

Finding Historical Place:
How Education Develops Students into Citizens

Adam A. Hill

FINDING HISTORICAL PLACE:

How Education Develops Students into Citizens

ABSTRACT

One of the key findings in social science regarding politics is the correlation between level of education and political participation. Research has repeatedly shown that increased educational level usually results in increased political participation. Although political scientists and other researchers have repeatedly documented that correlation over the last sixty years, little empirical research has been conducted to determine *what about education* produces politically engaged citizens.

In my research, I found that increased formal education offers something more than increased political participation: it fosters *deeper* political participation by providing students with a greater awareness of *historical place*—one's agency and role in society and history. The idea of historical place has clear implications for education, other social institutions, and public policy.

“If we are trying to still make America what it is supposed to be, [then we] are supposed to keep the light blowing, keep the fire blowing. . . . I know I’m supposed to participate and make it a better place.”

—Erica¹, a Nigerian-born U.S. citizen who participated in this study

In the realm of political science, few findings have been as significant as the correlation between education and political participation. Research repeatedly shows that a higher level of education increases the likelihood that a person participates in electoral politics.

But there have been few, if any, empirical studies examining the *meaning* of that relationship. Many social theorists have offered possible explanations, but none have conducted research to confirm or disprove their theories. This leaves a lingering question open: what *about* education encourages citizens to engage more frequently and deeply in electoral politics?

It is important to answer this question because it has deep implications for schools, colleges, and other social institutions. Past research has suggested that college graduates are more likely to participate in electoral politics than those who have a high school education or less. If our society considers electoral participation an important part of civic life, then it is important that all citizens are empowered to participate and understand the context of participation. A

¹ All names have been changed to protect participants’ privacy.

better comprehension of the meaning of the education-participation correlation gives us the ability to ensure that schools and colleges are addressing the civic needs of their students. It also gives us clues about how to use other social institutions to foster participation in citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, many sociologists, political scientists, and other researchers have studied the relationship between education and politics. I have focused on research related to a specific relationship: the correlation between level of formal education and level of participation in electoral politics.

The most influential research on education and politics comes from Almond and Verba, in their seminal study *The Civic Culture*. The two political scientists discovered causal relationships between a citizen's level of formal education and (1) recognition of the impact of national government (Almond and Verba 1963:87), (2) pride in one's national government (Almond and Verba 1963:105), (3) "belief in the beneficial effect of local government activities" (Almond and Verba 1963:245), and, thus, (4) "satisfaction with their voting participation" (Almond and Verba 1963:243).

In his book on social capital, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam also makes note of the education-participation correlation. For example, he writes that a

college education more than doubles the likelihood that a person attends public (e.g., city council or legislative) meetings (Putnam 2000).

Historian Arthur Whitaker also observed, in his study on patterns of democracy and dictatorship in Latin America, that the “literacy average of the six countries in this [democratic] group has been above the general Latin American average” (Whitaker 1950:114). A similar dichotomy was drawn around the same time by Seymour Lipset, who reproduced Whitaker’s study, expanded it to include European democracies and dictatorships, and found the same pattern in both regions of the world (Lipset 1959). These studies provided clear evidence that the rate of literacy, one crucial objective of formal education, influences the amount of electoral participation that takes place in a country.

Additionally, the leftist commentator David Croteau and sociologist David Kamens respectively conducted studies on education and participation, concluding that “schooling is a site of socialization regarding political and social issues” (Croteau 1995:149) and the “expansion of [public] education increases the likelihood that . . . democratic political systems . . . will persist over time” (Kamens 1988:116).

Almond and Verba attribute the correlation between education and electoral participation partly to their theory that education “opens the minds of individuals to the secondary structures of their society” (Almond and Verba

1963:105). Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter seem to share this view when they argue that “effective citizenship requires more than just factual knowledge [insofar as] citizens must also *be able to reason*” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996:5, emphasis added). Delli Carpini and Keeter also seem to support Croteau when they add that formal education is a prime facilitator of participation also because “it increases the motivation by socializing students to the political world and stimulating their interest in it” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996:190), a view additionally shared by sociologist William Galston. Galston suggests, “civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values” and “helps citizens understand their interests as individuals and as members of groups” (Galston 2004:264). Putnam proposes the idea that education is a major source of social capital, and the membership in a larger community of social capital empowers and informs citizens and inspires them to participate in electoral politics (Putnam 2000).

