Absolute x relative education: exploring political impacts in North and South

Rogerio Schlegel

Paper to be presented at the panel North-South relations, IPSA-ECPR Joint Conference, February 16 to 19, 2011, São Paulo, Brazil
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Abstract

The political impact of education is expected to follow three main paths: through the improvement of cognitive skills and transmission of values, on one hand; and through positional effects in society, on the other. The first two are supposed to have additive and cumulative impacts, responding to the absolute educational level of the individual; the third would reflect relative education – that of the individual compared to others from his or her environment. They all may affect political behavior at the same time, what makes especially difficult to gauge which mechanism prevails in a given context. This paper contrasts countries from the North and the South hemispheres, with remarkable differences regarding educational levels and their distribution among the public, to assess which of the paths presents itself as more promising in order to understand this relationship. Mirroring OECD’s indicators of social outcomes of education, this study uses data from the 2004 ISSP project to focus on the marginal effect of higher educational levels on interest in politics and interpersonal trust at the individual level. Results show that in countries with higher educational levels the transition to the upper secondary has greater impact on political interest than that to the tertiary level, suggesting that absolute impacts of education are predominant. As for interpersonal trust, the association with schooling observed in many OECD’s countries is put at stake using this broader sample, pointing to the inadequacy of the indicator to gauge impacts of education.

Key words: education; political behavior; democracy; interest in politics; interpersonal trust

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INTRODUCTION

Education is considered one of the decisive attributes to foster participation and democratic support at the individual level. This holds for better educated populations as well as for worse educated ones. The proposal of this paper is to mirror OECD’s indicators of marginal effects of education in a broader sample of countries, from the North and the South hemispheres. The main ambition is to contrast these different settings to understand mechanisms that may limit the impact of education in developed and developing countries. The central focus lies on three main paths that the effects of education are expected to follow: through the improvement of cognitive skills and transmission of values, on one hand; and through positional effects on the individual, on the other hand.

The first two paths are expected to have additive and cumulative effects, responding to the absolute level of educational attainment. Improved education means more cognitive resources that the citizen can mobilize to understand and act at the political realm – e.g. making easier to get information, to spot his or her own interest and to keep in contact with authorities. More schooling would also bring more intensity in the transmission of values prevalent in a given community, what would result in more participative and democratic citizens when intersubjective orientations are leaned towards participation and democracy.

At the same time, more schooling also reflects widely recognized credentials that help to reach a privileged position in society, enhancing the centrality of the citizen and his or her interest and capacity to influence the political system. In this alternative view, education is expected to have a relative impact, because its effect would depend on the distribution of credential among the citizens. How much my credential fosters a central position in society is a function of my neighbours’ educational attainment too.

The absolute and the relative effects of education can play at the same time, what makes especially difficult to point out which of the mechanisms prevails in a given context. Departing from the wave 2004 of the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme), this study focuses on 10 countries to try to gauge whether the distribution of educational credentials may have explanatory power regarding this relationship. The idea is to compare countries with different proportions of upper secondary graduates and people with higher educational levels to evaluate if this distribution makes any difference in determining the impact of schooling on political behavior. If it does, higher educational levels are expected to differentiate the citizen with more intensity in countries with smaller
proportions of better educated individuals. Their credentials being rarer, one can assume they have greater social and political impact, if the positional path is the prominent one.

Interest in politics and interpersonal trust are observed in this work, following OECD’s methodology. Marginal effects of the transition to the upper secondary and to the tertiary are assessed. Results show the transition to the upper secondary has greater impact on political interest in countries with higher educational levels, suggesting the cognitive and the value path prevails over the positional one – otherwise smaller political rewards would come along with greater proportions of upper secondary graduates.

As for interpersonal trust, the association with schooling observed in many OECD’s countries is put at stake when this broader sample is considered. In the selected countries from Latin America, Africa and Asia, one cannot assume that increases in educational attainment levels enhance the willingness to trust other people. This finding points to the inadequacy of the indicator to gauge this kind of social outcome in a wider geographical basis.

