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The emergence of a 'diploma democracy'? The political education gap in the Netherlands, 1971–2010

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Abstract In recent work, Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) state that the Netherlands has turned into a 'diploma-democracy'. The core of their argument is that the higher educated have come to dominate political processes in the Netherlands. While the effect of education on political and civic participation is well documented, Bovens and Wille make a longitudinal claim, namely that the political gap between education groups has increased over time. Yet, the longitudinal evidence presented to back up their claim is limited. In this article we track the education gap in various political behaviours and attitudes in the Netherlands from 1971 to 2010. Our analyses show that there is no evidence for a widening educational gap. In the case of political interest, the gap between educational groups has even narrowed significantly.

Keywords: education; political inequality; political participation; populism; Dutch politics

Introduction

Educational attainment consistently appears as a key demographic explanation of crucial facets of political behaviour and attitudes (for example Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba *et al*, 1978; Verba *et al*, 1995). Seemingly regardless of country or period of investigation, the higher educated are more likely to vote and participate in politics, to have higher levels of political interest and sophistication, to be engaged in more civic activities, and to exhibit higher levels of political engagement. From a normative perspective the political disparity between educational groups is troubling as it is likely to translate into unequal political influence. The fact that two distinguished scholars devoted their presidential address to the American Political Science Association to precisely this issue, underlines its importance to the discipline (Verba, 1996; Lijphart, 1997). Lijphart even advocates the introduction of compulsory voting, among other institutional remedies, to eliminate the bias against the less privileged that exists in the functioning of today's democracies.

More recently, Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) have called attention to developments in the Netherlands. Their central thesis is that 'the least educated have virtually disappeared from most layers of the participation pyramid' (Bovens and Wille, 2010, p. 417). They go on to show that the voices of the higher educated 'resonate stronger in the ballot box, are heard more loudly in campaigns for participation and protest, and are absolutely dominant in interest groups, deliberative settings, Parliament, and Cabinet' (ibid, p. 417). In their monograph Bovens and Wille (2011) make stronger claims about the longitudinal trends than in their 2010 article. In this study, we question the claim that educational positions have become increasingly important in politics.

Although ample evidence of the impact of education on political activity exists in the Netherlands (also see Dekker *et al*, 2009), it remains unclear how this education gap has developed over time. We will argue below that there are theoretically good reasons *not* to expect educational positions to become more important over time. We will then examine whether the impact of education on selected political outcomes has increased in the Netherlands using data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies from 1971 to 2010. These outcomes include various indicators of political participation, civic activity, political engagement and vote choice. Much like Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011), and many others before them, we show that education remains an important determinant of political behaviours and attitudes. However, we find no evidence of an increasing education gap with regard to any of the selected political variables. In some cases the political gap between the higher and lower educated remains constant, in others the gap even narrows, but in no instance do we find evidence of an increasing gap. We will investigate the data in two ways. We first test for the existence of linear trends in multivariate models, after which we take a more detailed look at some developments over time. We will conclude that the emergence of a 'diploma-democracy' as put forth by Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) is in need of some refinement.

Why Are the Better Educated More Politically Engaged?

There are few demographic variables that have a larger impact on political behaviours and attitudes than levels of education. Of course the effect of education depends very much on the type of behavioural or attitudinal outcome under scrutiny, but even so, one can identify a cluster of variables related to political and civic participation that seem

particularly sensitive to formal education. This section briefly states why this is the case.

As people pass through institutions of formal education, they acquire numerous skills that go on to impact their political behaviours and attitudes (also see Bovens and Wille, 2011, pp. 42–48). For one, education fosters psychological and cognitive engagement with politics (Verba *et al*, 1995). The higher educated are therefore more likely to be interested in and informed about politics. Next, they have the requisite cognitive ability coupled with ample training in the use of difficult and abstract language, which facilitates their navigation of the political arena, leading to higher levels of internal and external efficacy and lower levels of political cynicism. In addition, education plays an important role in promoting certain values, such as tolerance and meritocracy (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Nie *et al*, 1996; Kunovich and Slomczynski, 2007). These values are also acquired through a host of other channels, such as churches, sports clubs and family members, but given the massive amount of time spent in institutions of learning relative to those other sources, the role of socialization in schools cannot be overstated. Finally, through a combination of these factors, education features as perhaps the single most important predictor of actual political participation, from the act of voting to contacting public officials (Parry *et al*, 1992).