While these and other theorists have suggested reasons for the correlation between education and participation, few (if any) empirical studies have been conducted on the meaning of the relationship. The purpose of my study is to fill this gap in understanding. To do that, I will interview participants from various educational and political backgrounds, and identify some characteristics of

formal education that contribute to citizens' ability and desire to participate deeply and broadly in electoral politics.

RESEARCH METHOD

To complete my study, I interviewed nine participants from various educational and political backgrounds (the questions I used in these interviews can be found in the appendix). After conducting these interviews, I transcribed them and coded them according to categories that seemed useful for my research. I then compiled categorized discussions into files that helped me find commonalities, contradictions, and guiding principles.

My university's institutional review board approved my study before I conducted any interviews or sought prospective participants. I found participants through social networking: friends, family members, and friends of family members. Six of my participants were women and three were men; educational levels included some high school (1 participant), high school graduate (1), some college (5), college graduate (1), and some graduate school (1).

FINDINGS

As my literature review shows, past research provides clear evidence of the correlation between level of education and level of political participation—one of the key findings in political science. When I began my own research, I expected my participants to fall into the established pattern: more education

leads to more electoral participation. But in the interviews I conducted, educational level did not seem to affect a participant's frequency of participation in electoral politics.

Forms of Political Participation

What I found is that the *forms* of participation differ by education level. My participants who attended some high school or graduated high school were just as likely to vote as those in graduate school. (I do not attribute this to an error in previous research, but to a limited sample in my interviews. Among my participants, the grouping that was least likely to vote included those who attended some college but have not graduated.)

The least educated participants in my interviews were most likely to engage in what I call *individualistic politics*—studying candidates privately (often through TV and Internet news sources), voting, and volunteering for solitary campaign activities for individual candidates (such as stuffing envelopes and, among those who can afford it, donating money). This group of people—consisting of participants who did not graduate high school, who graduated high school but did not attend college, or who have dropped out of college—are well represented by the words of Isaac, who told me that “a primary—and caucuses, too, for that matter—are about political parties, and I don’t necessarily feel that they’re what I would consider good government.”

On the other side of the coin, the most educated group of participants—encompassing people who are currently in college or graduate school, or who have completed a college degree—participate in what I call *holistic politics*: electoral activities that take place in group settings such as rallies, political parties, caucuses, and door knocking for candidates and parties. One participant, Gary, offered an explanation that seems to represent this highly educated, largely holistic group of participants: He prefers holistic politics because he is “there with a coalition, and numbers matter.”

Some other elements influenced the levels and forms of electoral participation adopted by the people I interviewed. A recurring theme in my participants’ responses was family: In many cases, family members and close friends who were active in politics drew participants into electoral participation. As Claudia, a participant, said, “Sometimes, one person can really motivate you to get involved.”

But how do we explain the case of Leonard, who votes “religiously” and is a full-time staff member for a U.S. Senate candidate, and whose parents do not even vote? Another example is Sara, who only votes in Presidential and Senatorial general elections, but who was originally motivated to vote because “my dad looked at me and said, ‘you will vote.’”

Family, of course, is a double-edged sword, as many participants also cited time constraints due to family as inhibiting their ability to participate in politics. (It may be worth noting that this is particularly the case for people with little education and people who had children early in life. Among people with more education, or those who had children in their 30s, family roles are seen as promoting electoral participation: it is an opportunity to act as a role model for their children, or even to bring their children along to political events when appropriate.)

It seems, then, that *forms* of participation depend largely on one's level of education. But, even accounting for the differing forms of electoral participation (and the similar voting regularity among the least and most educated participants), levels of caucus attendance and group political work appeared to increase greatly with further education. This begs the question: What *about* formal education leads people to participate in electoral politics more regularly and more deeply?