THEORETICAL FRAME

Education is one of the most relevant factors to explain citizens’ political behavior, according to conventional wisdom. In multicausal models, education is often depicted as one of the crucial determinants of attitudes desirable to democratic life, such as participation and support for democratic principles. At the individual level, schooling is usually the variable with the clearest effects in cross-sectional analysis. Within this approach, it figures in consistent, strong and positive correlation to dimensions as diverse as interest in politics, media usage, knowledge of political information, voter turnout, and indicators of attitudes related to democracy, such as tolerance and political efficiency.

As a consequence, there have been high bets on the political potential of education. “Formal education is, of course, a direct creator of interest”, wrote LAZARSFELD ET AL. (1944: 42). “Education not only tends to imbue persons of a sense of civic duty and a sense of political efficacy; it also propels them into political activity”, stated KEY (1961, p. 329). “Widespread adherence to the democratic creed is produced and maintained by a variety of powerful social processes. Of these, probably formal schooling is the most important”, stated DAHL (1961, p. 316). “Whether one is dealing with cognitive matters such as level of factual information about politics or conceptual sophistication in its assessment; or such motivational matters as degree of attention paid
to politics and emotional involvement in political affairs; or questions of actual behavior, such as engagement in any of a variety of political activities from party work to vote turnout itself: education is everywhere the universal solvent, and the relationship is always in the same direction” (CONVERSE, 1972, p. 324). “Education presumably broadens men’s outlooks, enables them to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restrains them from adhering to extremist and monistic doctrines, and increases their capacity to make rational electoral choices”, argued LIPSET (1959: 79). “If one cannot say that a ‘high’ level of education is a sufficient condition to democracy, the available evidence do suggest that it is close to being a necessary condition”, added the author. “The uneducated man or the man with a limited education is a different political actor than the man that achieved a higher level of education”, claimed ALMOND AND VERBA (1965: 315).

The underlying assumption of this perspective is that more schooling always brings enhanced cognitive skills and more transmission of values. In this perspective, education is expected to improve the intellectual ability to understand and learn. The assumption that more education causes sustained increases in political knowledge, participation, tolerance and democratic support can be described as “prevailing view” in this academic field (NIE ET AL., 1996: 97/98).

More schooled people are more knowledgeable not only about encyclopedic facts but also about their contemporary world. They are more likely to search for new information and to be connected to information sources. The gap between more educated publics and less schooled ones is durable, despite age and time passed since school was left (HYMAN ET AL., 1975). The transmission of values is also mentioned as having an additive and cumulative impact. At school, individuals have contact with the intersubjective orientations that prevail in their society or social group. This experience is a way to reproduce values (BORDIEU AND PASSERON, 1990), change them towards a given direction (INGLEHART, 1993), and to learn the acceptable profile the social coexistence is supposed to have (GLAESER ET AL., 2007).

The new indicators of social outcomes of education created by OECD predominantly follow this track (OECD, 2009 AND 2010). They assume that higher educational attainment represents more of the desirable behavior, in an additive and cumulative effect – it brings “incremental differences” in political behavior (OECD, 2010: 152). In their 2009’s version, the indicators examine the relationship between educational attainment and three social measures of well-being in 21 OECD countries. One of the
outcomes will not be dealt with in this paper: the self-assessed individual health – it would represent a digression from our focus on attitudes closely related to politics.

The other two indicators are supposed to be measures of the cohesiveness of society: political interest and interpersonal trust. An increase in educational attainment associated with moving from one level of educational attainment to the next higher level is generally positively associated with both. The assumption is that adults who have higher levels of educational attainment are generally more likely than those with lower levels of attainment to report that they are at least fairly interested in politics and believe most people try to be fair. OECD research showed that an increase in educational attainment from upper secondary to tertiary level is broadly associated with stronger and more consistent increases in political interest and interpersonal trust, compared to an increase in educational attainment at the lower level (OECD, 2009).

Nevertheless, the institution’s research report acknowledges that the cognitive path is not the only one followed by the impact of education:

Education can directly increase civic and political engagement by providing relevant information and experience, and by developing competencies, values, attitudes and beliefs that encourage civic participation. Education can also indirectly increase engagement by raising individuals’ social status which may permit them to have better access to social and political power. Education can directly affect interpersonal trust since it could help individuals better understand and embrace the values of social cohesion and diversity. Education can also indirectly raise interpersonal trust since those with higher levels of education are more likely to live and work among those with similar high levels of education, environments in which crime and anti-social behaviour tend to be lower; the opposite is likely to be true for those with low levels of education (OCDE, 2009: 172/3).

