Original Article

The education gap in participation and its political consequences

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Abstract Although research on political participation has consistently observed a robust and positive relationship between education and political participation, there is fairly little systematic analysis of its implications for the functioning of modern democracies. This article first explores the degree to which educational differences matter in the extent and form of political participation in the Netherlands. It turns out that the well educated currently comprise less than a third of the population, yet they dominate every political venue in the Netherlands. The less educated, on the other hand, have virtually disappeared from most layers of the participation pyramid. Second, the article explores the political consequences of this education gap in participation. There is no such thing in the Netherlands as a general cleft between citizens and politicians. The major gap is one between less- and well- educated citizens. The less educated tend to be very distrustful and cynical about politics and politicians, whereas the well educated tend to be much more positive about government and political institutions. The education gap has been most manifest with regard to socio-cultural issues, such as crime, the admittance of asylum seekers, cultural integration of immigrants and EU unification. Regarding these issues, differences in the level of formal educational will lead to very divergent political opinions. However, the recent emergence of eurosceptic and nationalist parties, with a populist style, such as the LPF, SP and PVV, have made the less educated more visible in the political landscape.
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> There is probably no single variable in the survey repertoire that generates as substantial correlations in such a variety of directions in political behaviour material as level of formal education … Philip Converse (1972, p. 324)

A Fresh Look at an Old Variable

Revisiting the education effect

The fact that the higher educated are more politically active than the less educated is common knowledge in political science. Ever since the seminal work of Almond and Verba (1963, pp. 379–387) political scientists have shown time and again that educational level substantially affects the political interest and participation of citizens.[1] As far back as 35 years ago, Philip Converse (1972, p. 324) considered education to be the universal solvent for 'the puzzle of political participation'.

Although research on political participation has consistently observed a robust and positive relationship between education and political participation, there is fairly little systematic analysis of its implications for the functioning of modern democracies. A battery of variables (gender, age, education, income and so on) – some theoretically motivated, others simply used as controls – are usually included in survey analysis, yet little attention is given to why and how these variables make a difference. This under-theorized approach to the meaning of these variables, and for our purposes education in particular, inhibits a real understanding of the impact of educational differences on the workings of our democracy. The large differences in political behaviour between the less and well educated emphasize the need to rethink the treatment of education as a *usual suspect* in survey work (Achen, 1992).

The political invisibility of the less educated

From early empirical studies of political behaviour and attitudes formal education has been identified as the chief explanatory variable: 'Formal educational is almost without exception the strongest factor in explaining what citizens do in politics and how they think about politics' (Nie *et al*, 1996, p. 2). But why then has the education gap not drawn more attention? Why is a more systematic empirical investigation into the political consequences of educational differences missing from the literature? One of the reasons is probably that of all demographic characteristics that function as background variables education has been politically the least visible. Political groups are organized on the basis of gender, income, religion, race and ethnicity (Verba *et al*, 1995, p. 172). Education as a category has, however, not mobilized a politically visible group with a clear shared interest, demanding equal rights or an improved position. Although education frequently appears on the political agenda as a policy issue, it is always considered as a means to improve the position of groups that are otherwise socially or politically disadvantaged.

In political research, education most of the time is packaged together with other politically relevant characteristics. For example, being low educated often is bundled to a number of other characteristics, like income, race and gender. Education is, thus, not a politically visible characteristic. This may be the reason why the impact of educational differences on the workings of our democracy has been understudied.

In this article we shall try to deal with this dearth. We will explore the degree to which educational differences matter in the extent and form of political participation of Dutch citizens. Our purpose in this article is *not* to explain who is active and who is not. The aim is to *describe* the differences among educational groups – and to consider its political implications.

We will distinguish three levels of education.[2] Citizens who have no formal qualifications at all, or who have been educated up to the primary and/or lower secondary education level (primary school, VMBO, MBO1), are considered to be *low* educated. Those with higher secondary and/or junior vocational qualifications (HAVO, VWO, MBO2, 3 and 4) are the *middle* group. Citizens with a higher vocational college or university degree (HBO, WO) belong to the *highly* educated group. In 2007, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 29 per cent of the workforce had low educational qualifications, 44 per cent medium and 28 per cent was well educated.[3]

First we will show that well-educated citizens are indeed significantly more likely to be active in almost all forms of political participation than those less educated. Then we will explore the *consequences* of this inequality of political voice: does it matter? How relevant is the over-representation of the well educated in the different political arenas? Why should we bother about the education gap? And what are its consequences for the functioning of contemporary Dutch democracy? We will examine these questions on the basis of the Dutch Election Studies (DES/NKO) of 2006. In addition, for some descriptions – for example the educational background of politicians – we relied on several additional sources of data.

