

AFRICA: Higher education and democratic citizenship

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Formal education in Africa has provided 'democratic dividends', enabling people to make greater use of the news media, obtain information and understanding about politics and thus become more cognitively engaged and critical, according to research. But it is high school, and not higher education, that pays the greatest dividend.

And beyond preference for democracy over other regimes, formal education does not produce many other democratic orientations.

Links between higher education and democracy were investigated under the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa project. HERANA is an expertise network aimed at developing higher education studies and research in Africa, directed by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation, CHET, in Cape Town. *University World News* is a partner.

One project used survey data gathered by [Afrobarometer](#), an independent research project that measures the social, political and economic atmosphere in Africa, resulting in a report *The Limited Impacts of Formal Education on Democratic Citizenship in Africa* by Robert Mattes and Dangalira Mughogho.

It attempted to trace direct and indirect effects of formal education on democratic citizenship, examine these effects across broader dimensions of democratic citizenship than has been done before, and assess the impact of higher education within this process.

The report points out that on the world's poorest continent, poverty and lack of infrastructure seriously limit people's cognitive skills and thus their ability to act as full democratic citizens.

"Along with limited access to news media, extremely low levels of formal education found in many African countries strike at the very core of the skills and information that enable citizens to assess social, economic and political developments, learn the rules of government, form opinions about political performance, and care about the survival of democracy."

Surveys have suggested that a minority of Africans are committed democrats. And citizens often give poorly performing leaders, governments and regimes surprisingly high levels of positive evaluations and trust.

Together, write Mattes and Mughogho, these factors can "co-exist in a particularly corrosive form of 'uncritical citizenship' which contrasts with Pippa Norris' (1999) concept of the 'critical citizen' who supports democracy ideals yet is likely to identify shortcomings in representative institutions, elected leaders and the policies they pursue.

Formal education and democratic citizenship

Formal education can be seen to affect citizenship along at least three paths, the authors argue. First, it may affect attitudes and behavior via a 'positional path' by sorting citizens into differing social networks, situations and classes.

Second, it may promote democratic citizenship through a 'socialisation path', with children trained to support democracy, accept the authority of the democratic state and participate in democratic citizenship.

Third, it may facilitate democratic citizenship via a 'cognitive path', increasing people's verbal and cognitive proficiency as well as their ability to construct their own ideas and critical thoughts.

But in Africa, many people have not been formally educated. And most of those who have, attended schools run by less than democratic states with no 'pro-democratic tint' to teaching and little imparting of practical skills, critical thinking or autonomous participation.

Afrobarometer data has demonstrated that education, along with 'cognitive awareness of politics', is an important source of popular demand for democracy, the authors write. "Africans who have been to school, who use the news media, who know the identity of their political leaders, and who understand democracy as a set of political procedures rather than economic outcomes are far more likely to prefer democracy and reject its authoritarian alternatives."

Higher education and citizenship

Studies of the effects of higher education on democratic citizenship are rare, according to Mattes and Mughogho. It has mostly been assumed that positive contributions to democratic citizenship accumulate

with length of formal education.

The impact of tertiary education in Africa is likely to be minimal simply because so few citizens progress that far, although "there are good reasons to suspect that the micro-level democratic dividend of higher education might be more substantial", given that universities and colleges offer opportunities for critical skills development.

They point out that university students were a driving force behind popular protests that brought down autocratic leaders in many African countries in the early 1990s. Also, research has found that younger, university-trained elected representatives have formed the core of cross-party coalitions that have initiated key reforms in some African parliaments.

Mattes and Mughogho unpacked a set of 'cognitive awareness' factors and isolated the contribution of formal education to each of them, examined the impact of education on a wide range of facets of democratic citizenship - rates of political participation, the ability to formulate political opinions, basic democratic values, and willingness to offer critical performance evaluations - and examined the distinctive impact of higher education.

They used a series of 'Round 3' representative public opinion surveys conducted by the Afrobarometer, which is a joint initiative of the Centre for Democratic Development in Ghana, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa) and Michigan State University.

The surveys were conducted in 2005 in 18 Sub-Saharan African countries that had introduced a measure of democratic and market reforms: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe in Southern Africa; Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal in West Africa; and Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania and Uganda in East Africa.

Respondents were randomly selected citizens aged 18 years or older, and the sample size was 1,200 in most countries (but larger in South Africa and Nigeria). A total of 21,600 Africans were interviewed face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the respondent's language choice.

Afrobarometer surveys, the authors point out, can only be conducted in open societies, so the results do not represent the continent or Africans as a whole, although they do cast light on popular attitudes to democracy among Africans - "a subject on which almost nothing is otherwise known".

Some research findings

Just over one in 10 adults (13%) said they had completed high school, fewer than one in 10 (9%) went beyond high school and just 2% had completed university education. Access to formal education varied widely across countries and regions. Older Africans were far less likely to be educated than younger people, as were rural dwellers compared to urbanites, and women compared to men.

