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Partner Politics: How Partners Are Relevant to Voting

Objective: *The authors study how partners are relevant to voting.*

Background: *Previous studies have assessed whether having a partner influences political participation. The authors focus on how having a partner may affect political participation in different ways. The authors theorize and analytically disentangle three mechanisms through which partners relate to voting.*

Method: *The authors analyze the most recent wave of the European Social Survey and limit the analyses to people in a heterosexual relationship who cohabit with their partner (n = 23,373). In contrast to previous studies, the authors use Diagonal Reference Models, which allow them to disentangle the different ways in which partners affect voting.*

Results: *The authors find that both the educational level of the respondents and that of their partners positively affect voting. In addition, the relative position of a person in an educationally heterogamous relationship proves to be related to voting: Citizens whose level of education is lower than that of their partner are less likely to vote than people who have the same level of education but who are in an educationally homogamous relationship.*

Conclusion: *The authors argue that the lowest educated partner in a heterogamous relationship experiences a lower sense of entitlement to participate politically. This study increases the understanding of voting and underlines the political relevance of the family.*

INTRODUCTION

Various authors stress the potential importance of individuals' family contexts for political outcomes in addition to well-researched individual characteristics, such as gender, age, and education (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Stoker & Jennings, 1995; Zuckerman, 2005). Our study adds to this literature by focusing on partners' educational levels, as education is the most influential sociodemographic characteristic related to voting (Blais, 2006; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). It is important to move beyond analyzing the role of individuals' own educational level, as: "my behavior can be affected not only by my education, but also by that of others around me. The core issue is whether (holding constant my own education), I am more likely or less likely

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Key Words: couples, education, family structure, inequalities, socialization, spouses.

to participate politically and socially if those around me become more educated.” (Helliwell & Putnam, 2007, p. 1).

We argue that the role partners play in voting should be analytically disentangled into distinct mechanisms. Specifically, we theorize how voting is affected by the educational level of the partner and by educational heterogeneity—that is, relationships in which the partners differ in their educational attainment. We test our hypotheses by analyzing data from the most recent wave of the European Social Survey (2016). We apply a method that enables us to disentangle the role of partner characteristics and educational heterogeneity, hence allowing for a more in-depth understanding of how partners affect voting.

HOW PARTNERS ARE RELEVANT TO VOTING

The Importance of Partners

In response to a plethora of studies with a focus on individual-level socioeconomic or sociopsychological characteristics, various authors have stressed the role of individuals' social environments for explaining voting behavior. For example, Beck (1991, p. 373) argued that we should move away from treating the individual as an autonomous actor and also focus on intermediaries, such as personal networks and mass media, through which voters get political information. Similarly, Kenny (1993, p. 223) contended that we should recognize political participation as “both an individual and as a collective process.” Various others have also stressed that political outcomes are affected by social interactions with significant others, especially one's partner (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Jennings & Niemi, 1971; Zuckerman, 2005).

Voting is often a joint activity for partners, and partners may be a source of social pressure or participants in political discussions. Indeed, research finds that people most frequently mention a spouse as their main political discussion partner and that a spouse is one of the most frequent targets for political persuasion (Kenny, 1993; Stoker & Jennings, 1995, 2005; Zuckerman, 2005). Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, p. 45) argued that “the encouragement of a wife or husband might be the push necessary to get both partners to the polls.” Others have claimed that marriage inspires voting via fostering integration into one's community (Kingston & Finkel, 1987; Stoker & Jennings, 1995).

Against this background, much research has focused on “the most elementary question: are married people more likely to vote?” (Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008, p. 1514). Most studies have reported that married citizens vote more often than unmarried citizens (Kingston & Finkel, 1987; Leighley & Nagler, 2013; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008), even though other studies have found no (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001) or negative (Stoker & Jennings, 1995) effects of being married on the likelihood to vote.