The Education Gap in Participation

The participation pyramid

Political participation is the main mechanism in democracies by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences and needs to government. It takes place at an extraordinary scale during elections at which citizens have the opportunity to control who will hold public office. Outside elections there is an array of political activities directed towards the electoral system, such as holding a political position, contacting politicians,

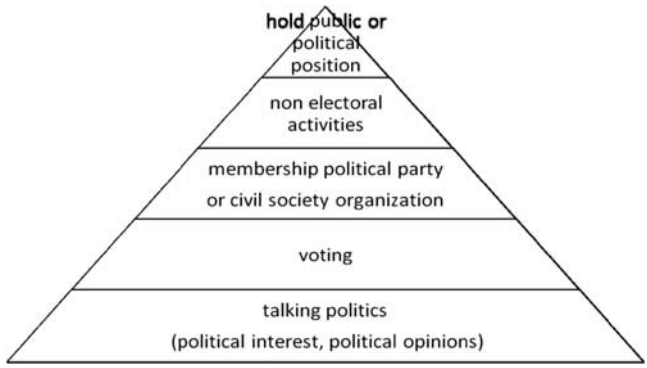

Figure 1: The participation pyramid.

belonging to parties, or non-electoral in its focus, such as taking part in community organizations, protest or petitions, that provide citizens the opportunity to influence public outcomes or to communicate concerns to political leaders (Wille, 1994; Verba *et al*, 1995).

Political participation can, thus, take many forms. Together these forms can be thought of as a participation pyramid (Milbrath, 1965) in which acts vary in terms of their difficulty and can be ranked from easy to difficult. Those acts most often engaged in are ranked at the bottom, whereas those less frequently employed are rated at the top. Figure 1 represents this pyramid, with activities as voting and talking politics at the lower layers of the pyramid and holding public or political office as the highest layer.

Apart from differences in terms of difficulty, political activities also vary in the extent to which an activity can be multiplied. Voting is an activity for which there is a mandated equality – each citizen getting one and only one for each election (Verba *et al*, 1995, pp. 9, 168–169). Other forms of activity necessitate no such equality of inputs. Individuals may spend as many hours campaigning for a good cause, attend as many political meetings or demonstrations and write as many e-mails to public officials as their time and inclination permit. Moreover, these activities differ in their capacity to convey detailed messages to policy makers. Voting is a blunt instrument when it comes to the translation of the specific political preferences of voters. Many acts are more 'information rich' (Verba *et al*, 1995, pp. 9, 169) in that they explicitly state the specific political preferences or wishes of participants.

Are the well educated significantly more likely to engage in all these forms of political participation, and how large are the disparities between the higher, the medium and the lower educated? Table 1 shows how differences in education patterns not only shape differences in electoral activities but also in non-electoral

Table 1: Education and participation (per cent) in the Netherlands in 2006

Participation	*Education respondent*			*Ratio (H/L)*
	Low	*Medium*	*High*	
Voting, elections and parties				
Did vote in 2006 parliamentary elections	90	93	97	1.1
Did vote in 2006 municipal elections	66	68	83	1.3
Voted on referendum to EU Constitution (2005)	56	67	83	1.5
Membership in a political party	5	3	9	1.8
Actions outside elections				
Mobilized radio, television or newspaper	9	11	12	1.3
Joined a civic action group	3	3	6	2.0
Contacted a politician or civil servant	7	9	19	2.7
Joined a demonstration	4	7	12	3.0
Participated in government-organized meeting/debate	6	8	21	3.5
Used the Internet, e-mail or SMS	7	17	31	4.4
Got involved in a political party or organization	2	4	11	5.5
Membership in civil society organizations				
Church	37	32	35	0.95
Neighbourhood organization	30	27	30	1.0
Trade Union	18	20	22	1.2
Music or cultural organization	15	17	23	1.5
Sports organization	31	43	47	1.5
Employers' organization	2	4	4	2.0
Environmental organization	20	27	46	2.3
Third world, human rights or peace organization	12	17	34	2.8
Professional organization	7	10	27	3.9

Note: All differences are significant at 0.05 level.

activities and organizational affiliations. On the basis of these figures, it is clear that there are significant differences between the populations in question.