Learning to Find a Place

One key element of education's influence on political participation was unwittingly revealed by one of my participants. Monica, currently a second-year graduate student at a Twin Cities university, told me that one of the great "motivators" — in addition to family involvement early in her life — that leads her

to vote, attend caucus, and volunteer time with political parties, is a piece of history that she learned in high school. In one of Monica's high school history classes, she learned about the women's suffrage movement and the sacrifices that generations of women made to acquire the right to vote. "There is a part of me," Monica says, "that feels . . . responsible to take that seriously." What about women who do not vote? "I think they're idiots." Monica quickly changed her wording, adding, "I shouldn't say *idiots*. That's kind of mean." But, without realizing it, she used the word in its original Greek context: a person who does not understand his or her place in history and contemporary society (which I will call *historical place*), who is unaware of government and politics, and who does not participate in civil society.²

Without realizing it at the time, Monica raised an important issue. In my interviews, participants with less formal education did not make references to electoral rights as the result of historic movements and revolutions that in many countries replaced, at least superficially, rule by hereditary monarchs with rule by the people. Every participant referred to voting as a duty, a right, or a privilege, but only those with higher levels of education perceived a tangible connection between themselves as citizens and a historical and conceptual role for electoral participation.

² For further information about the etymology and significance of the word *idiot*, see Nordenhaug (2000).

What does this have to do with education? One person I interviewed, Gary, provides an example of the kind of higher education that provides the kind of historical place that may be fundamental to the increased and deeper participation among those with greater levels of education. Gary did not vote, volunteer for candidates or campaigns, or even pay attention to politics during the first 29 years of his life. When he returned to school, at a Twin Cities community college, he “got the politics of absolutely everything you can think about: global politics, global concerns, how things work on a global stage; local, right down to city council stuff. You know, I got everything I ever wanted to know and then some.” Since then, he has voted in every election, attended every caucus, spent hundreds of hours volunteering for political candidates, and currently works for a political organization.

What Gary experienced at that community college—and what Monica’s high school history class provided—represents the element of formal education that brings citizens into broader and deeper electoral participation. The curricula in their schools helped them find their role in the world’s history, as well as the society of their world, nation, state, and community.

The Conceptual Foundation of Historic Place in Education

Two people I interviewed, Julia and Isaac, illustrate the difference between people who experienced a curriculum that helps students understand

their historical place and people who did not. Julia, who has a bachelor's degree from a Twin Cities university, thinks that Minnesota's caucus system is a constructive and desirable political process: "I don't think a lot of people realize that at those types of things—[which in] some places have five [or] ten people [who] show up—from that basic level is where we . . . come up with who is going to lead, or potentially lead, our country." Isaac, who did not graduate high school but took credits at a number of proprietary secondary schools, has a different perspective: "I tend to think of politics in terms of eighteen people getting together to decide something. . . . I think of it more as a committee, and I don't think that committees get much done."

Both Julia and Isaac have seen the bureaucratic and holistic nature of caucuses, conventions, and parties. The conceptual difference is that Julia has developed a foundation for understanding the historically significant role that she has (and anyone else can also have) in those assemblies and campaigns, as well as the social power that comes from that role. Isaac's educational background did not provide the same kind of bedrock for contextualizing the purpose of holistic electoral participation. As Isaac said when speaking of caucuses, "Somehow they missed, or I missed, some relevance—their relevance to me."

Of the least educated participants—the third that did not complete high school, completed only high school, or attended college but are no longer enrolled—only one attends caucuses regularly. The two who do not attend caucuses regularly were not able to “recall so much in formal education” (Isaac) except “that it was our civic duty to vote” (Rachel). The one who does attend caucuses regularly recalled his school sending five classes—his included—to a city council meeting to support a walkway near the school.

Depth of Education and Depth of Participation

It appears, then, that the key educational element in determining how deeply and broadly a person will participate in electoral politics lies not in the *amount* of formal education that a person has completed, but rather in the presence or lack of a fundamental framework for making sense of one’s historic place. But grappling with historic place is generally left to the realm of liberal arts curricula in colleges and universities.

As noted earlier, every participant—at every level of education—said that his or her education included the assertion that electoral participation is one’s right and duty. As Claudia said, “we were told about the process . . . but I didn’t know a whole lot about the working stuff [like] what it means to have the Electoral College.” Another participant, Erica, noted that teachers “do want to get everybody involved.”

But none of the participants, except Leonard (whose middle school class visited the city council intending to promote a certain proposal years before he took a full-time position with a Senatorial candidate) and Monica (whose high school history class briefly discussed the women's suffrage movement) mentioned a primary or secondary curriculum that explained the meaning of democracy or the historic place that each citizen occupies.

The remaining participants in my research experienced primary and secondary education as sources of the most basic components of knowledge: literacy, mathematics, history, geography, and health. These areas can serve as a preparation for further education, which for many college students is the sort of liberal arts education that provides a conceptual toolkit for understanding historical place.