We believe that it is important to take into account that partners may affect voting in different ways. Specifically, while extant studies focused on differences in voting behavior between those with and those without a (married) partner, we argue that an important next step is to scrutinize *why* a partner influences one's voting. Disentangling the different ways in which partners affect voting is crucial because this influence may work via multiple, perhaps even cross-pressuring, mechanisms. Consequently, we theorize three analytically distinct mechanisms. In so doing, we focus on people in a heterosexual relationship who cohabit with their partner. (Because of the social nature of the different mechanisms, it makes sense to focus on people sharing their daily lives and thus to focus on cohabiting partners. Because of data availability [see Data and Methods], we can only address heterosexual relationships.)

Partners' Educational Levels as a Boost for Electoral Participation

It is plausible that citizens' likelihood to vote is positively associated with their partners' level of education (Gruneau, 2018; Stoker & Jennings, 1995; Zuckerman, 2005). As higher educated people have higher levels of political participation and knowledge (Bovens & Wille, 2017), a more educated spouse may increase one's likelihood of voting because, for instance, of social pressure and the provision of political information. Therefore, we expect a positive association between the educational level of the partner and the likelihood to vote (Hypothesis 1). This aligns with conventional ideas in the field: Partners as a resource for political participation.

The Paralyzing Aspect of Educational Heterogamy

Research on the political relevance of partners has generally assumed that partners only introduce consonant viewpoints (e.g., Alford, Hatemi, Hibbing, Martin, & Eaves, 2011; Weiner, 1978) and that they “reinforce each other’s political beliefs” (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012, p. 484; see also Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 45). This common assumption most likely applies to educationally homogamous relationships, that is, relationships in which both partners have the same level of education. Such relationships probably increase the likelihood to vote, as citizens with firmly held beliefs are more inclined to express these at the ballot box.

However, the situation is likely different in educationally heterogamous relationships. There is overwhelming evidence that one’s level of education is associated with a wide range of political attitudes (Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015; Weakliem, 2002), indicating that people with different levels of education are likely to have different political views. This implies that educationally heterogamous relationships are likely to be characterized by dissonant, instead of congruent, political viewpoints. In such relationships, one’s political beliefs will more often be challenged, which may result in the decision to abstain from voting. Hence, we hypothesize that educational heterogamy is negatively associated with the likelihood to vote (Hypothesis 2).

Relative Positions in Heterogamous Relationships and a Sense of Entitlement

In addition to the relevance of educational heterogamy as discussed previously, one’s relative position in a heterogamous relationship may relate to voting, as it can affect one’s sense of entitlement. Indeed, we have to consider “the (socially authorized and encouraged) sense of being entitled to be concerned with politics” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 409; cf. Laurison, 2015). Tellingly, a recent experimental study demonstrates that less-educated respondents are less inclined to participate politically if they are confronted with the higher rates of political participation of more-educated citizens (Spruyt, Kuppens, Spears, & Van Noord, 2018). This indicates that a higher level of education fuels a greater “sense of being a relevant and legitimate

citizen who matters in society” and that it generates a sense of entitlement to participate politically (Ten Kate, De Koster, & Van der Waal, 2017, p. 64; cf. Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014; Laurison, 2015).

As processes of social comparison are also at play in relationships (Heckert, Nowak, & Snyder, 1998), we apply this insight about general social comparisons to the level of relationships. We theorize that one’s relative educational level may be especially salient for political participation in case of cohabiting partners. After all, in these cases people are confronted with and reminded of their educationally “superior” or “inferior” position on a daily basis. Consequently, one’s educational level when compared with that of one’s cohabiting partner may impact one’s voting via one’s sense of entitlement. Therefore, we expect that the highest educated person in a heterogamous relationship will have a higher likelihood to vote than someone with an equal educational level who is in a homogamous relationship (Hypothesis 2a). In contrast, the partner with the lowest educational level in a heterogamous relationship is expected to be less likely to vote than someone with the same educational level who is in a homogamous relationship (Hypothesis 2b).

DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS

Data and Measures

We use data from the most recent wave of the European Social Survey (ESS; Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2016), which includes information on 23 countries ($n = 44,210$). We apply poststratification weights provided by the ESS. We focus on a subset ($n = 25,633$) of these data by excluding all individuals who did not live together with a partner ($n = 18,298$) and same-sex couples ($n = 455$). Due to listwise deletion of missing values, the sample for our analyses consists of 23,373 individuals.