Voting and membership of political parties

We can see this, first of all, reflected in the category *voting in elections and membership of political parties*, these being the more traditional forms of political participation. Of all political activities, voting is generally considered as one of the less demanding forms of political participation; and by far the most common activity that provides an equal opportunity for each to participate. The well educated are, however, at the national level more inclined to use this opportunity, and the differences in turnout with the less educated are substantial both in municipal elections and at the EU level.[4]

According to the NKO data, presented in Table 1, the well educated also are much more inclined to join a political party than lesser educated citizens. These survey data are corroborated by other data on party membership in the Netherlands. The modern political party is a party of, and for, well-educated professionals. In 1999, for example, no less than 60 per cent of the members of all Dutch political parties was well educated, and only 16 per cent belonged to the least educated (Koole *et al*, 2000, p. 48). The well educated were also much more active within the party, and almost two-thirds of them were members of a party committee, compared to less than half of the least educated. Comparing the social background and political experience of political candidates with the members and voters of Dutch parties, Hillebrand (1992) concluded that party members have higher levels of education than the electorate in general. Aspiring political candidates high on the list are on average even more highly educated; and of the successful candidates more than two-third had completed a university education.

Actions outside elections

Voting is a pivotal but relatively rare and general form of political participation. Many acts have the capacity to convey more precise messages and to generate more pressure to respond than does a single vote. Contacting an elected official, carrying signs at protests, talking to a councilor during a neighbourhood meeting 'all permit the transmission of much more precise messages about citizens concerns' (Verba *et al*, 1995, p. 169). Not surprisingly, citizens try to influence the political process during the times between elections in a variety of other ways than voting – as the figures in Table 1 show. This table also displays the size of the gap between higher and lower educated by means of a ratio. For instance, for every less educated citizen who participated in a government meeting, 3.5 higher educated citizens participated.

It is also apparent from Table 1 that the intermediate educational categories do not take an exact middle position between the high and low educational levels. For a number of activities, there appears to be a sharp division between the higher educated on the one hand, and the middle and lower level educated on the other. For mobilizing the media, a political party or an organization, or when it comes to joining a civic action group, the participation differences between the categories of low and medium education levels are small. In fact, the main division is between the low and middle groups on the one hand, and the better educated on the other.

The use of digital communication technologies such as the Internet, SMS or e-mail – the so called *Internet activism* – has become one of the most popular forms of political participation. These new technologies enable faster and

broader communication and mobilization; text messages and mass e-mail allow organizations to communicate with individuals in an inexpensive and well-timed way, and make it possible to broadcast messages rapidly and to a large audience. This relatively new form of activism gives disproportionate representation to the higher educated: those with easy access to Internet and with technological abilities. Data from the DES/NKO of 2006 show that the access to Internet is unevenly distributed among the Dutch population. More than a third of the lower educated has no access to Internet, whereas virtually every higher educated person has Internet access. About 93 per cent of the higher educated uses the Internet daily or at least once a week; less than half of the lower educated do so. Given these constraints of no access, irregular Internet use and different Internet abilities, it is not surprising that the digital divide becomes visible in this popular form of online political participation.

The participation gap is probably most strongly felt in the series of new, deliberative forms of democracy that have been developed and propagated over the past decades. For participating in a *meeting or debate organized by the government*, such as consultations, deliberative assemblies or interactive policy-making sessions, we find a gap (differential) between the less- and well-educated of nearly 18 points. Nearly one out of every four highly educated people has taken part in this form of participation, whereas only one out of every 20 of the less educated has attended these sorts of meetings. For other forms of participation, such as *joining a civic action group* and *mobilizing the media*, the differences are relatively small: the gap is limited to 5–6 points.

Analysis of different forms of citizen participation reveals that the more demanding the act of participation is in terms of the required commitment of time and energy, the more likely that that type of participation will be disproportionately engaged in by people of higher socio-economic status. Interactive policy making, citizens' panels and self-regulatory networks, are pre-eminently the domain of the well-educated middle-aged male (Wille, 2001, pp. 100–102; Van Stokkom, 2003). They are over-represented in these arenas, they converse more easily (and especially more loudly) and they are rhetorically skilled, which means that they are listened to more often than other participants (Sanders, 1997; Hartman, 1998; Hooghe, 1999). According to Hartman (2000), those with a lower education level regularly concede in the informal deliberative arenas to the participation elite of mellifluous males.

