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# Classroom politics

## Education – not wealth – determines how Europeans will vote

The Brexit referendum, and the Dutch and French elections, have shown that the traditional distinction between right and left is becoming obsolete. Commentators argue that a globalisation cleavage is appearing in western Europe, with the issues of migration and European integration core bones of contention. We argue that at a deeper level it is not just globalisation or the EU that drives this contestation. The new political divide is also rooted in demographic changes, it is a manifestation of the rise of a more structural, educational cleavage. It's no longer just the economy, stupid, it's education.

Tell us what your highest diploma is, and we will tell you who you are and what you do. If you are a university graduate, you will watch public television, such as the BBC or its equivalent in other European countries (such as Canvas in Belgium) and read "quality" papers, such as The Guardian, Die Zeit, or Libération. You will do your utmost to get your children into public school in the UK, a Gymnasium in Germany and the Netherlands, or one of the Grandes écoles in France. You will live in a university town, a green pre-war suburb, or in the 19th century, gentrified parts of the inner cities, such as Prenslauer Berg in Berlin, De Pijp in Amsterdam, or Notting Hill in London. You will be moderately in favour of the EU, worry about climate change, the state of higher education, and xenophobia, and vote for a Green or social liberal party.

On the other hand, if your education ended after junior high school or primary vocational training, the chances are you will watch commercial television, such as SBS, VTM or ITV, and read tabloid papers – if you read any newspaper at all – such as The Sun in England, Bild in Germany, or BT in Denmark. Your children will attend a local state school in the UK, a large ROC in the Netherlands, or a lycée professionnel in France. You will live in former industrial areas and manufacturing towns, in post-war satellite cities, such as Marzahn in Berlin, Lelystad in the Netherlands, or Slough in England, or in the 20th century outskirts of the major cities. You will be highly sceptical about the EU, worry about crime and immigration, and vote for a nationalist

party, or perhaps not at all.

In our new study, Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy, we show how the contours of this new divide have crystallised in western and northern Europe. Using a broad notion of cleavage, we find the rise of an educational cleavage reflected along three lines: a new socio-demographic division, differences in terms of political preferences, and the appearance of a new divide in the political landscape.

## The rise of the well-educated as a new social segment

Cleavages are rooted in demography. For a large part of the twentieth century it made little sense to speak of distinct educational groups, because the group of well-educated citizens was so small. This changed as a consequence of rising educational attainment levels. In 2015, according to the OECD, 27 per cent of the EU workforce (using a group of 22 EU countries) was well educated – more than double the 11 per cent who classified as well-educated EU citizens in 1992 and more than twenty-five times higher than the meagre 1 per cent recorded in the 1960s. This massive expansion of the number of well-educated citizens provides the demographic basis for cleavage formation.

This emerging educational segmentation comes with an increased stratification and segregation along educational lines, with unequal access to housing, health and job opportunities. Moreover, education is an important driver of new patterns of homogamy. The well educated and the less well educated live in different social worlds and do not mingle. They differ in health, in life expectancies, in wealth, and in income.

## Cosmopolitans versus nationalists

Traditionally, most voters in western Europe can be positioned along a social-economic, left–right dimension and along a religious–secular dimension. In addition to these traditional conflict dimensions, which reach back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a new cultural conflict dimension has manifested itself in the past three decades. The crucial themes along this cultural dimension are immigration, globalisation, and European integration. This new division between what could be called "cosmopolitans" and "nationalists" has emerged gradually, fuelled by the waves of non-western immigration and the process of European unification.

This division between cosmopolitan and nationalist attitudes coincides

in western European countries with the education divide. Ranged on one side of this new line of conflict are the citizens who accept social and cultural heterogeneity and who favour, or at least condone, multiculturalism. These are the more highly educated. On the other side are citizens who are highly critical of multiculturalism and who prefer a more homogeneous national culture. These are predominantly citizens with lower education levels.

For example, in the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, strong educational differences could be observed. With the exception of Scotland, the Leave vote was much higher in those regions of Britain populated by citizens with low education qualifications, and much lower in those regions with a larger number of university graduates. According to Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath: "fifteen of the 20 '0least educated' areas voted to leave the EU while every single one of the 20 'most educated' areas voted to remain."