Voting was measured using the following question: “Some people don’t vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?” People who were not eligible to vote ($n = 3,687$) were omitted from the analysis; 81% of our sample did vote.

Education and educational heterogamy. Based on the International Standard Classification of

Table 1. *Cross-Tabulation of Educational Level of the Respondent and That of Her or His Partner*

Educational level respondent	Educational level partner						Total <i>n</i>
	Low		Medium		High		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Low	3,120	13.3	1,472	6.2	225	1.0	4,817
Medium	1,656	7.1	8,418	36.0	1,924	8.2	11,998
High	335	1.4	2,322	10.0	3,901	16.6	6,558
Total	5,111		12,212		6,050		23,373

Education 2011, we classified the educational level of respondents and their partners into one of the following three categories: low (for the categories “lower than lower secondary” and “lower secondary” in the original ESS dataset), medium (for “lower tier secondary,” “upper tier secondary,” and “advanced vocational”), and high (for “lower tertiary” and “higher tertiary”). Individuals in the category “other” (for educational level respondent: $n = 88$; for educational level partner: $n = 60$) were coded as missing. Table 1 presents the cross-tabulation of the educational level of the respondents with that of their partners. Educational heterogamy is a dichotomous variable indicating whether a respondent and her or his partner have different educational levels and relates to all the off-diagonal cells in Table 1. Next, we created the following two dichotomous variables to measure the relative positions in heterogamous relationships: individuals above (under) the diagonal are those who are the lowest (highest) educated person in a heterogamous relationship. For our three heterogamy measures, individuals in a homogamous relationship—that is, those on the diagonal—represent the reference category.

Control variables. To account for spuriousness, we control for variables that are related to both voting and educational level. We select these control variables based on extant literature (e.g., Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Gallego, 2007; Hadjar & Beck, 2010; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008). We control for age (centered around the mean of 52; $SD = 15$) and gender (50% women). (We tested whether the mechanisms through which partners affect voting [Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, Hypothesis 2a, and Hypothesis 2b] are gendered. Our analyses [not reported] demonstrate that this is not the case: Models including interactions to test whether the effects of the educational level of

the partner and educational heterogamy are different for men and women have worse fit than the models presented in Table 2). In addition, we control for the legal status of the relationship (81% married) and whether the respondent has children living at home (49%). Migrant status is a dichotomous variable differentiating natives from immigrants. Individuals were considered immigrants (16%) if at least one parent was born abroad. For religious denomination, we distinguish between “none” (39%), “Catholic” (35%), “Protestant” (13%), and “other” (13%). Finally, we control for political interest, which was measured as a series of dummies created using the following question: “How interested would you say you are in politics?” When responding to a four-point Likert-type item, answers varied from “not at all interested” (14%; reference category) to “very interested” (14%).

Method: Diagonal Reference Models

To test our hypotheses, we need to analytically separate how voting is associated with (a) the educational level of the respondent, (b) the educational level of the respondent’s partner, and (c) educational heterogamy. To simultaneously model these associations, we apply Diagonal Reference Models (DRMs). DRMs were developed by Sobel (1981) to study the consequences of social mobility and allow disentangling of the extent to which individuals are affected by their social position of origin, their social position of destination, and their experience of social mobility (e.g., Daenekindt, 2017). DRMs are also perfectly suited to model the relevance of heterogamy as they allow researchers to disentangle how both the characteristics of each partner and heterogamy are associated with a dependent variable (Eeckhaut, Van de Putte, Gerris, & Vermulst, 2013; Van der Waal, Daenekindt, & De Koster, 2017).

