THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT US! 13.11.2017 | Anchrit Wille & Mark Bovens

Reign of the brains (...or those who can afford a good education)

Why the prevalence of hyper-qualified politicians is a danger to democracy

Many West European countries are currently celebrating (or are about to celebrate) the centenary of universal suffrage for males. The Netherlands introduced universal suffrage for men in 1917, the UK and Belgium in 1918, and Germany in 1919 for both men and women. From this point on, the right to vote and to run for office no longer depended on wealth, social status, or educational qualifications. Any citizen could become a member of parliament, a councillor or a minister, regardless of their education or professional status.

There are few reasons to crack open the champagne, however. Parliaments in West European democracies today simply do not represent the people they are meant to serve. Rather, they are the domain of a select group of very well-educated citizens.

No less than 90 per cent of the members of the Dutch Parliament, elected in March this year, attended university or graduate school. Likewise, 87 per cent of the members of the British House of Commons, elected in June, attended university and 10 per cent have postgraduate qualifications. In the new German Bundestag, elected in September, the share of postgraduates is even higher: 130 out of 709 members have a PhD-degree or even the higher-level *habilitation*. Very few MPs possess only primary or secondary qualifications.

Europe: where swots hold sway

Most of the mature Western European democracies have become 'diploma democracies', ruled by those with the highest formal qualifications. University graduates are overrepresented in all political arenas – not only in parliaments or cabinets, but also in political parties,

interest groups and online consultations. Aristocracy (rule by the nobility) and plutocracy (rule by the wealthy) have given way to meritocracy: rule by the well-educated.

Almost 9 out of 10 MPs in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK have received a tertiary education – the highest proportion since the introduction of universal suffrage at the beginning of the 20th century. Over the course of the past century, those with only primary or secondary-level schooling have all but disappeared from parliament, from cabinets, and from many other political arenas, even though they still constitute a large majority – up to 70 per cent in most countries – of the electorate.

Before World War II, only two out of ten UK Labour MPs had a university degree. By 2017, that figure had risen to nine in ten.

The proportion of university graduates among MPs shows a U-shape trend in most countries (see graphs at the bottom of this page). It was very high during the second half of the 19th century, when the vote was largely restricted to the landowning classes. At the beginning of the 20th century, less well-educated social groups started entering the various parliaments due to the extension of suffrage and the rise of socialist, communist, and Christian-democratic parties.

During the first half of the 20th century, the proportion of parliamentarians with university degrees decreased substantially in most countries. However, After World War II, the number of MPs with higher educational qualifications increased, first gradually and then sharply from the seventies onwards. For example, before WWII, only 2 in 10 UK Labour MPs had a university degree. After WWII, the numbers rose steadily, reaching an all-time high of 9 out of 10 in 2017.

Large educational gaps can also be observed in all other forms of political participation, including voting, signing petitions, taking part in boycotts and online consultations, and joining civil society organisations.

Same countries, different worlds

It's a problem because education is not a politically neutral variable. The well-educated and the less well-educated live in different social worlds and rarely mingle. University graduates tend to watch public television and read 'quality' papers. They typically live in university towns, leafy pre-war suburbs, or in the gentrified parts of inner cities, such as Berlin's Prenslauer Berg, Amsterdam's De Pijp or London's Notting Hill.

Those whose educational career ended after junior high (middle) school or primary vocational training tend to watch commercial TV and read tabloid papers. They live in former industrial areas and manufacturing towns, in the post-war satellite cities, or in the 20th century outskirts of major cities.

Educational groups differ in terms of health, life expectancy, wealth and income, and have different interests and preferences on a number of salient political issues. Why, then, do we worry about gender or ethnic inequalities in political representation, but not about educational inequalities?

'They don't represent us!'

The almost total absence of citizens with a low or medium level of education in politics constitutes a serious democratic deficit. There is an emerging body of research that shows the over-representation of university graduates in parliament is simply not in line with the preferences of large parts of the electorate. Many voters are actually put off by politicians' university background. Citizens generally want representatives who are 'like them', either in appearance, background, or experience.

Less well-educated citizens feel politicians don't listen to them, and that today's policies are not shaped around their own needs.

Most importantly, different levels of education may sometimes lead to diverging political attitudes and preferences. Well-educated citizens and activists are socially and politically confident. They express trust in the national and European political institutions and they feel included in the political process. They see immigration and EU unification not as threats, but as opportunities. Less well-educated citizens, on the other hand, tend to be very sceptical about the EU, and worry about crime and immigration. They show high levels of social distrust and political cynicism. They feel politicians don't listen to them, and that today's policies are not shaped around their own needs.

Given the composition of present day political parties, parliaments and cabinets, these feelings of distrust and alienation should not come as a surprise. Because the higher educated are over-represented among political participants and politicians, the political agenda tends to be biased towards their priorities and preferences.

Diploma democracy is a flawed form of democracy, as it ultimately excludes a sizeable proportion of the population from any kind of meaningful political participation. Citizens with few educational qualifications currently make up a large majority of the electorate, yet they are very much under-represented in parliaments and other political arenas. The situation is not that different from the late 19th century, when formal diplomas sometimes determined whether or not a citizen was entitled to vote. Almost a century after the introduction of universal suffrage, some advanced Western democracies have, practically speaking, gone back to where they started.



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