For reasons of data availability detailed below this article focuses on seven forms of political behaviour and attitudes. These include the decision to vote, party membership, civic participation, political interest, external efficacy, political cynicism and vote choice. When it comes to the effect of education on these outcomes, the causal hypotheses very much follow the discussion so far. We expect education to be positively related to political and civic participation and these related attitudes. Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) indeed show that all these expectations regarding education and politics are met in the Netherlands.

An Increasing Educational Gap?

The theoretical framework for the 'diploma democracy' thesis is mainly rooted in the work of Kriesi *et al* (2008). According to Kriesi and his colleagues (2008, p. 5) Western European polities are increasingly characterized by political and social divisions between the so-called 'winners and losers of globalisation'. The authors maintain that as borders become more fluid because of processes of economic and political globalization, only those citizens equipped with 'convertible resources' such as high levels of education and language skills can easily benefit from these conditions (see also Baumann, 1998). Lower-skilled citizens find themselves on the losing side of globalization as they cannot capitalize on the benefits of international mobility and find themselves in increasing competition with lower-skilled workers from abroad. On the basis of these societal changes due to an increasing economic and political inter- dependence in Western Europe, Kriesi *et al* maintain that the tensions between winners and losers of globalization, and with that differences in educational attainment, have become more politically relevant in recent years. This idea is also reflected in the work by Bovens and Wille.

Although we are sympathetic to the some of the expectations stemming from the winners and losers of globalization thesis, there are reasons to doubt that the education gap has widened and gained more political relevance recently. First, the classification of losers and winners on the basis of educational attainment is perhaps less clear-cut than suggested. Think for example of a construction worker on a building site in Amsterdam who has lost some projects because of an influx of low-skilled workers from Bulgaria. He may have experienced the negative side-effects of increasing labour mobility, but at the same time he may also reap the benefits from cheap foreign labour when he employs a cleaning lady from the Ukraine. Consequently, people with lower levels of formal education may find themselves on winning and losing sides of globalization simultaneously. In addition, even if one believes that the lower educated find themselves in positions of loss, it is not necessarily the case that the lower educated as a group share similar political preferences. As a result, it may prove to be difficult for political parties to represent voters along educational lines and rally voters exclusively on having the educational or language skills needs to become winners of globalisztion. Although educational attainment clearly is and has been a key demographic explanation of crucial facets of political behaviour and attitudes, there seems no particular reason to expect that the education gap has become more pronounced or more politically relevant over the past decades.

The Evidence Thus Far

Even though Bovens and Wille present mainly static analyses – the bulk of their empirical evidence comes from the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study – they make direct claims about a widening political education gap over time. When Bovens and Wille write that 'the least educated [ɣ] *have virtually disappeared* from most layers of the participation pyramid' (2010, p. 417, emphasis added), this implicitly assumes they were present in the same pyramid before. Apart from this quote, their 2010 article remains relatively silent about the dynamics of the education gap, but the book-length study of 2011 has a lot more to say on the issue. Bovens and Wille (2011, p. 39) present a graph that depicts turnout across education groups from the early 1970s onwards, but there is no widening gap to be found. Bovens and Wille go on to state that turnout at second-order elections (municipal, provincial and European Parliament) has steadily declined after the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970. As the higher educated participate much more frequently in these elections, their relative share in turnout must have gone up, or so the argument goes (Bovens and Wille, 2011, p. 40). However, no data of second-order elections are presented to corroborate this hypothesis. Finally, according to Bovens and Wille (2011, p. 106), the gap in external efficacy between most and least educated citizens has widened since the 1970s. Their data show that the lower educated feel increasingly powerless.

Still, while their coverage of indicators from the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study is impressive, for this longitudinal perspective they only employ three survey items.

