

Economics focus

Degrees of democracy

More education does not necessarily lead to greater enthusiasm for representative politics

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ON JUNE 20th Zine el-Abidine Ben-Ali, Tunisia's former ruler, was sentenced in absentia to 35 years in prison. Many trace the origins of the popular rebellion that forced him from office to frustration over the treatment by the police of a young man with few job prospects. That combustible mixture of authoritarianism, unemployment and youth has played a big role in sparking many of the popular uprisings across the Middle East and north Africa that followed Tunisia's. But some argue that increased education should also take credit for the Arab spring.

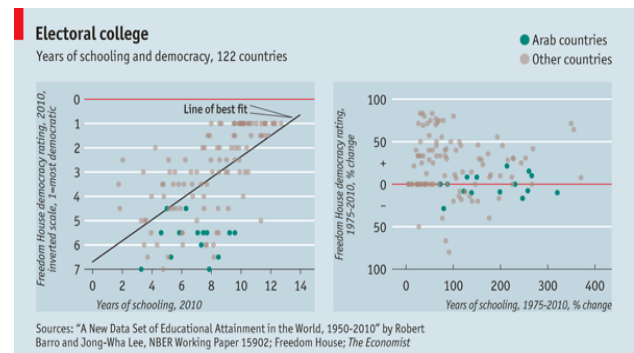
Many of the countries where disaffection with strongmen rulers has spilled over into revolt have seen their education levels rise sharply in recent decades. Young people in these countries are far better educated than their parents were. In 1990 the average Egyptian had 4.4 years of schooling; by 2010 the figure had risen to 7.1 years. Could it be that education, by making people less willing to put up with restrictions on freedom and more willing to question authority, promotes democratisation?

Ideas about the links between education, income and democracy are at the heart of what social scientists in the middle of the last century termed the “modernisation hypothesis”. One of its most famous proponents, Seymour Lipset, wrote in 1959 that “education presumably broadens men's outlooks, enables them to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restrains them from adhering to extremist and monistic doctrines, and increases their capacity to make rational electoral choices.”

Since then plenty of economists and political scientists have looked for statistical evidence of a causal link between education and democratisation. Many have pointed to the strong correlation that exists between levels of education and measures like the pluralism of party politics and the existence of civil liberties (see left-hand chart). The patterns are similar when you look at income and democracy. There are outliers, of course—until recently, many Arab countries managed to combine energy-based wealth and decent education with undemocratic

political systems. But some deduce from the overall picture that as China and other authoritarian states get more educated and richer, their people will agitate for greater political freedom, culminating in a shift to a more democratic form of government.

This apparently reasonable intuition is shakier than it seems. Critics of the hypothesis point out that correlation is hardly causation. The general trend over the past half-century may have been towards rising living standards, a wider spread of basic education and more democracy, but it is entirely possible that this is being driven by another variable. Even if the correlation were not spurious, it would be difficult to know which way causation ran. Does more education lead to greater democracy? Or are more democratic countries better at educating their citizens?



The modernisation hypothesis suggested a particular direction of change: more education and income should beget greater democracy. But as the right-hand chart shows, there is virtually no statistical association at all between changes in a country's level of education and its measured level of democracy. If this is true, there is no particular reason to hope that more education will lead to a more democratic world.

A recent NBER paper* (#footnote1) sheds light on why this might be the case. Those who posit that more schooling leads to greater democracy often have specific ideas about how people's attitudes change as a result of their becoming more educated, arguing that it creates people who are more willing to challenge authority. It is possible, however, that education reinforces authority and the power of ruling elites; indeed, it may often be designed to do precisely this. The study tried to find out which of these competing ideas of the effects of education is more accurate.

The authors compared a group of Kenyan girls in 69 primary schools whose students were randomly selected to receive a scholarship with similar students in schools which received no such financial aid. Previous studies had shown that the scholarship programme led to higher test scores and increased the likelihood that girls enrolled in secondary school. Overall, it significantly increased the amount of education obtained. For the new study the authors tried to see how the extra schooling had affected the political and social attitudes of the women in question.

Class divide

What they found was in many ways contradictory. For instance, girls who benefited from the

scholarship and got more schooling were more independent and less accepting of the traditional sources of authority within the family. But although education seemed in some sense to have “liberated” them in terms of their personal aspirations, it did not seem to have had the broader effects that proponents of the modernisation hypothesis would have expected. In particular, those with more education did not become more favourably inclined towards democracy. In fact, education deepened their sense of identification with their ethnic group and increased their tolerance for political violence. There was little evidence that having more education made them more engaged in civic life or political organisations.

This is not entirely surprising. Education may make people more interested in improving their own lives but they may not necessarily see democracy as the way to do it. Even in established democracies, more education does not always mean either more active political participation or greater faith in democracy. In India, for example, poorer and less educated people vote in larger numbers than their more educated compatriots. Indeed, the latter often express disdain for, and impatience with, the messiness of democracy. Many yearn instead for the kind of government that would execute the corrupt and build highways, railway lines and bridges at the dizzying pace of authoritarian China.

* “Education as Liberation?” by Willa Friedman, Michael Kremer, Edward Miguel and Rebecca Thornton. NBER Working Paper 16939, April 2011.

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