance, a small majority lead of those that have had a little bit of a high school education, have a high school degree, or went to junior college identify as “Moderate” with percentages of 38.1%, 43.5%, and 40.7% respectively. Although, when we add the percentages of those who have views on either the left or the right for the sake of identifying educations effect on political partisanship, we see that those with schooling beyond junior college have a significantly higher likelihood of partisanship than those without 4-year college degrees or higher. For instance, the percent of those that identify as Liberal or Conservative, the percentage jumps from 59.3% for those with a degree from Junior College to 71.5% for those with a Bachelor’s degree and 74.1% for those with a Graduate degree. In addition to this, there is also a trend in the differences of percentages for those that are Liberal and Conservative that gets stronger as we move from the “Little High School” column to the “Junior College” column, then suddenly dropping off when we move to “Bachelor” and then reverses in favor of a more Liberal viewpoint under “Graduate”. What can be gathered by these results is that political partisanship, or polarization, increases significantly with the level of education received. Not only this, but the level of Conservatism gets stronger with the amount of education one receives short of a degree from a 4-year University, and then significantly wanes to the point of eventually favoring Liberalism beyond that level of education.

In comparison of the results of this analysis to the findings of previous research using similar variables, similarities between the two begin to emerge. Previously, it was suggested that there appears to be a positive relationship between those people whose parents received higher levels of education and voter registration. Furthermore, another previous study reviewed found

that those that are uninformed tend to position themselves in the middle. Not only this, but societies with higher levels of education experience higher levels of political polarization as well; all of which is corroborated almost exactly by the findings in this study.

What is ultimately significant about the relationship analyzed in this study is the role an educational system plays in the political process. Invariably, the educational standard is distributed differently amongst a population due to inequality in various other social institutions. While at the same time, politics helps to either determine solutions or creates more problems with regard to the level of inequality in these social institutions. What the analysis of this study shows us is that a lack of equality in education has the potential to influence the perpetuation of this vicious cycle of social inequality which should be pertinent to sociological research.

#### Conclusion

This study included a review of the current research, as well as an analysis of GSS 2010 survey data in order to identify the significance of the relationship between education and political views in America. Upon inspection of the resulting data, it was determined that there is a positive correlation between political partisanship and one's level of education. In addition, those who identified as Liberal tended to have a higher level of education than Conservatives, and especially so when compared to "Moderate" respondents, of which the lower educational categories were mostly made up. These findings postulate that the research hypothesis does indeed hold water, and may further suggest that a lack of education can alienate those of lower socioeconomic status from the political process. The reason for this being that other factors at play, such as income level or the accessibility of a quality education, may push certain individuals out of the informative loop, through which they may receive proper representation in the American political system. Speculations aside, this is a prime example of an area for which

further research can be conducted, and for which the more elusive factors at play in one's quantity or quality of education can be examined. In addition, an extended analysis conducted on the evolution of education, politics, and those of a low socioeconomic level over time could be helpful in understanding what may be in store for the future of American politics.

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Annexure A: Code Book

POLVIEWS

Do you think of yourself as Liberal or Conservative?

- 0 IAP
- 1 Extremely Liberal
- 2 Liberal
- 3 Slightly Liberal
- 4 Moderate
- 5 Slightly Conservative
- 6 Conservative
- 7 Extremely Conservative
- 8 DK
- 9 NA

POLVIEWS2 (Recode of POLVIEWS)

- 1 Liberal
- 2 Moderate
- 3 Conservative

DEGREE

What is the highest educational degree you have received?

- 0 Little High School
- 1 High School
- 2 Junior College
- 3 Bachelor

4 Graduate

7 IAP

8 DK

9 NA

Annexure B: SPSS Output

Political Views Frequency Tables

**Statistics**

|   |         | THINK OF SELF<br>AS LIBERAL OR<br>CONSERVATIVE |      | polviews2 |
|---|---------|--|------|-----------|
| N | Valid   | 1973   | 1973 |           |
|   | Missing | 71   | 71   |           |

**THINK OF SELF AS LIBERAL OR CONSERVATIVE**

|         |                      | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative<br>Percent |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Valid   | EXTREMELY LIBERAL    | 76        | 3.7     | 3.9           | 3.9                   |
|         | LIBERAL              | 259       | 12.7    | 13.1          | 17.0                  |
|         | SLIGHTLY LIBERAL     | 232       | 11.4    | 11.8          | 28.7                  |
|         | MODERATE             | 746       | 36.5    | 37.8          | 66.5                  |
|         | SLGHTLY CONSERVATIVE | 265       | 13.0    | 13.4          | 80.0                  |
|         | CONSERVATIVE         | 315       | 15.4    | 16.0          | 95.9                  |
|         | EXTRMLY CONSERVATIVE | 80        | 3.9     | 4.1           | 100.0                 |
|         | Total                | 1973      | 96.5    | 100.0         |                       |
| Missing | DK                   | 61        | 3.0     |               |                       |
|         | NA                   | 10        | .5      |               |                       |
|         | Total                | 71        | 3.5     |               |                       |
| Total   |                      | 2044      | 100.0   |               |                       |

**polviews2**



|         |              | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid   | Liberal      | 567       | 27.7    | 28.7          | 28.7               |
|         | Moderate     | 746       | 36.5    | 37.8          | 66.5               |
|         | Conservative | 660       | 32.3    | 33.5          | 100.0              |
|         | Total        | 1973      | 96.5    | 100.0         |                    |
| Missing | System       | 71        | 3.5     |               |                    |
| Total   |              | 2044      | 100.0   |               |                    |

## Educational Level Frequency Tables

### Statistics

#### RS HIGHEST DEGREE

|         |         |      |
|---------|---------|------|
| N       | Valid   | 2044 |
|         | Missing | 0    |
| Mode    |         | 1    |
| Range   |         | 4    |
| Minimum |         | 0    |
| Maximum |         | 4    |

#### RS HIGHEST DEGREE

|       |                | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | LT HIGH SCHOOL | 305       | 14.9    | 14.9          | 14.9               |
|       | HIGH SCHOOL    | 1001      | 49.0    | 49.0          | 63.9               |
|       | JUNIOR COLLEGE | 145       | 7.1     | 7.1           | 71.0               |
|       | BACHELOR       | 375       | 18.3    | 18.3          | 89.3               |
|       | GRADUATE       | 218       | 10.7    | 10.7          | 100.0              |
|       | Total          | 2044      | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |



### Chi-Square Tests

|                                 | Value               | df | Asymptotic<br>Significance (2-<br>sided) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|----|--|
| Pearson Chi-Square              | 53.072 <sup>a</sup> | 8  | .000                                     |
| Likelihood Ratio                | 53.847              | 8  | .000                                     |
| Linear-by-Linear<br>Association | 1.409               | 1  | .235                                     |
| N of Valid Cases                | 1973                |    |  |

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 40.23.