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Review of Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*

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NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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## Review of Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*

### **Abstract**

The presumed importance of formal education to good citizenship has been deeply imbedded in the theory and practice of democracy in America since the founding. Education provides the skills and knowledge for creating a productive, informed, and engaged citizenry. It is the great equalizer that helps level the economic, social, and political playing field. Survey research since the 1950s has provided consistent evidence of the value of education at the individual level. Indeed, in his 1972 essay, "Change in the American Electorate" (in Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse, eds., *The Human Meaning of Social Change*), Philip E. Converse describes education as "the universal solvent," strongly and positively correlated with a host of valued civic attitudes and behaviors.

### **Comments**

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Education and Democratic Citizenship in America.**



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more difficult with cooperative programs. Local compliance is greater under coercive mandates, but local innovation is higher in cooperative systems. The flexibility to be gained from using cooperative efforts is, to some degree, countered by the variability in commitment from different local governments.

The authors quite reasonably conclude that neither style is ideal and that both have limitations. Furthermore, to their credit, the authors do offer some recommendations, particularly about the facilitating conditions under which the virtues of a cooperative system may be realized. Finally, the authors suggest, albeit succinctly, how lessons from these programs may be generalized to other policies in other settings.

A project this ambitious and innovative is bound to inspire questions. The most obvious, comparability of cross-national cases, is one which the authors anticipate early and meet head on. Defending even the comparison of the State of Florida to the nation of New Zealand, they argue that "the similarities . . . far outweigh the differences" (p. 11). I did not find this as troubling as some comparative scholars may, but some aspects of such comparisons warrant more discussion. One of these, mentioned on the last page of the Appendix, is that much greater growth pressures in Florida than in New Zealand or New South Wales could well lead to a much different environment for local governments. A second and related aspect involves competitive influences such as relocation blackmail. The authors themselves cite a New Zealand minister's concerns about lowering standards to attract development (p. 57). The effect of such pressure on state and local governments worried about losing business to the next county or state could receive fuller consideration.

A second question concerns focus. The book examines the effect of system type on policy outcome but is much less concerned about the front end of those arrangements: Why are coercive or cooperative styles chosen in the first place? This is understandable given the emphasis of the project and is probably necessary for purposes of length, but more comprehensive answers about the choice of institutional arrangements may help inform the answers to why certain outcomes result. For example, referring back to competition pressures, Florida may consider a coercive style the only reasonable option for how to use local governments in the face of competition from Georgia or Alabama over coastal developers.

A third issue involves possible connections between this project and the broader literature on intergovernmental relations. Though the authors' citations (and previous work) indicate an understanding and awareness of that literature, I personally would have preferred to see deeper and more pointed reflection on how the results of this project extend, contradict, or expand upon some of the research in this field. Having started this review by stating that the role of local governments has not received enough attention, I must also say that it has received some, and some of it is quite good. I would have liked to see, for example, fuller consideration of the theoretical implications of this project for the arguments posed by Paul Peterson and others about the incentives of policymakers in local governments.

Finally, a lesser but related point is more stylistic. Readers should be aware that the book uses endnotes for each chapter but does not include a bibliography. Perhaps the reason—the wide range of literature needed for the scope of the project—is the same reason that some readers would find one desirable.

Overall, this is an impressive work. It presents challenging ideas as examined in a variety of settings and does so in a clear and readable manner. This book will be useful for policy

practitioners as well as for classes on environmental policy, intergovernmental relations, and even comparative politics.

**Education and Democratic Citizenship in America.** By Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 268p. \$48.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Michael X. Delli Carpini, *Barnard College, Columbia University*

The presumed importance of formal education to good citizenship has been deeply imbedded in the theory and practice of democracy in America since the founding. Education provides the skills and knowledge for creating a productive, informed, and engaged citizenry. It is the great equalizer that helps level the economic, social, and political playing field.

Survey research since the 1950s has provided consistent evidence of the value of education at the individual level. Indeed, in his 1972 essay, "Change in the American Electorate" (in Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse, eds., *The Human Meaning of Social Change*), Philip E. Converse describes education as "the universal solvent," strongly and positively correlated with a host of valued civic attitudes and behaviors.

But there is a problem. Despite the steady increase in the average years of formal education attained by Americans, despite the shrinking gap in education among citizens, and despite the strong connection between *individual* measures of good citizenship and education, aggregate indicators of civic involvement show little evidence of increasing, and in many instances they have declined over the past several decades. It is this apparent paradox that Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry attempt to resolve in their excellent book, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*.

The authors begin by arguing that, at the individual level, education enhances democratic citizenship through two distinct pathways. "Democratic enlightenment," defined as an adherence to democratic norms and the recognition of collective interests that can contradict and override one's individual preferences, is centrally affected by education's ability to increase the cognitive capacity of citizens. This in turn gives people the motivation and tools to appreciate both the logic of democratic norms and the potential legitimacy of views different from their own. "Democratic engagement," or the ability to understand one's own interests and effectively pursue them through the political system, is largely connected to education through one's social position and the resulting access to centers of political power and decision making.

In Part I (chapters 2 through 5), the authors use data from the 1990 Citizen Participation Study to demonstrate that civic enlightenment (measured as political tolerance, knowledge of democratic principles, and knowledge of current political facts) and civic engagement (measured as voting, political attentiveness, knowledge of political leaders, and participation in difficult political activities) are two correlated yet distinct dimensions of citizenship; that formal education is positively correlated with each dimension; and, most important, that the effect of education on civic enlightenment occurs largely through the intervening variable of "cognitive proficiency" (measured by a verbal proficiency test), while the influence of education on civic engagement occurs through a more complex set of pathways dominated by "social network centrality" (measured by respondents' self-reports of how personally acquainted they are with local,

state, and national elected officials and with local and national members of the media).