Although the study admits the possibility of “indirect” effects, it presumes they will always have the same direction of the direct effect of education – an additive and cumulative one. But what if there is what can be called an inflation of credentials, a sharp increase in the proportion of people holding higher educational attainment levels? And what if the threshold that do differentiate politically the citizen in worse educated nations is from no education to some education and no other incremental change can be expected in more advanced educational transitions? Indeed, the impact of shifts in the average educational level of a nation was just laterally theorized by the studies that launched the underpinnings to understanding the education-politics relationship. These analyses have a common assumption: departing from associations valid for increased education in a given
point in time, they inferred similar outcomes for increasing education over time – always expecting additive and cumulative marginal effects.

However, abundant empirical evidence points to other direction. In the end of the 1970’s, BRODY (1978) put forth what he called “the participation puzzle”: political activation indicators in the United States showed steady decline in comparison to previous decades, regardless of the major expansion of material and cognitive resources – featuring education – among the citizenry. NIE ET AL. (1996) pointed out stagnation or decline in different dimensions of participation and attention to politics in the US in the span 1972-1994. In a study with 94 countries, ACEMOGLU ET AL. (2004) conclude that nations with increases in their average educational level between 1970 and 1995 were not likely to be more democratic according to Freedom House’s criteria.

The relative impact of education may help to explain these findings. Going to school, individuals learn their place in society and in social networks, position to which the familiar background crucially accounts (BORDIEU AND PASSERON, 1990; NIE ET AL., 1996). Moreover, educational attainment is a powerful sorting clue; it helps to rank people through life, no matter what are the skills and knowledge effectively associate to the achieved grade (COLLINS, 1979). This positional effect depends on relative education.

NIE AND COLLEAGUES (1996) argued that some of the impacts of schooling on political attitudes are more closely related to relative gains in educational attainment – what the educational rank of the individual is, compared to others, rather than what his or her absolute achievement is. Above all, this would apply to participation, including interest in politics. From this standpoint, the disposition to take part in the affairs of the polity is largely determined by the centrality of the individual. The cost of political information, the effort to keep oneself up to date in political issues, the skills to make one’s opinion heard, the abilities to get favorable political outcomes vary dramatically depending on the individual’s position on social nets. Political affairs take place at the centre of the society and the proximity to policy-makers and media gatekeepers, for instance, can be crucial to the disposition to participate and to the predictable success on this duty.

Despite all this conceptual richness – or perhaps because of it –, the precise mechanisms that link education and political attitudes are widely undertheorized and the role relationship is still described as a “black box” (CAMPBELL, 2006: 26). The relationship between education and political behavior has connections that are not easy to disentangle, due to the difficulty in establishing causal chains (HYLLIGUS, 2005; CAMPBELL, 2006).
“Given the strength of the Lipset/Aristotle hypothesis as an empirical regularity, it is surprising that convincing theoretical models of the relation do not exist”, claims Barro (1999:182)².

Regardless of this incertitude, the association between schooling and individual attitudes is presented as a point not open to controversy. The relative impact of education is frequently underestimated – more so in comparative research. But national levels of educational attainment and the distribution of credentials within society may play an important role in determining the political impact of education. INGLEHART (1993) is one of the authors that started following this clue:

The most readily available indicator of political ability is the level of formal education. In part, participation levels reflect levels of abilities, and basic literacy seems to be enough to produce the vote. Citizens of most Western democracies have reached this point generations ago. But while the mere literacy seems to be sufficient to produce high rates of voting, the initiative to search for specific changes in policies at national level seems to require at least secondary education, if not tertiary. (INGLEHART, 1993: 13)

His approach still presumes absolute effects for education. But the same educational attainment level might represent very different resources if the individual is in a developed country or in a developing one, even if it would correspond to the same cognitive skills in both settings. One major challenge of this academic field is to conduct research on the impact of schooling in developing societies. Most studies on the political influence of education refer to the United States and Western Europe. Even research about Eastern European societies tends to portrait contexts in which secondary education is universalized – or virtually universalized – and tends to concentrate on higher levels of education (EVANS AND ROSE, 2007).

