

Lower education levels goes hand in hand with support for direct democracy

By Democratic Audit UK

*What role does education play in the type of political system that citizens would like to see implemented in their country? **Hilde Coffé** presents results from a study, in collaboration with Ank Michels, using survey data in the Netherlands. The research shows that while all education groups have similar levels of support for representative democracy, those with lower levels of education are far more supportive of direct democracy and other alternative systems. The findings suggest that this support is not linked specifically to a desire for greater participation in politics, but instead reflects the fact that lower educated groups are simply more willing to back alternatives to the current form of representative democracy used in the country.*



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As levels of political distrust and dissatisfaction with political institutions have increased in various post-industrialised countries, scholars, policy makers and politicians have debated ways of organising democracy to restore citizens' political trust. Many reformists have called for various mechanisms of direct democracy to complement the existing form of representative democracy. The people, it is alleged, desire to have a greater voice in political decision-making processes. Yet, the extent to which people actually desire more of a voice is an on-going debate.

Using data collected in December 2011 within the scope of the Dutch [LISS Household Panel](#) administered by [CentERdata](#), we explored support (and educational differences therein) for representative, direct and so-called stealth democracy. This concept, [developed](#) by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse refers to a form of democracy that stresses efficiency, less debate, less influence of partisanship interests, and a greater use of expert opinions in political decision-making processes. Thus, while direct democracy, as compared with representative democracy, entails a higher degree of involvement of ordinary citizens in the decision-making process, stealth democracy calls for less active citizen involvement.

Our [findings](#) show that the levels of support for representative democracy are similar across lower education, medium education and higher education levels. Hence, our data do not reveal a positive link between education

and support for representative democracy. Yet, more substantial differences occur with regard to support for direct and stealth democracy, with considerable differences showing up between each of the three educational groups. Support for both direct and stealth democracy is highest among those with little education and lowest among more highly educated citizens.

Our results also indicate that those who perceive themselves as being unable to exert political influence are more likely to support an *alternative* type of democracy compared with those who feel that they can influence government policy. Thus while supporting both stealth and direct democracy may seem contradictory (as the former requires less citizen involvement, while the latter involves a higher degree of citizen engagement), both seem to offer an alternative to representative democracy for those who feel dissatisfied and lacking in influence. The main explanation for lower educated citizens' higher levels of support for stealth, and in particular, direct democracy, relates to lower levels of political efficacy and satisfaction among the groups with a lower level of educational attainment. In general, therefore, our study finds support for *political dissatisfaction theory* which argues that citizens who feel dissatisfied by representative democracy will demand a more participatory role in politics.

At the same time, we found no substantial differences between different levels of education with respect to general support for representative democracy. In fact, citizens with a lower level of education who displayed the same levels of political efficacy, trust and satisfaction as more highly educated citizens were found to be slightly more supportive of representative democracy than the better-educated group.

In other words, while lower educated citizens seem to be more supportive of direct and stealth democracy than higher educated citizens, such support does not imply that citizens with less education are generally less favourable towards representative democracy. Indeed, while lower educated citizens' lower levels of political trust, efficacy and satisfaction makes them more inclined to prefer alternative ways of democracy over representative democracy, they do not result in a substantial difference in overall support for representative democracy.

While there are no major educational gaps in overall support for representative democracy, when a direct comparison is made with 'alternative' types of democracy poorly educated citizens tend to have lower levels of support for representative democracy. It would therefore be worthwhile investigating how trust and satisfaction with the main institutions of representative democracy can be improved. One possibility would be to look for ways to strengthen citizens' feelings of being represented, which are on average weaker in the groups with less education compared with those with a higher level of educational attainment.

In general, the educational gaps in support for direct and stealth democracy deserve further attention. Ultimately, the extent that different educational groups have different opinions about how democracy should be structured might have consequences for the legitimacy of democracy, in particular because a legitimate democracy demands some form of common conception as to what democratic decision-making should entail. Moreover, the gaps relate to a trend towards an *increasing* educational gap in political interest, attitudes and behaviour which seems to occur in various countries and which it is necessary to continue surveying.

Note: This article is based on the author's recent article in [Electoral Studies](#) (co-authored with Ank Michels) and gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit UK, nor of the London School of Economics. It originally appeared on [LSE EUROPP – European Politics and Policy](#). Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

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