Other longitudinal investigations of the education gap in the Netherlands are sparse. Dekker and Van der Meer (2009, p. 136) employ data from 1975 to 2006 to show that there is no uniform increase or decrease in the difference in selected political attitudes between the higher and lower educated. On some indicators they find a widened gap, but not on others. Thomassen (2010) shows that political trust in the Netherlands has been more or less stable since the 1970s among the highest educated, but has been rising for the lower educated. Therefore, according to him, the political gap between education groups has narrowed, not widened. Finally, Stolle and Hooghe (2011) show that the effect of education on party membership and protest activity in the Netherlands has remained constant from 1971 to 1998. Yet, the diploma- democracy thesis refers largely to more recent developments and the evidence presented by Bovens and Wille stems mainly from the 2000s. Therefore, the results of Stolle and Hooghe cannot be taken as evidence, which falsifies the diploma-democracy thesis.

We propose a comprehensive test of whether or not the political gap between education groups has widened, narrowed or remained constant by, first, combining indicators into indices for the sake of validity and reliability; second, by moving beyond bivariate to multivariate models; third, by including more time points from a cumulative 1971–2010 data file of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study; fourth, by including a wider selection of indicators of political and civic engagement. To these empirics we turn next.

Data and Methods

For our longitudinal study of educational attainment and political behaviours and attitudes we make use of the cumulative 1971–2006 data file of the Dutch National Election Studies (DNES) (Todosijevic *et al*, 2010) into which we merged the 2010 survey ourselves. This time span from 1971 to 2010 covers almost 40 years and 13 time points to analyse the development of the political education gap. We include as many dependent variables as the data allowed, but some items from the DNES are only included recently and therefore unsuitable for our purposes. Unfortunately, this means that we have little to nothing to say about the gap in ideology between education groups as issue items were not consistently part of the DNES before 1994. Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) show that the higher and lower educated differ markedly in their policy preferences with the higher educated being more progressive on immigration, crime and the European Union (see also Kriesi *et al*, 2008; Stubager, 2010). Whether these issue differences have recently surfaced or have always been present in the Netherlands cannot be answered conclusively with the data at hand.

Our main analysis consists of a series of regressions for six different political outcomes. We bundled these dependent variables in three groups for the ease of presentation, such as to approximate the various indicators used by Bovens and Wille (2010). The first group ('voting, elections, parties') consists of the act of voting and party membership. The second group ('actions outside elections') includes modes of civic behaviour, such as joining a demonstration, civic action group, having activated political parties and so on, which we have grouped into a single civic participation index. The third group ('distrust and distaste') is formed by indicators of political engagement such as external efficacy, which captures 'the belief that the authorities or regime is responsive to attempted influence' (Finkel, 1985, p. 893), political interest and political cynicism, which refers to 'strong distrust in the reliability and competence of politicians' (Adriaansen *et al*, 2011, p. 436). For each of these six dependent variables we included the highest completed education of the respondent on the right hand side as the main independent variable. The exact coding of all these variables is available in the appendix.

It is crucial to note that, in contrast to Bovens and Wille (2011, pp. 101–106), we capture concepts such as political cynicism, external efficacy and political interest using batteries of survey items. Survey methodologists have long shown that combining multiple items into one construct tends to drama- tically increase validity and reliability over the use of single items (for example, Achen, 1975). In addition to using indices of items, we also controlled for age, sex, religious denomination and urbanization, to isolate the effect of education on the dependent variable. Otherwise, we could not conclude that the difference in outcomes between higher and lower educated respondents was because of their education rather than other demographic factors.

The research design outlined above will establish whether education has an effect on the dependent variable in question. Of course, we wish to test whether that particular effect changes over time. That is to say, in each of our regressions the coefficient for education is expected to be conditional on time. We therefore constructed a time variable with a value of one in 1971 that increases by a value of one per year and added this as a predictor of each of the political attitudes or behaviours in order to capture a trend over time. In addition, for each dependent variable we included the interaction between education and time as well such that:

$$\text{Political outcome} = f(\text{education; time; education} \times \text{time; demographic controls}) \quad (1)$$

When interpreting the regression coefficients for equation (1), the coefficients for education and the interaction term would have to have the same sign and appropriate level of statistical significance for us to establish an increasing education gap.[1] To estimate these equations we used logistic regression for dichotomous dependent variables and

ordinal logistic regression for the four composite indices of civic participation, external efficacy, political interest and political cynicism.