Table 2. Parameter Estimates for Model 1, Model 2, and Model 3 on Voting ($n = 23,373$)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	OR	95% CI ^a	OR	95% CI ^a	OR	95% CI ^a
Diagonal intercepts						
Low education	0.58*	[0.46, 0.73]	0.60*	[0.48, 0.76]	0.60*	[0.47, 0.75]
Medium education	1.00	[0.81, 1.24]	1.02	[0.83, 1.26]	1.02	[0.83, 1.27]
High education	1.78*	[1.42, 2.25]	1.85*	[1.46, 2.34]	1.83*	[1.45, 2.32]
Weight parameter ^b						
Educational level respondent (p)	0.67*	[0.56, 0.78]	0.67*	[0.57, 0.78]	0.32	[-0.14, 0.78]
Educational level partner ($1-p$)	0.33*	[0.22, 0.44]	0.33*	[0.22, 0.43]	0.68*	[0.22, 1.14]
Heterogamy measures (in homogamous relationship = ref.)						
In heterogamous relationship			0.92*	[0.85, 0.99]		
Respondent higher educated than partner					1.15	[0.85, 1.54]
Partner higher educated than respondent					0.74*	[0.55, 0.99]
Controls						
Gender (men = ref.)	1.16*	[1.07, 1.25]	1.16*	[1.08, 1.25]	1.16*	[1.08, 1.25]
Age (centered)	1.03*	[1.03, 1.03]	1.03*	[1.03, 1.03]	1.03*	[1.03, 1.03]
Migrant status (native = ref.)	0.49*	[0.44, 0.55]	0.49*	[0.44, 0.55]	0.50*	[0.44, 0.55]
Religious denomination (none = ref.)						
Catholic	1.48*	[1.33, 1.64]	1.47*	[1.33, 1.64]	1.47*	[1.33, 1.64]
Protestant	1.73*	[1.47, 2.03]	1.73*	[1.47, 2.03]	1.73*	[1.47, 2.03]
Other	0.79*	[0.67, 0.93]	0.79*	[0.67, 0.93]	0.79*	[0.67, 0.93]
Political interest (not at all = ref.)						
Hardly interested	2.55*	[2.31, 2.81]	2.55*	[2.31, 2.81]	2.55*	[2.31, 2.81]
Quite interested	5.35*	[4.77, 5.99]	5.37*	[4.79, 6.02]	5.37*	[4.79, 6.02]
Very interested	6.98*	[5.89, 8.27]	7.01*	[5.91, 8.31]	7.01*	[5.92, 8.31]
Children at home	1.13*	[1.04, 1.23]	1.14	[1.05, 1.23]	1.14*	[1.05, 1.23]
Married	1.35*	[1.23, 1.50]	1.35*	[1.22, 1.49]	1.35*	[1.22, 1.49]
Country dummies (not shown)	INCLUDED		INCLUDED		INCLUDED	
χ^2_{diff} (vs. M1)			4.43*		6.70*	
Df_{diff}			1		2	

Note: M1 = Model 1; ref. = reference. ^aConfidence intervals are based on robust standard errors. ^bThe weight parameters are not odds ratios. * $p < .05$.

We specify the baseline DRM (Model 1) as $Y_{ijk} = p * \mu_{ii} + (1 - p) * \mu_{jj} + \sum \beta x_{ijkl} + e_{ijk}$. DRMs model behavior of individuals in heterogamous relationships as a function of behavior of people in different homogamous relationships (Eeckhaut et al., 2013). Therefore, estimates of voting of respondents in an educationally homogamous relationship—which are located on the diagonal of the cross-tabulation of the educational level of each partner—are combined to estimate voting of respondents in educationally heterogamous relationships. These so-called diagonal intercepts are represented in the equation as μ_{ii} and μ_{jj} . Therefore, the behavior of individuals in heterogamous relationships with educational levels i and j is modeled as a function of the behavior of respondents in homogamous relationships

characterized by these educational levels (i.e., μ_{ii} and μ_{jj}). Subsequently, p —which lies in the interval $[0, 1]$ —indicates the relative importance of the educational level of the respondent (i.e., i); $1-p$ indicates the relative importance of the educational level of the respondent’s partner (i.e., j). Hence, this baseline model provides a test for the importance of the educational level of the partner (specifically, it tests if $1-p$ is significantly larger than 0). To test the other hypotheses, we need to extend the baseline model. The different model specifications are presented in Table 3.