Works on Africa, for instance, show how the research results do not always travel well beyond developed countries. BRATTON, MATTES AND GYIMAH-BOADI (2005) concluded that more than foster support for democracy, education reduces support for undemocratic attitudes. In other study, BRATTON AND MATTES (2001) found discomfort with democracy among highly educated people, attributed to the fear of giving political rights to illiterate citizens, who may exercise them in a way considered irresponsible.

² In his article of 1959, Lipset credited Aristotle for part of the preposition about the political impact of education, and Barro reproduces this credit.
EVANS AND ROSE (2007) sought predictors of democratic attitude at the individual level in 18 sub-Saharan African societies, with special attention to the role of education. The authors concluded that educational level is the dominant social structural factor conditioning support for democracy, far outstripping others that have typically been attributed important roles in modernization theories, and religion is also of little consequence. The authors believe they have demonstrated that the relationship between education and democratic support involves cognitive elements that impact the understanding and involvement in politics, which would be consistent with a model based on values rather than as a marker of inequality of resources. In this setting, the greatest aggregate gains in support for democracy are likely to be obtained by increasing the proportion of the population who complete primary education, which is still beyond the reach of the majority of children in sub-Saharan Africa.

Differences in the proportion of individuals holding a given credential may play a role even in different points in time in the same developed country. In the United States, evidence has shown that people attaining the lower secondary (high school) in the 1990’s have political knowledge equivalent to that of the primary level graduates in the 1940’s; among those with higher education, the knowledge is comparable to high school graduates fifty years before. The public impact of this shift was not more dramatic because the declining gains brought about by each educational level were counterbalanced by changes in the proportion of students across levels – with higher levels achieved by growing proportions at each time, during the second half of the 20th century (DELLI CARPINI AND KEETER, 1996). In Brazil, political rewards of higher educational attainment levels shrank between the end of the 1980’s and the middle of the 2000’s in several dimension of participation and democratic support (SCHLEGEL, 2010).

Taking all this into consideration, the main aim of this paper is to contrast countries with distinct educational attainment levels to understand mechanisms that may influence the impact of education in developed and developing countries – especially which form of educational impact (absolute or relative) is predominant. Nations from the North and the South hemispheres with variable combinations of educational groups will be compared. The basic expectation is that this composition influences the political effects in a predictable way: in countries with higher proportions of better educated people, the most pronounced effects tend to appear in the transition to higher educational levels; because intermediate levels are more widespread, they are expected to represent less
differentiation in political terms, if the relative impact of education plays a prevalent role in this relationship.

OECD’s research compared political interest and interpersonal trust in 21 countries without using the distribution of their educational attainment levels to interpret the results. The study gauged the marginal effects of two thresholds: the transition from lower levels to the upper secondary level; and the transition from the upper secondary to the tertiary. In general, the data suggested that the marginal effects in terms of political interest are generally larger and more consistent at the higher level of education than at the lower level of education. In Italy, for instance, moving an individual from upper secondary to tertiary education is associated with a 20 percentage point increase in the probability of expressing interest in politics, while moving an citizen from below upper secondary to upper secondary is associated with a 13 percentage point increase. The trend holds after controlling for gender, age, and income. This was interpreted as a suggestion that learning experiences at the tertiary level may be particularly important for stimulating political interest. Evidence in the same direction was gathered regarding interpersonal trust.

Among the 21 nations, there was only one from the South hemisphere – New Zealand, country with levels of economic and human development comparable to those of Europe, United States, and Canada. It did not show consistent association for both indicators. The association between education and the “cohesion” variables were less consistent in poorer nations: marginal effects on interest in politics did not show significance in regression models for Turkey (besides New Zealand and Korea); as to interpersonal trust, they did not have significance for Turkey, Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, and Portugal (besides New Zealand, Korea, Italy, and Spain). The mentioned regression models controlled for age, sex and income.

The present study intends to mirror OECD’s with a broader sample of countries, including more cases of developing nations.