In Part II the authors draw on this theoretical argument and empirical evidence to address directly the paradox mentioned above: If education is positively correlated with civic engagement at the individual level, and if median levels of education have increased dramatically in the United States over the past several decades, then why have median levels of civic engagement not increased? Other researchers have noted this paradox but have largely addressed it by assuming that other societal changes (the weakening of political parties, the erosion of civil society, the increased complexity of politics, the declining quality of education, the growing dominance of television as a source of political information, and so forth) have worked to cancel out the positive effects of education.

Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry take a different tack. Building on the logic of Fred Hirsch's *Social Limits to Growth* (an important and, to my mind, undercited book), they argue that education's collective effect on civic enlightenment, since it is driven mainly by individual cognitive proficiency, is absolute, while education's collective influence on civic engagement, because it is driven by one's location in a sociopolitical hierarchy, is relative and thus bounded. The distinction is an important one. Most theory and research on the effect of education assumes the absolute model: If attributes of good citizenship increase with education, then raising the median level of education should increase the median level of good citizenship. But if the influence of education is relative, then greater aggregate levels of education are equivalent to running in place; a college degree today gets you what a high school degree did in the past.

The authors test their theory using pooled data from the General Social Surveys and from the National Election Surveys from 1972 to 1994. Their models include measures of both absolute years of educational attainment and the relative educational environment (measured as the mean years of education attained by all respondents aged 25 to 50 years at the time the respondent was age 25), as well as other variables to control for the effects of life cycle, generation, demographic characteristics, partisanship, and family and community characteristics. They also include dummy variables for the year of each survey so as to de-trend the data and isolate (as best as possible) the effects of education from other exogenous factors not included in the model.

The authors find that, consistent with their theoretical expectations and the findings from Part I, civic enlightenment increases with both absolute education and the relative educational environment, while civic engagement is positively correlated with absolute education but *negatively correlated with the relative educational environment*. They then use the results of these analyses to estimate the predicted mean level of enlightenment and engagement over time, and they find a remarkably strong fit between the predicted and actual trends from 1972 to 1994. In short, they find that the absolute and relative effects of education work cumulatively to increase civic enlightenment, while the positive effects of absolute levels of education on civic engagement are neutralized and sometimes overwhelmed by the decreasing relative value of education (as a social sorting mechanism) over time.

The authors' conclusions are sobering. While the absolute effects of education theoretically may increase citizens' ability to be engaged, relatively fixed limits on the ability of political elites to respond to demands mean that the political system will always be most responsive to those who, because of their social status, are best positioned to be heard. Given these unknown but bounded limits, increased education simply

leads to more fine-grained decision rules as to who sits at the political table. More education is necessary for individuals, but only to hold one's place in the sociopolitical hierarchy as others become more educated. Efforts to alleviate social inequality through increased education, while well intentioned, will inevitably lead to conflict, since political access for new groups and individuals necessarily means less access for others. Given this, the authors end by suggesting that the social, political, and economic costs of policies aimed at increasing the aggregate level of education in the United States *may* outweigh the benefits provided.

One can take issue with parts of the theoretical arguments and empirical analyses presented in this book. Why, for example, would cognitive proficiency logically increase one's ability to appreciate the legitimacy of the interests of fellow citizens but not increase the ability to discern one's own interests? Why should knowledge of current political facts (such as which party controls Congress) be considered an attribute of both civic engagement and civic enlightenment, while knowledge of political leaders be conceptualized as an attribute of only civic engagement? Why do voting and political attentiveness, which the authors hypothesize should be part of both civic enlightenment and civic engagement, appear to load only on the latter dimension. This last point is especially troubling, in that voting and attentiveness do not clearly fit the logic of social network centrality, which assumes limited access to those in power and politics as a zero-sum game.

More generally, the authors' vision of politics as a zero-sum game played by individual actors in contact with individual political leaders who control limited, divisible goods and services misses the more collective, consensual aspects of politics. And even if one accepts the fundamentally competitive nature of politics, thinking in terms of competition among groups rather than individuals lessens the sense of system overload and changes the calculation regarding the value of a more educated—and more equitably educated—citizenry.

Nonetheless, taken as a whole, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* presents an elegant, challenging, and innovative argument that is strongly supported by the data. The authors provide important contributions to the way in which we conceptualize citizenship and the way in which we conceptualize the civic effect of education. This book is a must read for anyone interested in issues of democratic politics and will have a major influence on the field for years to come. Quite simply, it will be impossible to consider the effects of education on citizenship, political participation, and public opinion without addressing and building on the theories and findings presented in this book.

**Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy.** By Benjamin I. Page. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 167p. \$29.00 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

James S. Fishkin, *University of Texas at Austin*

Ben Page's new book has many virtues. It is readable, thoughtful, and built around some case studies that will engage anyone interested in politics. The book is also more than a series of essays because Page ties them together by posing a common problem and reflecting on what his case studies mean. The common problem is one that cuts to the core of democratic theory. "A vigorous democracy cannot settle for a passive citizenry that merely chooses leaders and then forgets entirely about politics" Page says. "Some kind of