

How your partner affects your likelihood to vote



Previous research has indicated that those with partners are more likely to vote than those who are single. Drawing on a new study, [Stijn Daenekindt](#), [Willem de Koster](#) and [Jeroen van der Waal](#) write that the impact of partners on voting is more complex than has previously been assumed. They explain that while partners can motivate each other to participate in elections, they can also suppress each other's levels of political participation in certain circumstances. This is particularly apparent in relationships where there is a disparity in education levels as this can have a negative effect on the lower-educated partner's perception of political competence.

It is widely recognised that electoral participation is central to democratic performance. However, not everybody votes. For example, voter turnout at the 2019 European Parliament elections was [50.6 per cent](#). The decision to vote is not random: some groups of citizens are more likely to vote than others. Research shows that the likelihood to vote correlates with socioeconomic position. This is deemed problematic since, as [Arend Lijphart famously argued](#), unequal voting implies unequal representation and unequal influence.

Why do certain citizens turn out to vote, while others stay at home? Part of the answer to this puzzle can be found in educational attainment. On average, political participation is higher among people with higher levels of education. To explain this, researchers often indicate that educational level is a resource: it increases one's political competence. The argument is that, via education, people develop cognitive abilities and acquire political information which allows them to make sense of politics, to develop political opinions, and to participate politically.

Social scientists emphasise that the importance of education is not limited to one's own educational level. Family and friends are also valuable resources for political behaviour. In particular, the educational level of one's partner matters. Voting is often a joint activity for partners, people tend to discuss politics with their partner, and partners may be a source of social pressure to participate politically. Therefore, the higher educated one's spouse is, the higher the likelihood to vote. Or so the traditional argument goes.

This common perspective, however, overlooks crucial processes of social comparison. Because of these, having a well-educated spouse may actually suppress one's inclination to vote. To understand this, it is necessary to consider the role of educational attainment beyond that as a mere resource.

Higher levels of education are not only a resource, but also function as an indicator of social status. People often interpret educational attainment as a signal of competence and expertise. Status beliefs dominant in western societies assert that higher educated people are more competent to vote than lower educated people. Research indicates that *both* higher and lower educated people share such status beliefs. Therefore, one's relative position in society affects perceptions of one's own entitlement to participate politically.

We argue that this status effect of educational attainment also, and perhaps especially, applies to partnerships. After all, people with a lower educational level than their partner are confronted with their lower educational status on a daily basis. Consequently, we hypothesised that they are discouraged to vote.

To examine this, we turned to the most recent wave of the [European Social Survey](#), which includes detailed information about representative samples of citizens living in 23 European countries. Because we are interested in *how* partners affect voting in different ways, we limited our analyses to people cohabiting with their partner. We used a statistical technique that allowed us to disentangle the different ways in which partners affect voting.

On the one hand, our analysis reproduced the well-known finding that having a partner with a higher level of education *increases* one's likelihood to vote. On the other hand, however, we found that being less educated compared to one's partner simultaneously *decreases* one's likelihood to vote, most likely due to a lower sense of entitlement. Living with a partner with a higher level of education consequently proves less of an impetus to go to the ballot box than is often assumed.

Indeed, in addition to viewing education as a resource – for example, as a way to acquire political competences – education is relevant because of its social implications regarding status. Educational attainment puts people in positions that are socially constructed as ‘inferior’ or ‘superior’ and which, via processes of social comparison, affect people’s sense of entitlement to participate politically.

Inequality, obviously, goes beyond the setting of cohabiting partners. Therefore, our arguments may be applied more generally to understanding inequalities in political participation which hamper democratic performance.

For more information, see the authors’ accompanying paper in the [Journal of Marriage and Family](#)

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