When comparing data across four decades, we have to be aware of the fact that the average education level of the Dutch population has risen during this period. Moreover, response rates have declined, which leads to a more biased overrepresentation of higher educated respondents in recent surveys than in surveys from the early 1970s. Changes in the composition of the Dutch population in terms of education may have consequences for the distribution of the dependent variable, if the effect of education remains the same. However, our research question is whether that gap between high and low educated has increased, and to answer this question it is irrelevant how many people are in the different educational categories. The same reasoning applies to the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of certain groups in the samples. As long as there is a sufficiently large group of citizens from each educational category in the sample, we can validly estimate the gaps between educational groups. This can be done by testing whether the effect of education remains the same over time.

This research design will be applied to the cases where the dependent variable is either dichotomous or at the ordinal level. One crucial dependent variable, however, is party choice, which is a nominal variable. Moreover, it is a different nominal variable in different elections, because some parties merge, others disappear and new ones come up. For this variable, we will only focus on the bivariate relationship between education and party choice (measured by Cramer's V) and how this changes over time.

Results

Table 1 displays the effect of educational attainment on selected political variables in the Netherlands from 1971 to 2010. Much like Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) and Dekker *et al* (2009) we find that education impacts political behaviours and attitudes. The higher educated are more likely to vote and be party members, they are more frequently engaged in civic activities, they exhibit higher levels of external efficacy and political interest, and are less cynical about politics. Of course these results stand in a long line of scholar- ship that has yielded similar findings. Still, the political differences between education groups should not be overstated, as the explained variance of these models is quite modest. This goes to show that our independent variables, and education being one of them, do a rather poor job in accounting for the variance in the selected political outcomes. In other words, the differences within educational groups are much larger than the differences between them. Having said that, our immediate interest in this article was to track the political education gap over time. As mentioned before, for the education gap to increase, the coefficients for education and the interaction in Table 1 should be statistically significant and have the same sign. Let us examine the three clusters in turn.

First, respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to vote than those with lower levels of education. However, this coefficient is very stable during our timeframe so there is no evidence of growing disparities in turnout over time. When we consider party membership, we find that the coefficient for time is statistically significant but the interaction term is not, which indicates that party membership has declined equally for all education cohorts. Moving on to civic participation, we find that the higher educated are more likely to engage in civic activities than the lowest educated, but again this difference remains stable over time. Unfortunately, the question wording for the items that were included in the scale changed after the 1998 survey, therefore the longitudinal coverage is less comprehensive than for the other variables. These results are comparable to those of Stolle and Hooghe (2011). Using some of the separate indicators that we combined into the civic participation index, they find evidence of a stable effect of education for the same time period.

As for our final cluster of political outcomes, Table 1 shows that external efficacy has increased over time. The interaction effect shows that this was particularly the case for the lower educated, but this interaction is not statistically significant. Political interest is positively related to one's level of education, but here we see that the gap between the most and least educated citizens *narrows* over time. Finally, we find that the highest educated are less cynical of politics than the lowest educated, but there is no evidence of a widening gap. The time coefficient indicates a rise in political cynicism among the Dutch but there is no statistically significant difference between the different levels of education in this increase.

In sum, for five out of six political outcomes the education gap remains stable. This still signifies that level of education influences these important political variables, but it also goes to show that the education gap that exists today with regard to these variables has always existed to a similar degree in the past. In addition, for one of our six outcomes the gap between most and least educated has actually become smaller. While the higher educated still show more interest in the politics than the lower educated, this gap has narrowed with the passing of time.