The concentration of activity

It is important to ask not only whether the higher educated are over-represented in each particular participation area, but also how much overlap there is in these activities. Do the same higher educated citizens participate

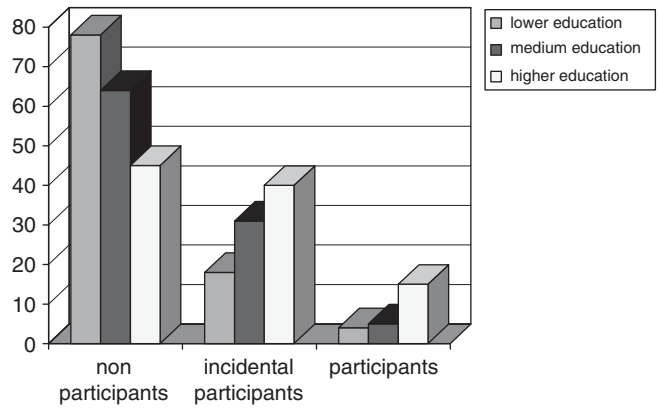

Figure 2: Percentage non-participants, incidental participants and participants by education levels (per cent); $N = 2194$.

in this set of political activities, or is participation more equally distributed when considered on an overall basis? How many engage in more activities than average? How many have been engaged in one or two activities in addition to voting? And how many are merely 'spectators' and have not participated in any of these activities? To examine the extent of concentration of political activity, we counted the number of activities undertaken by each respondent, and we have classified citizens on the basis of the frequency of their participation.

We have distinguished three groups: the *non-participants*, who have engaged in no activity at all; the *incidental participants*, who have been engaged in solely one or two activities in addition to voting; and the *participants*, who have been engaged in three or more activities. This new classification provides a clear picture of how much political activity the average citizen undertakes and what the backgrounds of the (non-) participants are.

Figure 2 displays data relevant to this issue and it is clear that activists come disproportionately from the higher education groups. The higher educated are over-represented among the activists and incidental activists. Among the higher educated we see a proportion of active participants that is three times higher (15 per cent) than that of people with lower education (4 per cent).

Not only the amount of active participants differs between the higher and lower educated. Figure 3 shows that university graduates are five times more likely to be involved in political activities than persons with only an elementary school background. The higher educated are clearly over-represented in the participatory arenas.

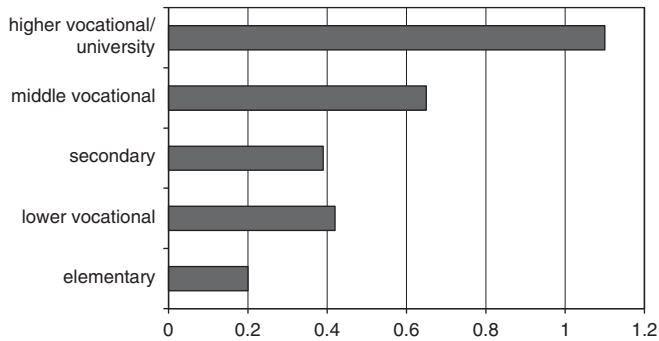

Figure 3: Average number of political acts by different educational levels (means) $N = 2194$.

Membership in civil society organizations

Similar variations can be found in the third category of participation, *membership in civil society organization*s. Skocpol (2002, 2003, 2004) has shown that in the United States many popularly rooted mass organizations, such as trade unions, women's federations, veterans' associations and fraternal groups, witnessed a sharp decline in membership and political influence. Their role as intermediary between politics and society is being taken over by professionally managed advocacy groups. Many of these single-issue advocacy groups have no members, let alone local chapters, and operate solely through mailing lists, newsletters and financial donations. More importantly, these advocacy groups are heavily skewed towards well-educated citizens. They are run by highly educated professionals; they interact with university educated Congressional or parliamentary staff, professional policy makers and academically trained public managers; and they recruit their members and acquire their financial donations almost exclusively from the well-educated.

Very similar trends can be observed in the Netherlands. There are few differences in membership between the well and less educated with regard to traditional, mass organizations, such as churches and unions. However, the well-educated are much more involved in single-issue advocacy groups and professional organizations. The lower educated are, on average, member of 1.9 organizations of the set of nine displayed in Table 1, whereas the higher educated are, on average, member of 2.9 organizations. Moreover, membership may not always equal participation within the organization and its activities. Qualitative research into informal, civil initiatives and neighbourhood activities, for example, shows they are dominated by the well-educated (Hurenkamp *et al*, 2006, p. 59).

In the past three decades, the memberships of mass organizations such as political parties, broadcasting associations and churches have declined, or stagnated in the case of unions, whereas single-issue organizations focusing on consumer affairs (ANWB, Vereniging Eigen Huis, Consumentenbond), nature, environment and animal welfare (Natuurmonumenten, Greenpeace, WNF, Dierenbescherming) and international solidarity (Novib, Unicef, Amnesty, Aidsfonds) witnessed sharp increases in membership (Van den Berg and de Hart, 2008).