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3 There might have explanations other than the relative impact of education to this predicted result. As Brazilian experts know well, the popularization of higher educational levels tends to be accompanied by a loss in the quality of education, understood as content retention and cognitive skills development. However this is a rather complex issue, which would require cognitive indicators to be dealt with, what is beyond the scope of this paper.
2 - DATA ANALYSIS

The main hypotheses of this paper are the following:

- Countries with higher proportions of better educated people will show the most pronounced marginal effects in the transition to higher educational levels, in terms of political interest.

- Countries with lower educational attainment levels will show weaker marginal effects, regardless of the transition point location, in terms of interpersonal trust.

Mirroring the work released by OECD in 2009, this study uses the 2004 databases of the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme). Each of the countries selected had original samples close to 1,000 individuals. Here, all samples are restricted to individuals aged 25 to 64, to represent the adult population with completed education. The educational variable in the data source is converted to a three-level variable based on ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) – below upper-secondary; upper secondary; and tertiary education – as summarized in chart 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description of level in ISSP database</th>
<th>ISCED conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No formal qualification, incomplete primary</td>
<td>Below upper secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lowest formal qualification</td>
<td>Below upper secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Above lowest qualification</td>
<td>Below upper secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Higher secondary completed</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Above higher secondary level, other qualifications</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>University degree completed, graduate studies</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ten countries with quite distinct educational levels are selected from four continents. Table 1 brings their national educational levels, the percentage of interest in politics (IP) and of interpersonal trust (IP). The first political variable uses the question “How interested would you say you personally are in politics?”, and the answers “very interested” and “fairly interested” were coded 1 – leaving “somewhat interested”, “not very interested”, and “not at all interested” as 0. The variable about interpersonal trust was built from the question “How often do you think that people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, and how often would they try to be fair?”; code 1 went to the answers “try to be fair most of the time” and “try to be fair almost all of the time”; code 0 was left for “try to take advantage most of the time” and “try to take advantage almost all of the time”.

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Table 1 – Educational levels, political interest and interpersonal trust, by country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Educational levels (in %)</th>
<th>IP (in %)</th>
<th>IT (in %)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below US</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ISSP 2004

Marginal effects are estimated with inferential analyses, using country-specific regression models to predict each dichotomous outcome variable, with control variables for age (as a continuous variable), sex (0-1), and family income (low, intermediate and high, calculated by country). The odds ratio for educational groups, having the category “below the upper secondary” as reference, appears in table 2.

Table 2 - Education as a predictor of IP and IT (odds ratio and significance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Interest in politics</th>
<th>Interpersonal trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To upper sec.</td>
<td>To tertiary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2,587**</td>
<td>4,877**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>1,721**</td>
<td>3,050**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1,830**</td>
<td>3,714**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2,081**</td>
<td>2,907**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1,900**</td>
<td>3,361**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1,265</td>
<td>1,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>1,620**</td>
<td>4,625**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,779**</td>
<td>3,861**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>1,426*</td>
<td>2,493**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>1,762*</td>
<td>2,778**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at the 0.05 level ** Significant at the 0.01 level

The results indicate a stronger association between education and interest in politics than the one detected with interpersonal trust. All countries but Mexico show positive and consistent impact of education on the interest in politics, distinguishable at both transitions (from below upper secondary to upper secondary, and from upper secondary to tertiary). As to interpersonal trust, only four countries have odds ratios over 1.
– indicating incremental shifts from one level to the other – and with statistical significance: United States and three nations from Western Europe (UK, Ireland and Spain).

Next step is using the regression models coefficients to estimate the possibility of citizens with different profiles having the outcome of interest. In OECD’s study, the gap between educational categories is interpreted as the marginal effect added-up by the completion of each transition⁴. For each level of attainment, estimates are obtained by setting the educational variable to the appropriate level and setting the remaining variables to the following pattern: man, national average age and intermediate family income. Graphs 1 and 2 represent graphically the results.

**Graph 1 – Interest in politics (probability of being fairly or very interested)**

Graph 1 shows the probability of having high interest in politics. There is a sound impact of education on this variable in all selected countries, featured by longer columns at the back and shorter ones at the front. That does not hold for interpersonal trust. In graph 2, many countries have columns at the back that are smaller than those at the front, indicating that the probability of believing people tend to be fair does not necessarily increase with the transition to higher educational levels.