Table 1: The effect of education on political variables over time (the Netherlands 1971–2010)

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Independent variables	*Voting, elections, parties*		*Actions outside elections*	*Distrust and distaste*		
	Vote	*Party member*	*Civic participation*	*External efficacy*	*Political interest*	*Political cynicism*
Education	0.465**	0.283**	0.234**	0.290**	0.668**	−0.169**
	(0.063)	(0.032)	(0.058)	(0.027)	(0.048)	(0.043)
Time	−0.011	−0.042**	−0.001	0.018**	−0.005	0.016*
	(0.014)	(0.006)	(0.012)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Education × Time	−0.001	0.001	0.004	−0.002	−0.006*	−0.001
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Age	0.121**	0.152**	−0.022	−0.051**	0.125**	0.073**
	(0.010)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.007)
Male	−0.128**	0.267**	0.303**	−0.030	0.753**	0.167**
	(0.041)	(0.036)	(0.041)	(0.031)	(0.056)	(0.034)
Urbanization	−0.064**	−0.157**	0.022	−0.008	0.035**	0.023
	(0.022)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.011)	(0.015)	(0.018)
Religion (ref. = none)						
Roman Catholic	0.079	–0.142	−0.166	0.025	−0.065	−0.158**
	(0.071)	(0.115)	(0.086)	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.058)
Calvinist	1.265**	1.372**	−0.119*	0.395**	0.171**	−0.410**
	(0.143)	(0.124)	(0.053)	(0.074)	(0.046)	(0.093)
Dutch reformed	0.504**	0.044	−0.228**	0.184**	−0.005	−0.109*
	(0.085)	(0.048)	(0.044)	(0.059)	(0.032)	(0.052)

Table 1: *continued*

Independent variables	*Voting, elections, parties*		*Actions outside elections*	*Distrust and distaste*		
	Vote	*Party member*	*Civic participation*	*External efficacy*	*Political interest*	*Political cynicism*
Islam	−0.668*	0.576*	−0.448**	0.189*	0.330	−0.118
	(0.294)	(0.264)	(0.154)	(0.078)	(0.321)	(0.471)
Other	−0.370*	0.411*	−0.075	0.174**	0.136	−0.083
	(0.145)	(0.161)	(0.121)	(0.051)	(0.089)	(0.082)
Constant	0.837**	–3.522**	—	—	—	—
	(0.244)	(0.162)	—	—	—	—
Cut-point 1	—	—	0.149	−0.584**	0.188	−1.720**
	—	—	(0.164)	(0.188)	(0.148)	(0.160)
Cut-point 2	—	—	1.952**	0.365	2.419**	0.478*
	—	—	(0.245)	(0.192)	(0.186)	(0.178)
Cut-point 3	—	—	—	1.264**	3.369**	1.925**
	—	—	—	(0.199)	(0.184)	(0.195)
N (individuals)	21 457	23 216	13 514	24 639	24 639	16 559
N (surveys)	13	12	9	13	13	10
Pseudo R^2	0.06	0.09	0.03	0.03	0.07	0.02
Period	1971–2010	1971–2010	1971–1998	1971–2010	1971–2010	1977–2010

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors clustered by survey within parentheses. **Statistically significant at the $P<0.01$ level, *at $P<0.05$ (two-tailed).

Education and Vote Choice

The regression analyses conducted above form our main evidence against the longitudinal argument that the lower educated *have disappeared* from the participation pyramid. Rather than having disappeared, their political presence has always been modest compared to those with higher levels of education. In this section we consider the impact of education on vote choice. Apart from affecting the actual decision whether or not to vote, Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) also argue that education determines political party preferences. They present evidence from the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study showing that the lower educated are more likely to vote for the PvdA and CDA, albeit slightly, and much more likely to vote for the rightwing populist PVV. The middle educated are more likely to vote for the socialist SP than either the lower or higher educated but again differences are rather small. The higher educated are more likely to cast their vote for the liberal VVD and D66 and the green party GroenLinks. The smaller protestant parties (SGP and ChristenUnie) and the animal party (Partij van de Dieren) seem to receive equal support from all education groups.

Again, our disagreement does not pertain to the static argument that education impacts vote choice. We wish to engage Bovens and Wille on their claim that vote choice is much more determined by educational attainment nowadays than it was decades ago. For this we employ a straightforward test of the strength of association between the highest completed level of education and the party voted for during the recent elections from 1971 to 2010. Given that vote choice is a nominal variable, the regression approach that we used in the previous section is not appropriate. Rather, we calculate the strength of association between these two variables using Cramer's *V*, a statistic that is directly based upon the well-known chi-square test. Once we establish the statistical dependence of two nominal variables, or in our case between the nominal variable 'vote choice' and the ordinal variable 'education', Cramer's *V* captures the strength of that association on a scale of 0 (no association) to 1 (perfect association). Even though Cramer's *V* is a bivariate measure, it does provide evidence of the size of net education effects on vote choice for each our 13 DNES.

