

The development of social and gender disparities in political engagement during adolescence and early adulthood: what role does education play?

Policy brief

Large social and gender gaps in political engagement skew democratic decision-making in favour of the privileged and men, which undermines the public legitimacy of democracy. Little is known, however, about how these gaps arise and what role education plays in influencing them. The current brief offers a summary of the findings and policy recommendations of a recently completed project funded by the Nuffield Foundation which addresses these questions. The full findings can be found in the [project report](#). The project used two longitudinal data sources, the British Household Panel Study / Understanding Society (BHPS/US) and the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS), to examine these questions. The project used political interest, voting intentions and support for a political party as indicators of political engagement. Social background was captured with the education level of parents.

Key findings

Between ages 11 and 15 children from different social backgrounds drift apart in political engagement

The social gap in political interest and in voting intentions appears to open up quickly in early adolescence and remains stable thereafter. At age 11 there is no difference between children with well-educated and less well-educated parents in these outcomes but by the time they reach 15 the former show significantly higher levels of engagement than the latter. Between ages 15 and 30 the social gap in political interest and voting intentions is stable.

Schools exacerbate the social gap in political interest

The project found that educational factors, such as school social composition, taking part in school political activities and experiencing an open climate of classroom discussions, can explain about *half* of the growing social gap in political interest. It appeared that children with well-educated parents have higher levels of participation in civic learning opportunities, such as school political activities and classroom discussions of political and social issues, and that participation in these opportunities, in turn, is related to a steeper rise in political interest than not taking part in these opportunities. Schools thus *amplify* social inequality in political engagement by not offering equal access to civic learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

People with A levels show a steeper growth in political engagement between ages 16 and 30 than those with post-16 vocational qualifications

Specifically the project found that those with an upper secondary vocational qualification (such as a Btech or NVQ) as their highest level of education have a significantly lower rate of growth in political interest and in support for a political party between ages 16 and 30 than those with an upper secondary academic qualification (i.e. A levels) as their highest level of education at age 25. This shows that post-16 pathways can have effects on political engagement that last deep into adulthood.

The growing gender gap in political interest between ages 16 and 30 is partly explained by women with lower level and vocational qualifications showing lower growth rates in political interest

Men not only had a higher level of political interest at age 16 but their political interest also grew faster than that of women between ages 16 and 30. Educational qualifications turned out to be an important factor accounting for this growing gender gap: women with lower level and upper secondary vocational qualifications at age 25 had a significantly lower growth rates in political interest than women with upper secondary academic qualifications (i.e. A levels) and degrees. Women with such vocational qualifications actually experienced a decline in political interest between ages 16 and 30.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The finding that schools do not offer equal access to civic learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds suggests that schools need to develop strategies that counter these unintended exclusionary processes. Constraining the voluntary nature of participation in such opportunities by, for example, giving turns to children from disadvantaged backgrounds to speak up in class, or asking such children to take on leadership roles and other responsibilities, might be useful strategies. These strategies imply a much more active role for the teacher in guiding and facilitating participation. The finding that school social composition can also partly explain the growing social gap suggests that the social segregation in England's school system needs to be reduced in order to mitigate social disparities in political engagement.

The finding that post-16 educational pathways are related to diverging trajectories in political engagement, both in general and for women in particular, suggests that more civic learning opportunities in the vocational tracks in upper secondary would be effective in reducing inequalities in political engagement.