Why does democracy need education?

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Abstract Across countries, education and democracy are highly correlated. We motivate empirically and then model a causal mechanism explaining this correlation. In our model, schooling teaches people to interact with others and raises the benefits of civic participation, including voting and organizing. In the battle between democracy and dictatorship, democracy has a wide potential base of support but offers weak incentives to its defenders. Dictatorship provides stronger incentives to a narrower base. As education raises the benefits of civic engagement, it raises participation in support of a broad-based regime (democracy) relative to that in support of a narrow-based regime (dictatorship). This increases the likelihood of successful democratic revolutions against dictatorships, and reduces that of successful anti-democratic coups.

Keywords Democracy · Education · Political participation

1 Introduction

The hypothesis that higher education leads to more democratic politics (Lipset, 1959, 1960) has received a good deal of empirical support (Barro, 1999; Glaeser, LaPorta, Lopez-de-Silanes, and Shleifer, 2004; Papaioannou and Siourounis, 2005). However, the theoretical reasons for this relationship remain unexplored. Indeed, according to (Barro, 1999, p. S182), “given the strength of the Aristotle/Lipset hypothesis as an empirical regularity, it is surprising that convincing theoretical models of this relationship do not exist.” In this paper, we first motivate and then propose one model of a causal impact of education on democracy.

Our starting point is the connection between education and political participation. This connection has been emphasized by Almond and Verba (1989, 1st ed. 1963), who see...
education as a crucial determinant of “civic culture” and participation in democratic politics. “The uneducated man or the man with limited education is a different political actor from the man who has achieved a higher level of education (p. 315).” Almond and Verba’s work has influenced both political science (e.g., Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995) and sociology (e.g., Kamens, 1988), and our work can be seen as an elaboration of their ideas using theoretical and empirical tools of economics.

A dramatic place to see the effect of education on political participation is student activism. Students rioted against authority at Oxford, Bologna, and Paris even in the Middle Ages. Martin Luther found the most immediate intense support from the students in Wittenberg and other German universities. Students played key roles in liberal movements and revolutions in Europe in the middle of the 19th century. “If the revolution had a core, it was the young educated elite” (Rander-Pehrson, 1999, p. 145). Student demonstrations played a role in the overthrow of Peron in Argentina in 1955, the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the downfall of Perez Jimenez in Venezuela in 1958, the resignation of the Kishi government in Japan in 1960, the resistance to Diem in Vietnam in 1963, the anti-Sukarno movement in Indonesia and the toppling of the Rhee government in Korea in 1966, the Prague Spring in 1968, and the downfall of Ayub Khan in Pakistan in 1969. The Tianenmen student uprising of 1989 failed to depose the Communist Party, perhaps because the students got little support in generally uneducated China and were crushed by the troops. Most recently, peaceful demonstrations in which students played a key part helped save democracy in Ukraine against the aggrandizement by the ex-President who stole the election.

It would be incorrect to conclude from these examples that students have a preference for democratic government—perhaps because they value freedom, information, or elections—rather than for political participation. The hep-hep anti-semitic riots in Bavaria in 1819 started when during an academic ceremony an aged professor who had recently come out in favor of civic rights for Jews had to run for his life as angry students assaulted him. Mussolini enjoyed substantial support from students in the young fascist movement. Hitler likewise relied on the Nazi students, who eventually seized control of the universities. In Latin America, students offered strong support to the Che Guevara led communist guerilla movement, no friends of democracy. The evidence that students organize to participate in collective action—democratic or anti-democratic—is much more compelling than the evidence of their preference for democracy. Our goal, then, is to explore more deeply the consequences of what we take to be the primitive connection between education and participation.

In Sect. 2 we briefly review the evidence on education and democracy. Although econometric controversies about this evidence still linger, the weight of recent research suggests that the Lipset hypothesis is valid, and that theories to explain it are indeed called for.

In Sect. 3, we motivate our basic assumption that education leads to higher participation in a whole range of social activities, including politics. This might be so for several reasons. In one view, schooling incorporates indoctrination about the virtues of political participation. A second view sees human capital as actually social capital: schools largely teach students to interact with one another. By improving interpersonal skills, education facilitates civic involvement. Using micro-evidence from both the US and other countries, we document the robust correlation between many forms of civic activity, including political participation, and education. This evidence is most naturally consistent with the second view.

Motivated by this evidence, we present a model of regime stability in Sect. 4. Unlike the literature on regime change that typically focuses on the payoffs to citizens under alternative political regimes (e.g., Bourguignon and Verdier, 2000), our model describes incentives to participate in the political activity itself. These include top-down incentives, such as punishments meted out by political leaders to their presumed supporters who are shirking. But