FINDINGS

We used Turner and Firth’s Dref subcommand of the gnm R package (Turner & Firth, 2007).

Table 3. Specification of the Models for Testing Our Hypotheses

Model	Specification
1	$Y_{ijk} = p \times \mu_{ii} + (1 - p) \times \mu_{ji} + \sum \beta x_{ijkl} + e_{ijk}$ <p>p: the relative importance of the educational level of the respondent for voting $(1-p)$: the relative importance of the educational level of the respondent's partner for voting This model tests if the educational level of the partner is positively associated with voting (Hypothesis 1)</p>
2	$Y_{ijk} = p \times \mu_{ii} + (1 - p) \times \mu_{ji} + \beta_h \times het + \sum \beta x_{ijkl} + e_{ijk}$ <p>het: 0 = homogamous relationship; 1 = heterogamous relationship This model tests if heterogamy is negatively associated with voting (Hypothesis 2)</p>
3	$Y_{ijk} = p \times \mu_{ii} + (1 - p) \times \mu_{ji} + \beta_{hh} \times hethi + \beta_{hl} \times helto + \sum \beta x_{ijkl} + e_{ijk}$ <p>$hethi$: 1 = respondent is the highest educated person in a heterogamous relationship; 0 = other $helto$: 1 = respondent is the lowest educated person in a heterogamous relationship; 0 = other This model tests if the relative position in a heterogamous relationship is associated with voting (Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b)</p>

Note: Because of the binary character of the dependent variable, we apply a logit link function to each model.

To account for the clustered nature of our data—that is, respondents from the same country tend to be more similar than two randomly chosen respondents—we did two things. First, we estimated fixed effects models with country dummies to remove unobserved heterogeneity between countries. Second, we estimated robust standard errors that correct for heteroscedasticity. To calculate these, we used the sandwich R package (Zeileis, 2004, 2006). Considering the number of countries in our data, we relied on the heteroscedasticity consistent covariance matrix HC3 (Long & Ervin, 2000).

We first considered the baseline model (Model 1), which is presented in Table 2. The diagonal intercepts in Model 1 indicated that voting is stratified. That is, people in a homogamous relationship had lower odds to vote if they had lower educational levels (e.g., 0.58) than if they were higher educated (e.g., 1.78). The weight parameters provided insight into the relative importance of the educational level of respondents and their partners. Both weight parameters were significantly higher than 0 (0.67 and 0.33, respectively). This indicated that both the educational level of the partner and the educational level of the respondent mattered for voting. In other words, controlling for one's own educational level, the higher the educational level of one's partner, the more likely one was to vote. This corroborates Hypothesis 1.

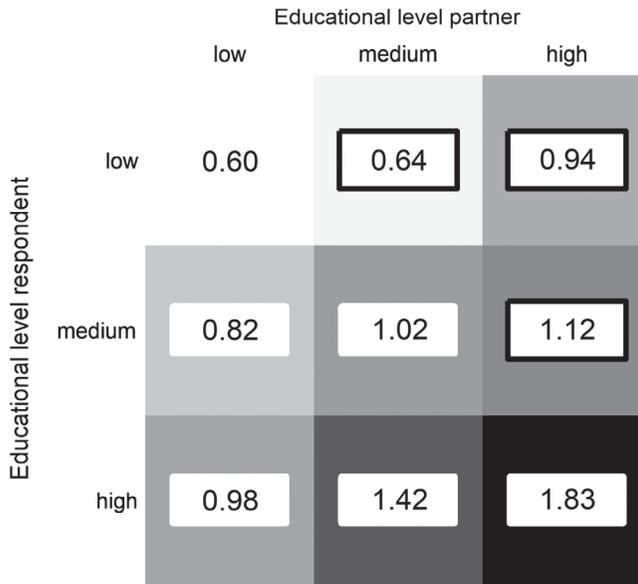
To test the other hypotheses, we moved to the more complex models specified in Table 3. We compared the models using the Chi-squared test. Both Model 2 ($p = .04$) and Model 3 ($p = .04$)

were superior to Model 1. The results of Models 1, 2, and 3 are presented in Table 2.