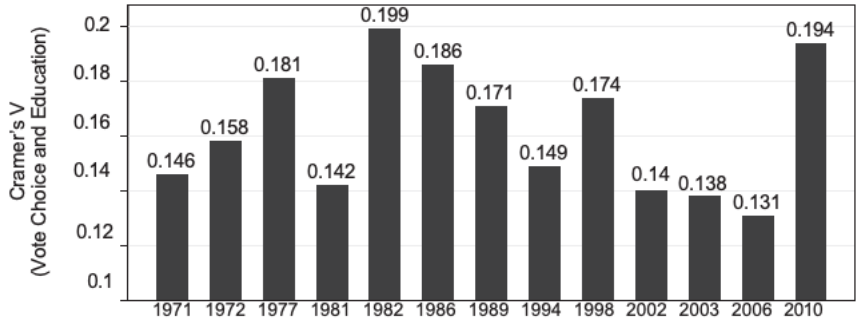

Figure 1: The strength of association between education and vote choice, 1971–2010.

We restrict our analysis to voters alone. The previous section has shown that the effect of education on turnout is stable through time. Therefore, we might expect the inclusion of non-voters as a separate vote choice category to have no consequence for the strength of association between education and vote choice. As a robustness check we still calculated Cramer's *V* for education and a vote choice variables that does include a category for non-voters, but this yielded identical results to the ones we present below.

For all surveys we can confidently reject the null hypothesis of statistical independence and conclude that education and vote choice are related. However, as Figure 1 shows, there is no evidence that the relationship between these two variables is stronger nowadays than in the past. Even with the inclusion of 2010, the average Cramer's *V* for the 2000s is lower than that of the previous decades.[2] Moreover, the size of Cramer's *V* never exceeds 0.20 echoing the results of our multivariate regressions that the effect of education on political behaviour should not be exaggerated.

Populism and the Mobilization of the Lower Educated

So far we have shown that for none of the longitudinally available political indicators in the DNES dataset (1971–2010) the impact of education has increased over time. We have also seen that vote choice nowadays is not more dependent on education than it was in the past. However, we have only tested for the presence or absence of linear trends. We were justified in doing so, as our aim in this article was to engage with the argument of Bovens and Wille. They argue for a monotonically increasing education gap, so our research design followed suit.

Still, let us take a closer look at two of the six political outcomes mentioned earlier, namely political interest and political cynicism. Figure 2 charts political interest from the early 1970s to the present across education cohorts. The five education groups form a tidy ordinal scale with regard to the political interest scores. We also see that a bivariate depiction of education and political interest yields comparable findings to the multivariate analyses presented above, as the gap in political interest between the highest and lowest educated clearly narrows. We added linear trend lines to underscore this point even further. A linear relationship with time fits the data quite well for the most and least educated, but it is also apparent that there is considerable fluctuation around the trend. The largest deviation from the trend line concerns political interest in the early 2000s. Of course, the 2002 general elections in the Netherlands were completely dominated by the late Pim Fortuyn and his rightwing populist party, the Lijst Pim Fortuyn. Figure 2 shows that all education groups, apart from the highest educated, received a boost in their political interest around this time. In other words, a dynamic appears to be at work where the participation and prominence of populist parties mobilizes lower educated parts of the electorate, which are usually ignored by the political establishment. We seem to be able to paint an analytically richer picture by allowing for fluctuations in the effect of education on political behaviour and attitudes rather than mere trends.