## The rise of social-liberal versus nationalist parties

Cleavages manifest themselves also in the support for specific political parties. New parties with new types of preferences have recently entered the political stage across Europe. On the one side of the new cultural dimension of conflict, we see the emergence of Green and social liberal parties, such as Groen! and Ecolo in Belgium, Les Verts in France, The Greens in Germany, D66 and GroenLinks in the Netherlands, and the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom, to name but a few. Since the late seventies, they have become established political actors throughout western Europe. In all countries, the Green and social liberal parties predominantly attract voters from the high end of the education spectrum, as shown in Figure 1 (below)

On the other side of this cultural conflict, we see the emergence of nationalist populist parties such as the FPÖ in Austria, Vlaams Belang and NV-A in Belgium, the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, France's Front National, the AfD in Germany, Lega Nord in Italy, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats, and UKIP. These nationalist parties tend to draw large proportions of the low and medium-educated voters, and relatively few well-educated voters as shown in Figure 2 below

Political contestation regarding globalisation issues should thus be understood as only part of the puzzle. Underneath it, the contours of an educational cleavage have become visible. Educational differences matter

most in societies that are meritocratic – in which access to higher education, the labour market, and social stratification are based on merit instead of class or patronage.

This is particularly the case in western and northern European countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, and to a somewhat lesser extent the Netherlands, the UK, Finland, Austria, and Switzerland. In these countries, the contours of something resembling a full educational cleavage are visible. The nationalist populist parties on the one hand, and the Greens and social-liberals on the other hand, embody the institutionalisation of this new political conflict line. They have gained a lasting place in the political arena because they represent groups of voters who not only share a particular set of issue attitudes, but also specific social characteristics – their educational background.

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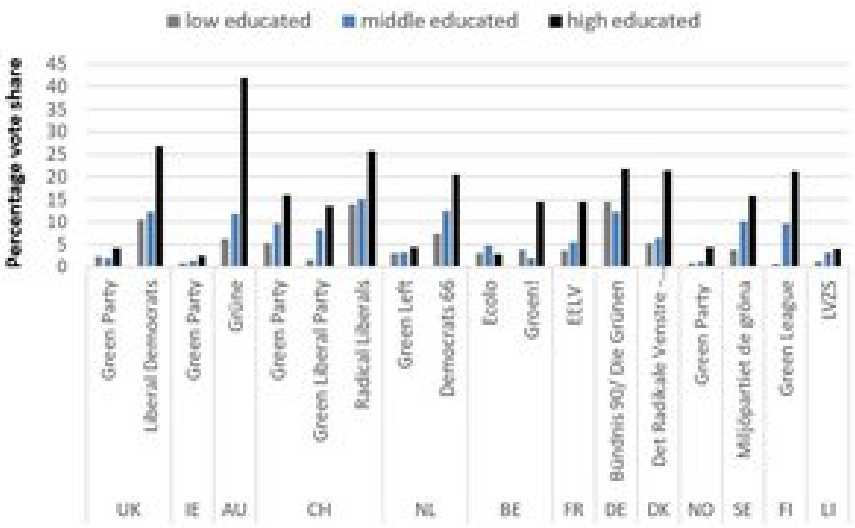



Figure 1: Link between education and support for Green and Left-liberal parties (2014)

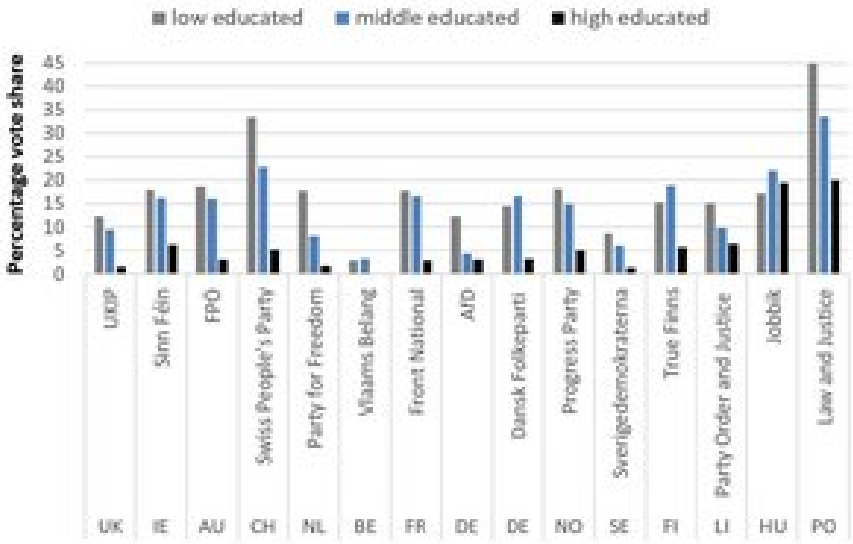



Figure 2: Link between education and support for nationalist parties (2014)

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