With this shift in membership of organizations we also witness a change towards a different form of participation. Organizations estimate that two-thirds of their membership comprises *passive members* or donor members and that the relative size of this group has grown in recent decades at the expense of the percentage of active members and volunteers (De Hart, 2005, p. 65). This process of increasing passivity is coupled to a trend towards professionalization: two-thirds of organizations have seen an increase in the numbers of paid staff over the last 10 years (De Hart, 2005, p. 65). An important unintended consequence of this development is that civic engagement and grassroots political involvement is needed less and less in these types of civil society organizations. Increasingly, these single-issue organizations are run by a well-educated 'professional elite' (De Hart, 2005, p. 61), the number of university graduates among their members and donors is burgeoning, and the share of the less educated among their membership is dwindling (De Hart, 2005, pp. 32–36, 53).

Political elites as educational elites

At the top of the participation pyramid are elected or selected politicians. In the Netherlands, the political and governing elite, made up of ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs), to some extent has always been an educational elite. This is particularly true of the Cabinet. Ministers in the Netherlands are extraordinarily well educated compared to the rest of the population. For example, the Balkenende IV Cabinet, which was installed in 2007, has extremely high academic qualifications. All 16 new ministers are highly educated; six even have a PhD degree, and four are former university professors. The Balkenende Cabinet fits a long post-WWII tradition of recruiting university graduates for political office. Although a university education always has been important for a career as a political executive, figures from Secker (1991) and Bovens and Wille (2009) show that in the decades since WWII a graduate diploma has developed into a crucial credential for those who want to reach political office. At least 82 per cent of all ministers have a graduate education, and between 93 and 97 per cent belong to the well-educated in the post-WWII period.

The well-educated dominate Parliament too. Of the newly elected members of the 2006 Dutch Parliament, 85 per cent have an academic or university degree and 15 per cent have a medium educational background. Only one of the 150 members falls within the category of the less educated. However, university graduates always have been less prominent in Parliament than in the Cabinet. In the nineteenth century, when the nobility and the patrician class dominated Parliament, some 75–80 per cent of MPs had completed university in the Netherlands (Van den Berg, 1983; Secker, 1991). As suffrage was expanded, this percentage declined substantially. In the decades after 1918, the year in which universal suffrage was introduced, the percentage of university graduates among MPs averaged between 40 and 50 per cent. It was not until the late 1950s that this percentage started to rise, and since the 1960s some two-thirds of the MPs have been university graduates (Cotta, 2000, pp. 514–516; Secker, 2000, p. 292). Since the 1990s, this group has been joined by another 25 per cent who hold higher vocational (HBO) degrees, which means that, nowadays, on average approximately 90 per cent of all MPs belong to the group with the highest level of educational attainment. The remainder mainly holds upper secondary vocational education diplomas, with one or two MPs who hold a secondary school diploma as their highest qualification. Nowadays, there are virtually no MPs who have only an elementary education (Van den Berg and van den Braak, 2004, p. 75).

Is it an education gap?

The data show an educational elite that is also a participatory elite. It is possible though, that the education variable serves as a stand-in for pre-adult experiences (Kam and Palmer, 2007), is the result of income differentials, of group-based factors (Parry *et al*, 1992, p. 70), of age and lifecycle effects (Nie *et al*, 1996, p. 180; Gesthuizen, 2005) or of family background (Tenn, 2007) and that at least part of the differences in political participation may be *spurious* rather than intrinsic to education level. Compared to highly educated people, the less educated are more likely to come from financially and culturally disadvantaged families and from families in which the parents were less likely to be socially active themselves. Once their influence is taken into account, some contend (Kam and Palmer, 2007) that education is left with no independent effect.

We therefore analysed the relationship between education and participation while simultaneously controlling for the influence of a number of other confounding factors. Of all of these background characteristics, education is clearly the key variable in explaining democratic participation. The inclusion of the various social background variables in an OLS regression did not result

in an improved fit. It is evident that education matters. After controlling for the influence of various other background variables, *the educational effect* is somewhat reduced, but remains largely intact. This is a constant finding in other studies as well (Almond and Verba, 1963, pp. 315–316; Nie *et al*, 1996; Lauglo and Oia, 2007, p. 13; Teorell *et al*, 2007, pp. 399–403). This educational gap is so consistent that it is reasonable to assume a considerable independent influence of 'education' on 'political participation'.