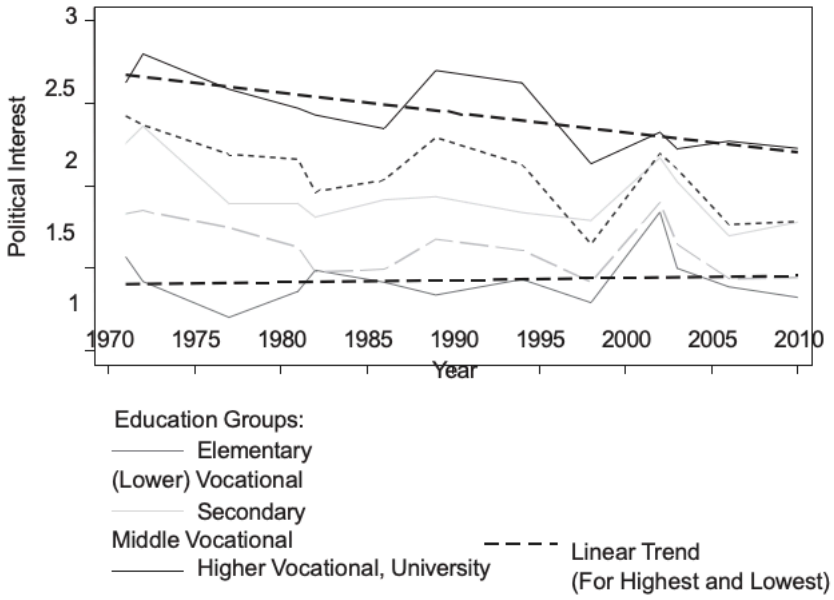

Figure 2: Political interest across education groups, 1971–2010.

To be fair, Bovens and Wille also seem to acknowledge the potential for these parties to represent lower educated citizens: 'one could argue that thanks to the recent emergence of populist parties the less educated have become more visible in the Dutch political landscape' (2010, p. 418). However, how this surge in populism is to be reconciled with the lower educated disappearing from the political scene is left unanswered. If populist parties attract disproportionate support from the lower educated and these very same parties receive stronger support nowadays than in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, it should follow immediately that the political gap between higher and lower educated groups is more likely to narrow, not widen.

The notion of populist parties dampening the effect of education on political attitudes receives further support from Figure 3. In line with expectations, political cynicism is highest among the lower educated and decreases as levels of education rise. Furthermore, the regression analyses conducted earlier are supported here. Political cynicism is on the rise in the Netherlands, regardless of educational attainment. We also note that cynicism increases linearly albeit with some fluctuations around the trend line. Much like the case of political interest, the gap in political cynicism between education groups seems to narrow in the early 2000s. There seems to be preliminary evidence that the rise of populist parties such as the LPF and SP coincided with a compression in the political education gap.

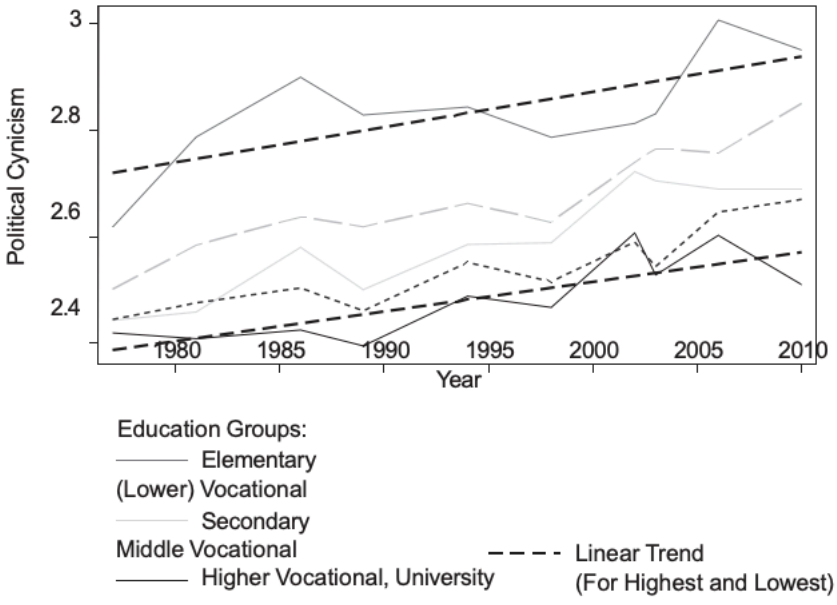

Figure 3: Political cynicism across education groups, 1977–2010.