The research found that citizens with higher levels of formal education were far more likely to use news media and to be aware of the identity of leaders, as well as other basic political facts and constitutional rules.

But education provided no real advantage in terms of increasing cognitive engagement or political efficacy. Cognitive engagement seemed to be promoted far more effectively by identification with a political party, and to a lesser extent membership of civic organisations.

"Thus, the main impact of formal education in Africa on the cognitive awareness of politics is through the stimulation of news media use and by giving citizens the skills to accumulate basic facts about the political system, rather than of increasing cognitive engagement or efficacy," write Mattes and Mughogho.

Further, the combined effects of formal education, political information and news media use told very little about who does and does not participate in African politics. Formal education only had a "miniscule" correlation with contacting officials and joining civic associations.

The researchers also looked at whether formal education increased Africans' abilities to articulate preferences and opinions about political life. Here, they found substantial direct and indirect impacts.

Higher levels of education, news media use and political information made "significant and positive contributions" to increasing Africans' ability to offer opinions about the performance of the political system, provide preferences about democracy versus alternative regimes, and a range of social and political values, and provide some meaning to the word 'democracy'.

With educated Africans more likely to offer preferences and opinions, the researchers turned to examine the content of expressed attitudes and people's values.

They found that education had "a positive and sizable impact on the demand for democracy by itself and indirectly through news media use and political information, each of which also has a positive impact," the authors write. Further, education had a "notable impact" on people's stated willingness to confront bureaucratic intransigence and demand accountability.

But across other values the impact of education, news media use and political information was "negligible to non-existent" and in general, cognitive factors seemed to have little to do with whether or not Africans held democratic values or predispositions.

Looking at whether educated Africans were more likely to offer critical evaluations, three main findings emerged.

"First, formal education, media use and political information have sizeable impacts on how people evaluate the national economy, the status of political rights, and the degree of trust they place in government and state," write Mattes and Mughogho.

"Second, with one exception, formal education consistently has a statistically significant and negative impact on performance evaluations. Thus, schooling not only enables Africans to offer more opinions, it also allows them to offer more critical opinions."

Third, while education (holding constant media use and information) made people more critical of performance, it also simultaneously led people to acquire more information, which in turn made them "consistently more forgiving of bad performance".

Higher education and democratic citizenship

The research then narrowed focus to examine the particular impact of higher education which, the authors argue, may be more effective than schools in promoting critical skills and habits, and encouraging students to appreciate diversity, ambiguity, contradiction and nuance.

It found that university attendees were similar to the overall profile of educated people: "They are more urban, and more male, and they also are less likely to experience poverty than high school graduates. But the differences between these two groups are far less pronounced than across the full educational spectrum," Mattes and Mughogho write.

"The effects of higher education (when compared to those of high school education) on news media use and political information are also far more modest than those of formal education in general." And those with university education are only slightly more likely to use the news media or know basic facts about the political system than school-leavers.

The research found that while Africans with at least some university education were less likely than high school graduates to identify with a political party, and more likely to become involved in protest and contact formal officials, the difference was relatively small.

"As with formal education in general, higher education plays no role in encouraging people to join civil society organisations, become involved in community affairs, or vote," the authors continue.

"Compared to high school-leavers, university attendees are very slightly more able to offer opinions on government performance, but exhibit no statistically significant differences in terms of their ability to provide a meaning of democracy, or offer preferences about democracy and a range of other social and political values."

"The most consistent impacts of university education can be seen in terms of performance evaluations." University attendees were consistently more likely to offer more critical evaluations of the performance of their economies, governments and political regimes. "At the same time, the size of the impact is quite limited."

Conclusions

The research provided evidence that Africa's schools and universities "have paid some democratic dividends".

Viewed across 18 countries, increasing levels of formal education enable and stimulate Africans to make greater use of the media to get news about politics and to acquire the basic information that allows citizens to make sense of the larger political system. This, in turn, leads people to become much more cognitively engaged with politics.

Africans with higher levels of schooling are also more likely to display key critical skills, formulating preferences and offering evaluations of political and economic performance.

"They are also more likely to offer critical opinions, especially in terms of how they rate the national economy and the degree to which they distrust government and state institutions, including state-run news media," the authors conclude. Higher levels of schooling also lead Africans to demand democracy.

Beyond the preference for democracy to other regimes, however, formal education does not produce other democratic orientations. Educated respondents were more likely to contact formal officials but no more or less likely to vote, identify with a political party, join civic groups, get involved in community affairs or protest.

And higher education has limited effects on enhancing democratic citizenship.

While graduates were more critical, in general they demonstrate few statistically significant or important differences with high school graduates in terms of political information, news media consumption, political participation, articulateness or pro-democratic values.

"Even with the enormous challenges faced by Africa's schools, students who move up the educational ladder and complete high school become more knowledgeable, more articulate and more critical democrats," Mattes and Mughogho conclude.