⁴ The 2010’s version of the study uses the concept “incremental differences” instead of marginal effects to describe this gap.
This general pattern can be observed precisely in countries from the South, with two exceptions: Korea, which falls into this group despite its geographic position, and Chile, that does not follow the trend of other Latin American countries. Departing from this evidence, it seems clear that the assumption of association between education and interpersonal trust does not travel so well beyond the North hemisphere.

At last, we arrive at evidence to test the main hypothesis: late educational transitions are more powerful in terms of political effects in countries with higher levels of educational attainment? The data on political interest (left hand side of chart 3) suggest precisely the opposite. The first transition is more politically powerful in countries with more than 40% of their population with educational attainment levels equivalent to the upper secondary or more.

In the United Kingdom, more than half of the population in beyond the lower educational category – 32% are upper secondary graduates and 20.2% completed the tertiary level. But overcoming the first transition increases the possibility of being interested in politics in 13.49 percentage points, slightly above the second transition impact, of 13.02 percentage points. In Poland, 33.9% of the population is upper secondary graduates and 14.7% college graduates; the marginal effect of the transition to the intermediate category is 15.72 percentage points and that of the second transition is 13.66 percentage points. Similar examples are Unites States, Ireland, Spain, and Korea.
The case of the United States suggests another possible way of making sense of these results. The country has the greatest difference between the two transitions, and it is precisely the nation with the smallest proportion of population below upper secondary education – not more than 9%. Another way to look at these numbers is to think that this small group is extremely atypical compared to the remaining of the population, from a political behaviour point of view – i.e. this 9% group is more differentiated from the other two groups than they are among them. In this case, our way of estimating the impact of education can be interpreted as stressing rather the marginal disadvantage of the less educated group than the other way round. Although plausible and worth exploring in future works, the pattern of other countries in this study does not confirm this assumption.

Regarding interpersonal trust (right hand side of chart 3), the results indicate the existence of two different clusters of countries. There seems to have association between education and this kind of trust in the United States and European nations (UK, Ireland, Spain, Poland); nevertheless, countries from other parts of the world do not show this pattern, except for Chile. In Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and Korea, more education is not followed by more interpersonal trust – actually, these nations have negative marginal
effects in the first transition. This evidence recommends looking somewhere else, other than education, to understand variations in levels of interpersonal trust.

3 - PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

Which lessons can be extracted from the uneven political impact of education in the North and in the South, explored by this study? Firstly, regarding interest in politics, the contrast between nations with lower and higher educational attainment levels provided a relevant material to test the hypothesis of the relative impact of education in different settings. More schooling is supposed to bring more widely recognized credentials that would help to reach a centrality position in social and political life. That would differentiate the impact of distinct educational transitions according to the proportion of nationals holding a given credential. It follows that when major portions of the population graduated in a certain level, its political impact should be expected to be weaker.

The evidence brought about by the tests does not confirm this expectation. Comparing the marginal effects of two transitions – from below upper secondary to uppers secondary, and from upper secondary to tertiary – the political impact of education is not stronger at the higher transitional point in better educated populations. One conclusion that might be drawn is that the absolute effects of education are prominent in these settings. There are positive and consistent marginal effects for the schooling added-up to the citizen’s stock, and they might have more to do with the enhancement of cognitive skills and the transmission of values than with the positioning of the individual in society.

The additive and cumulative effects of education prevailed, at least with this research design. New studies, with a wider range of countries and more detailed observation of different transitional points, would help to understand more deeply this finding. Earlier transitions might have stronger effects in less educated nations, but this kind of observation was out of the reach of this exercise, because of its way of estimating marginal effects of schooling.

Regarding interpersonal trust, the comparison of countries from the North and the South put in question the assumption that education has a sound positive association with this dimension of social cohesion. Taken seriously to the point of generating an indicator of desirable social outcome of education by OECD, this association seems highly disputable. In countries included in a previous study of the organization, there is a reasonable relationship, even when sex, age and family income are controlled; when a broader
sample of nations is observed, the marginal effects of education fade. This evidence suggests that other factors might be more consistent as interpersonal trust predictors and that one should be cautious before taking this attitude as a sound indicator of social outcome of education.

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