Models 2 and 3 included different measures of educational heterogamy. Model 2 included a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was in an educationally heterogamous relationship (for testing Hypothesis 2). In Model 3, heterogamy was further specified by including separate dummies for being the highest and for being the lowest educated person in a relationship (reference category: being in a homogamous relationship). The parameter estimates for these different types of heterogamy had different signs as expected based on our theorizing on one's relative position in a heterogamous relationship (i.e., Hypotheses 2a and 2b): Being higher educated than one's partner affects voting positively (but insignificantly), whereas being less educated than one's partner is negatively related to voting. These contrasting effects indicated that the modest parameter estimate of heterogamy in Model 2 was the result of a cross-pressure (i.e., a net result of two underlying opposing effects). Model 3 demonstrated that it was vital to separately estimate parameters for being the highest and being the lowest educated in a heterogamous relationship. Moreover, if Hypothesis 2 on the paralyzing effect of heterogamy on voting were correct, both parameters for heterogamy would be negative in Model 3, which was not the case. In short, we found no evidence for Hypothesis 2 and select Model 3.

The estimates in Model 3 indicated that being less educated than one's partner mattered:

FIGURE 1. CROSS-TABULATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF BOTH PARTNERS REPRESENTING THE ODDS TO VOTE (SHADING PROPORTIONAL TO SIZE OF ODDS).



Respondents whose partners were higher educated than themselves were less likely to vote when compared with individuals who were in an educationally homogamous relationship. Thus, for example (net of the separate effects of the educational level of the respondent and of the partner, addressed in Hypothesis 1), citizens with a low level of education who had a partner that also had a low level of education had 1.35 (= 1/0.74) higher odds to vote than citizens with a low level of education whose partner had a medium or high level of education. This supported Hypothesis 2b. As the parameter estimate (1.15) for being the highest educated in a heterogamous relationship was not significant, we found no evidence for Hypothesis 2a.

To aid interpretation, we visualized the results of the DRM analyses consistent with Daenekindt, Van der Waal, and De Koster (2018, p. 278) in Figure 1. For each cell in the cross-tabulation of educational level of the respondent and that of her or his partner, Figure 1 presents the odds to vote. The odds in the visualization are based on Model 3 and represent individuals who have the mean age and are in the reference category of each other control variable. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the odds to vote increased with the level

of education of the partner. For respondents with a low level of education, the odds to vote were 0.60 if their partner also had a low level of education, whereas the odds were 0.64 and 0.94 if their partner had a medium or high level of education, respectively. The fact that this increase in odds was very modest was because of the simultaneously operating effect of being less educated than one’s partner (as reflected in Hypothesis 2b). If this dampening effect did not exist, the educational level of the partner would more strongly boost one’s likelihood to vote. Generally, in every heterogamous relationship, the likelihood of voting of the lowest educated person was reduced because of his or her relative position (the cells with borders around the numbers).

CONCLUSION

Major Findings

We scrutinized how partners are relevant to voting. We followed up on the literature that stresses the importance of individuals’ social environments, including their partners, on political outcomes. In addition to extant studies that analyzed whether partners affect one’s inclination to vote, we argued that one’s partner is likely to

affect one's inclination to vote in different ways. We theorized three distinct mechanisms through which the educational level of one's partner may affect voting, applied a method to disentangle these in our analyses, and assessed their empirical relevance. Consistent with previous work (e.g., Gruneau, 2018), our analyses showed that the higher educated one's partner is, the more likely it is that one will vote. This finding aligns with how the literature usually considers the role of partners for voting: As a resource for political participation. People acquire political competences and a willingness to vote by being socialized and/or pressured by their higher educated partner.