These results are reminiscent of the debate on class voting and its demise. While this is certainly not the place to delve into this massive literature (see Evans, 1999 for an overview) there has been a movement away from more sociological bottom-up to political top-down approaches. According to the latter, the strength of association between social class and voting is as much driven by supply-side factors such as party ideologies and institutions as it is by large scale societal processes such as social mobility or cognitive mobilization. In the words of Evans *et al* (1999, p. 100): 'the future strength of class voting therefore depends more upon party strategy and electoral appeals than upon secular trends in society'. Figures 2 and 3 would suggest that the strength of association between educational attainment and political outcomes might be endogenous to party- political supply-side variables. Obviously more research is needed in this area before we can confidently claim that populist parties act as egalitarian agents regarding the political education gap. For one thing, the causal arrow might be the reverse of our claim. That is to say, perhaps populist parties gain in elections where participation by the lower educated is highest rather than the other way around. Still, much like others have accomplished in the class voting literature, incorporating supply-side factors to explain variation in the effect of education on political outcomes seems to be a promising direction for future research.

Discussion

Has the Netherlands turned into a 'diplomacy democracy' as Bovens and Wille (2010, 2011) state? We concur with them that education has an impact on political and civic participation and related attitudes such as political interest, external efficacy and political cynicism. Although the effects should not be overstated, our analyses show that the higher educated are more likely to vote and be party members, to be civically engaged, to display higher levels of political interest and lower levels of powerlessness and cynicism. Furthermore, education to some extent determines which party people vote for.

We also ignored the discussion in Bovens and Wille (2011) on the overrepresentation of the higher educated in civil society and high public office. Bovens and Wille rightly point to the tension between the universal right to stand for office and the practical reality that these same offices are dominated by academic elites.

Our disagreement lies with the argument that the difference in the abovementioned political variables between the higher and lower educated has increased in the past 30–40 years. Our main analyses show that in none of the seven selected political variables there was evidence of a widening gap between education groups. In six out of seven instances education has roughly the same effect today as it had four decades ago. In one instance, in the case of political interest, the education gap has actually narrowed. We believe that the rise of populism has been instrumental to engaging a group of lower educated citizens with politics and have presented preliminary evidence to that effect. We also presented bivariate associations between vote choice and education and found a stable relationship over time. Education does not structure vote choice today any more than it did in the early 1970s.

These findings are important for several reasons. First, they put the cautionary words of Bovens and Wille of the Netherlands turning into a Platonic meritocracy into perspective. While considerable political inequality between the higher and lower educated remains, there are more signs of a decreasing disparity in the population than the opposite. As mentioned in the introduction, this provides some room for optimism for those championing a society of citizens engaging with one another as political equals. Second, akin to one of the conclusions reached by Bovens and Wille, we believe that the rise of populist parties on both the left and right has the potential to mobilize a large group of mostly lower educated citizens. Even though journalists, politicians and commentators tend to view these parties with scepticism at best and outright hostility at worse, their role as egalitarian agents certainly deserves notice.

As a more general point, we have argued in our theoretical section that there is not much reason to expect social categories in terms of level of education to become increasingly relevant politically. After decades of individualization, it does not seem plausible that citizens would begin to identify strongly with a social category such as 'low educated'. Moreover, parties do not present themselves as the defenders of the interests of these specific social categories. There may be an additional reason, which has to do particularly with education. Over the past decades there has been a dramatic rise in the number of people with a university degree. It seems plausible that, as a consequence of this, the subjectively perceived gap (in social status) between those with little education and those with a university degree is now smaller than before. If the educational gap in social status would be smaller, why would the gap in political attitudes and behaviours increase?

Notes

1. In the regression tables that follow, we report the magnitude and statistical significance of the coefficient on the interaction terms. However, in line with recommendations by Brambor *et al* (2006) we have plotted the effect of education on each of the six dependent variables and the 95 per cent confidence intervals against the modifying variable ('time') to ensure that we interpret our conditional coefficients and their standard errors correctly. These graphs are not shown to save space, but are available from the authors upon request.
2. Cramer's *V* equals 0.162 for the 1970s, 0.174 for the 1980s, 0.161 for the 1990s and 0.151 for the 2000s.

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