DISCUSSION

To be sure, my findings are useful but should be viewed as a stepping-stone to further research. My sample was not representative, and it was relatively small. A larger study, including many more participants who better reflect the disparate society of the United States, could replicate my method to determine whether my findings on historical place are applicable to the general population.

The idea of historical place, as outlined in this study, has significant implications for our society. If it is true that people with a deeper understanding

of historical and social context, and their role as agents in the world, are more inspired to contribute to holistic politics—a type of politics that originates in, reflects the interests of, and operates as a community—then we must entertain the idea that secondary schools should prepare students with the information they need to comprehend those contexts and roles. Students who do not go on to college or university should not be deprived of the valuable sense of agency and empowerment that comes from understanding historical place.

Of course, there are plenty of social institutions beyond schools. It might be worth considering whether media outlets have a responsibility to provide the kind of meaningfully educational programming that provides viewers with an understanding of historical perspective. Remember Monica, one of my participants, who was profoundly impressed by a high school discussion of the women's suffrage movement. Monica also cited a made-for-TV film on women's suffrage activists, *Iron-Jawed Angels*, as informing her understanding of historical place. Perhaps it is time to consider public policies that obligate media outlets to devote greater amounts of airtime to programming that does not merely entertain or inform, but also enlightens.

Considering that most of my participants who were engaged in holistic political activities also mentioned family and friends as motivators, it might also be suitable to consider the role of the family in reproducing an awareness of

historic place—whether that means studying and maintaining genealogical records to document the progress and development of an individual family, or perhaps supplementing school curricula with lessons of community.

Ultimately, historical place can be conceptualized as an appreciation for one's agency in the world as well as the sequence of historic events that have brought the world to its current state. Using education, and any other social institutions, to instill awareness of historical place empowers each individual to know and work for his own interests and the interests of his local, regional, and global community—an empowerment that can be expressed in many ways, including holistic political participation.

REFERENCES

- Almond, Gabriel A., and Verba, Sidney. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Croteau, David. 1995. *Politics and the Class Divide: Working People and the Middle Class Left*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Galston, William A. 2004. "Civic Education and Political Participation." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, April, pp.263-266.
- Kamens, David H. 1988. "Education and Democracy: A Comparative Institutional Analysis." *Sociology of Education*, 61(2):114-127.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1959. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy." *The American Political Science Review*, 53(1):69-105.
- Nordenhaug, Theodore D. 2000. "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Liberal Education (and Some Other Things)." Savannah, GA: Armstrong Atlantic State University. Retrieved April 15, 2008 (<http://www.thales1.armstrong.edu/pdg/events/idiotsguide.pdf>).
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Teixeira, Ruy A. 1987. *Why Americans Don't Vote: Turnout Decline in the United States 1960-1984*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Whitaker, Arthur P. 1950. "Pathology of Democracy in Latin America: A
Historian's Point of View." *The American Political Science Review*, 44(1)101-
118.

APPENDIX

Interview Guide

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself.
2. Tell me about your educational background.
3. Describe your experiences with voting and attending caucuses, if any.
 - Tell me about the first time you voted (if you have voted).
 - If you haven't voted before, how come?
 - What inspired you to vote in that election?
 - Why do (or don't) you vote these days?
 - Talk about your first caucus (if you have attended caucus).
 - If you haven't attended caucuses before, why?
 - What motivated you to attend caucus the first time?
 - What keeps you coming back to precinct caucuses?
 - Tell me about what comes to your mind when you think about voting or attending caucuses.
4. Describe your experiences volunteering time or donating money to political candidates or parties, if any.
 - How did you first get involved with volunteering to campaigns or parties (if you have)?

- Tell me about the first time you donated money to a candidate or party (if you have).
 - If you haven't volunteered or donated, how come?
5. Tell me about any experiences you've had in which you've met with, or written to, or called an elected official to discuss an issue.
- What inspired you to meet with an elected official the first time?
 - How do you decide which issues to discuss with officials?
 - If you've never discussed an issue with an elected official, how come?
6. Describe your experiences attending public meetings (city council, legislature, Congress, etc.).
- Tell me about the first public meeting you attended.
 - What comes to your mind when you think about public meetings?
 - If you've never attended a public meeting, why is that?
7. Tell me what you remember hearing in school or college about politics.
8. Do you have an interesting memory from your educational or political experiences?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?