In addition, we found that educational heterogamy matters. Specifically, we found that citizens whose level of education is lower than that of their partner are less likely to vote than people who have the same level of education but who are in an educationally homogamous relationship. This is consistent with literature that stresses the importance of a sense of entitlement (Bourdieu, 1984; Laurison, 2015; Spruyt et al., 2018; Ten Kate et al., 2017). It is likely that people who are confronted with a higher educated partner on a daily basis consider themselves to be less entitled and less qualified to hold and express political opinions, which underlies a lower likelihood to vote. This conclusion improves our understanding of how education relates to political outcomes. Consistent with Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996; cf. Helliwell & Putnam, 2007), our results underline the importance of relative education. Indeed, we argue that in addition to the substantive role of education—as a way to acquire political competences and knowledge, for instance—education is relevant because it associates with a sense of entitlement to participate politically.

However, in contrast to our expectations, the highest educated person in a heterogamous relationship is not more likely to vote than equally educated citizens in a homogamous relationship. An explanation may be found in psychological research, which finds that people compare themselves primarily with people they consider superior (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). This may explain why the relative position in heterogamous relationships—via processes of social comparison—only appears to be relevant for the sense of entitlement of the lower educated partner.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

By studying the different ways in which partners' educational levels affect voting, we contributed to the literature on individual-level drivers of voting behavior. As the way partners affect voting may be context specific, future research could build on our study by engaging with the rich body of literature on the role of characteristics of institutional contexts, such as compulsory voting, for political outcomes (e.g., Powell, 1986). As a first step in theorizing and scrutinizing various mechanisms linking partner characteristics to voting, we analyzed cross-sectional European data by including country fixed effects. We encourage other researchers to build on our insights and to study longitudinal and cross-national differences in how partners are relevant for voting. In so doing, attention could also be paid to disentangling age, period and cohort effects, which is especially salient because educational homogamy has undergone considerable changes due to the vast increase of women's enrollment in higher education.

In addition, it would be worthwhile to collect data on partner characteristics in election surveys. First, this would allow for more precise measurements. Because the ESS data collection was not designed to coincide with national elections, some respondents may have had a different partner during the elections than when the survey was fielded. In our analyses, cross-country variation in this time lag was captured by country fixed effects, but remaining within-country random measurement error may have biased our coefficients downwardly, suggesting that we provided conservative tests of our hypotheses. Measuring the educational level of the partner during national elections would help to overcome this. Second, election surveys would benefit from including additional partner characteristics. While we focused on level of education because this is a key factor in shaping the likelihood to vote and because relevant high-quality, large-scale data are available, other partner characteristics—such as occupation, income, or age—might matter as well. Analyses of data containing richer information on partner characteristics would not only allow to control for potential confounders but also could be used to assess the relative importance of a wider range of theoretical mechanisms linking partner characteristics to voting. This would

be an important next step in the literature on the political relevance of the family.

Study Contribution

The role of the partner is often linked to the gender gaps in political attitudes and in political participation (e.g., Giger, 2009; Pratto, Stallworth, & Sidanius, 1997). With regard to political attitudes, for example, Stoker and Jennings (2005, p. 66) argue that spousal influence reduces or eliminates the gender gap. While we address political participation instead of attitudes, our findings nevertheless may nuance this claim. The suggestion that partners only affect each other politically by erasing differences between partners reflects the conventional focus on political socialization and social pressure within relationships. However, we demonstrated that, in addition to one's educational level and that of the partner, one's relative position in the relationship affects political outcomes, leading to larger differences between partners. This suggests that the relevance of spousal influence for the gender gap in political attitudes and behavior is more complex than typically assumed.

Our finding that the relative position in a relationship is relevant for voting resonates with research on the impact of one's relative position in society on various outcomes. This relative position can "bias people's expectations for their own and the other's competence and suitability for authority in a situation" (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 5). We have theorized that the relative position may also—and perhaps especially—be salient for cohabiting partners, as people are confronted with their "superior" or "inferior" position in this context on a daily basis.

We focused on voting as it is an obvious choice for assessing the potential political relevance of partner characteristics. However, we expect that our theory and findings can be extended beyond voting and potentially apply to other forms of political and civic participation. Systematically scrutinizing how partners are relevant to political outcomes promises to increase our understanding of processes of political socialization and inequalities in political outcomes in general and the political relevance of the family in particular.

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