Why Bother: The Disparity of Political Voice

The exclusion bias: Missing opinions in political arenas

In the Netherlands, just as in the United States and elsewhere in Europe,[5] the well-educated are increasingly over-represented in almost every political venue. But what is so terrible about highly educated citizens having a disproportionate amount of political influence? Is it not reassuring to know that our representatives and leaders have had such a solid academic grounding and that education and expertise are dominant in shaping and determining policy (Zakaria, 2003)? Moreover, the fact that political officials and activist do not match their constituents in important demographic characteristics does not necessarily imply a failure of substantive representation of the needs and interest of their constituents. Elected politicians and political activists may not share the same characteristics as their constituents, but that does not mean that they do not act 'in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (Pitkin's, 1967, p. 209). However, representation becomes more problematic when there is a substantial gap in policy preferences between active and inactive citizens, that is when 'those in public life are more likely to be aware of, and to pay attention to the needs and preferences of those who are active' (Verba *et al*, 1995, p. 163).

Activists can differ in politically consequential ways from those who do not engage in politics, and this means that the exercise of political voice can be stratified. As Verba *et al* (1995, p. 2) have argued for the United States: 'The voice of the people as expressed through participation comes from a limited and unrepresentative set of citizens'. The voices of the well educated and the well-heeled (…) sound more loudly' (Verba *et al*, 1995, p. 512). Accordingly, some interests might be muted, not because citizens lack concerns relevant to a particular controversy, but instead because they have difficulty making themselves heard on the political stage. Skocpol (2003, pp. 236–244; 2004, pp. 13–14) argues, on the basis of legislative studies conducted by Jeffrey Berry (1999), that in the United States the transition from membership to advocacy has greatly diminished the political room for inclusive and generous public

social provision and warns for upward-tilted public agendas and policy making: 'As new advocacy politics surged between 1963 and 1979 (…) economic legislation taken up in Congress moved increasingly away from the issues of wages and job training affecting blue collar workers' (Skocpol, 2003, p. 239). Instead, the attention given by Congress to post-material and lifestyle issues, pushed by citizen advocacy groups, doubled in that period.

Participation may therefore fail to equally represent the preferences of all citizens with regard to some of the important political issues of our time. This misrepresentation arises from what Berinsky (2004) calls an 'exclusion bias': the exclusion of the preferences of a sometimes sizable portion of the public. The political voice of these abstainers is, in certain cases, systematically different from the voice of those who do participate.

Disparate issue agendas

This raises the question of whether the higher educated participants in the Netherlands differ from less educated non-participants in their issue agendas. In order to get an idea of the issues that are on the 'public agenda', building on Cobb and Elder's (1972) conception of issue agendas, an *open-ended* question was posed in the DES/NKO on what respondents consider to be the most important problems facing our society today. The top five problems that respondents mentioned in the DES/NKO of 2006 are displayed at the top of Figure 4. There is a consensus on the most important problems: 44 per cent of the less educated mentioned ethnic minorities as the most important problem facing the country today, and 41 per cent of the higher educated did so. Both groups – higher and lower educated – also mention health care and crime as salient problems, but the higher educated see health care as a larger problem than crime (30 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively); whereas the less educated consider crime to be a more important problem than health care (respectively, 33 per cent and 25 per cent).

Large differences appear on the issue agenda, however, when it comes to the problem of ethics in contemporary society. About 36 per cent of the higher educated mentioned this as an important national issue, whereas only 18 per cent of the less educated raised this problem. Similar disparities in the issue agendas of the higher and less educated were found outside of the top five national problems (displayed at the bottom of Figure 4). The well-educated are much more concerned about education: over 22 per cent mentioned education as a problem, compared to only 4 per cent of the less educated. Similarly, approximately 17 per cent of the higher educated mentioned the environment as an important concern, whereas only 6 per cent of the less educated mentioned this issue.

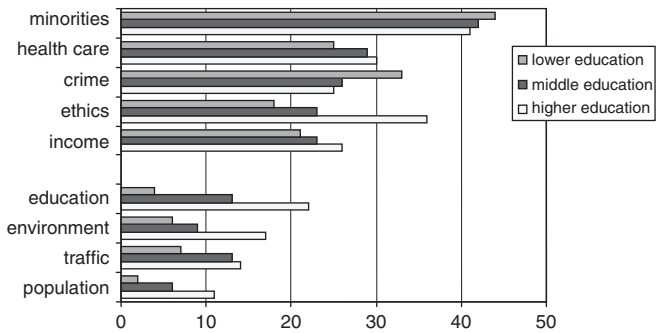

Figure 4: Issue agenda by education (per cent).

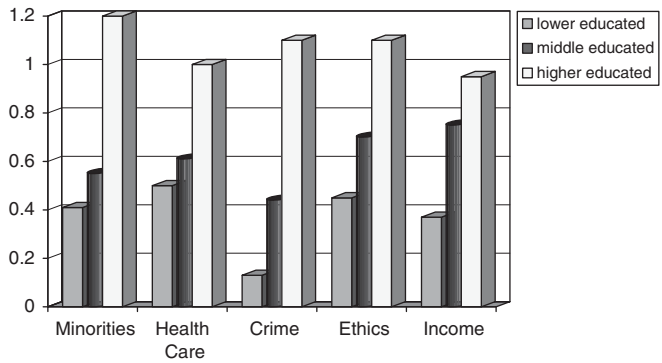

Figure 5: Average activity levels by education for the most salient problems on the issue agenda (means).

Different levels of activity

The disparate issue agendas of the higher and less educated bring in the crucial question of what issues come into the decision-making arena and what ones are left out? By looking at the differential rates of participation among those who mentioned certain national problems as important, we can obtain insight in what problems (or what definitions of the problems) are likely to remain invisible and what sort of problems are more likely to have an entry into the 'political' agenda because of their being perceived as salient by the activist segment.

Figure 5 shows, for the top five national problems, the activity levels of the higher and less educated groups who considered these problems as salient. Each of the bars reports the mean activity levels of the higher and less educated

groups who mentioned these particular problems as important. This figure shows that the higher educated people who mentioned the issue of ethnic minorities as a salient problem are thrice as politically active (participating in 1.2 activities) as those less educated who also mentioned this issue (and who participate in less than 0.4 political activities). These data reveal for the five largest 'public issues' very significant differences between the active higher educated and the inactive less educated.

Different policy preferences

These different activity levels need not be a problem if the activists and non-activists share the same preferences on these salient issues. The well-educated could then act as active spokesmen for the least educated, who are less able and willing to devote their time to engage in political debate and advocacy. In this vein, protestant ministers, teachers, 'Red Barons' and an army of university graduates have defended the interests of the working class in Parliament during the past century.

This raises the question of to what extent these higher-educated activist groups differ in their *policy preferences* from the politically passive less educated groups. Do the higher educated differ in their particular policy preferences from less educated groups regarding the most important matters on the issue agenda? Data displayed in Table 2 show that *policy congruence* between the higher and lower educated is quite low on issues, such as crime, the admittance of asylum seekers, cultural integration of immigrants and EU unification. The higher educated favour much more liberal policies with regard to cultural integration, crime fighting and refugees, and they are more positive about the European unification. The differences in mean issue positions

Table 2: Mean issue position in the Netherlands in 2006 by education

Position of respondent on political issues	*Education respondent*			*Deviation (H-L)*
	Low	*Mid*	*High*	
Immigrants – keep own culture (1) adjust to Dutch culture (7)	5.9	5.1	4.6	1.3
EU unification – should go further (1) has gone too far (7)	5.2	4.7	4.2	1.0
Asylum seekers – admit more (1) expel more (7)	5.2	4.7	4.2	1.0
Crime – too strict (1) much stricter (7)	6.4	6.0	5.5	0.9
Nuclear Power Plants – quickly build more (1) no more plants (7)	5.0	4.7	4.4	0.6
Income differences – bigger (1) smaller (7)	5.6	5.2	4.9	0.6
Euthanasia – forbidden (1) allow (7)	5.8	5.9	5.8	0.0

Table 3: Pearson correlations between level of education and level of political activity and issue positions

	Highest education	*Participation index*
Immigrants	−0.293**	−0.167**
Crime	−0.246**	−0.161**
Asylum seekers	−0.223**	−0.136**
European unification	−0.195**	−0.085**
Income differences	−0.155**	−0.051*
Nuclear plants	−0.109**	−0.040
Euthanasia	0.018	−0.024

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); ** correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

between the highest and the least educated (presented in the last column in Table 2) show that for these issues the differences in policy preferences between citizens with low and high education levels are the largest. On euthanasia, incomes and nuclear energy, the policy match between the higher and less educated is considerably stronger.

The data on the issue of immigrants are fairly clear. The political preferences of the higher educated are more in favour of a liberal position (immigrants to keep their own culture), whereas the less educated are less liberal in their policy stand (adjust to Dutch culture). The figures in Table 3 indicate that there is a significant correlation between a respondent's level of education and his/her position on this issues. This pattern is paralleled by an association between the level of political activity and issue preference: the more politically active population is also in favour of a more liberal position. This pattern of differences in responses between the higher and less educated is consistently and consequently repeated in the Dutch Election Studies for similar sorts of questions having to do with the issues of ethnic minorities.

The well-educated are also much more positive about the benefits of the EU than the less educated.[6] In fact, throughout Europe the less educated show significantly less support for EU membership and trust in the European Commission than university graduates, and they are far less positive about the benefits of the EU. For example, 43 per cent of the least educated think their country has not benefited from the EU (41 per cent thinks it did), as opposed to 25 per cent of the university educated (67 per cent is positive).[7] Given these figures, the negative outcomes of the referenda on the EU convention in France, the Netherlands and Ireland do not come as a surprise and may even be valued as a healthy correction of the dominance of the well-educated in the debates about European integration.

Table 4: Support for political reform initiatives in the Netherlands in 2006 (per cent) by the general public by education and of members of parliament

General public education respondents	*Low*	*Mid*	*High*	*MPs*
Citizens should be able to decide important national issues by referendum	76	77	69	49
The inhabitants of the municipality should elect the mayor	68	64	49	31
The Prime Ministers should be directly elected by the voters	60	46	32	17

Source: NKO 2006 and Parliament Survey 2006 (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2007).

Growing concerns about whether representative institutions are able to sustain the legitimacy and effectiveness of government have given rise to debates on improving the *quality* of democracy. Participatory reforms to engage citizens in a greater number in political decision-making have been widely discussed in the Netherlands, particularly the introduction of referendums and the election of mayors; and these policy proposals have had firm supporters and critics. To what extent are these debates also divided along educational lines? Figures from the Dutch Election Study 2006, presented in Table 4, show that less educated groups perceive a much greater need for political reforms – and are more supportive of them – than the higher educated. They place a greater reliance on referendums as a tool for influencing the political agenda, they have a larger preference for a direct election of mayors and the Prime Minister and favour increasing the democratic control of political elites.

Disparities in issue representation

These major differences in policy preferences between the less- and well-educated are not specific to the Dutch parliamentary system. Research in numerous European multi-party systems based on proportional representation shows, for instance, a strong relative responsiveness connection between voters and representatives on the left–right scale (Powell, 2004, p. 286). But on other issues the absolute positions of voters and parties are more widely removed. Responsiveness on the European issues has, for instance, remained comparatively low (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2007, pp. 84–85). The policy goals of politicians have diverged from what the median voter favours with regard to European matters, with most of the well-educated politicians being far more pro-European than their less-educated voters.

When politicians have no information on where voters stand on political issues they will try to estimate the opinions of their voters by projecting their

own perception of the voters' positions (Thomassen, 1999, p. 53). Empirical data show that politicians do much better on older, highly politicized, left–right issues than on newer, less politicized and non-left–right issues. The result of these participatory distortions is that representative institutions include the opinions, perspectives and interests of the well-educated citizens at the expense of marginalizing the opinions, perspectives and interests of the less educated. Because the higher educated are over-represented among political participants and politicians, the political issue agenda has been biased towards their preferences and priorities.

Why Bother: Political Consequences

Diverging styles of representation

The high educational backgrounds of political representatives and political activists have made the political class more homogeneous and more parochial. Changes in the social make-up of parliaments, parties and interest groups, and the disappearance of the less educated, have made representation more indirect. Meritocratization has increased the social distance between the executive and the legislative branches on the one hand, and substantial parts of the general public on the other (Gaxie and Godmer, 2007, p. 131).

In descriptive terms, therefore, the quality of political representation is deteriorating. However, the fact that representatives do not match the represented in important demographic characteristics, such as educational background, does not necessarily imply a failure of substantive representation of the needs and interests of the represented (Verba *et al*, 1995, p. 166). Elected officials have incentives to represent more than their own narrow selfish interests – at least if they wish to remain in office. Therefore the 'how' of representation becomes relevant.

The emphasis recently on participatory democratic arrangements has apparently inspired new ideas about the operation of representative democracies and democratic representation among the public. The concept of popular sovereignty has become more legitimate; parliamentary sovereignty is no longer absolute (cf. Dalton *et al*, 2003, p. 254). This has also changed expectations regarding the role of elected representatives. Representative institutions are more and more expected to be responsive to the public, that is, to take the interest of citizen into account in the process of policy making; representatives are expected to act as *delegates* rather than *trustees* (Zittel, 2007, p. 224).

How do Dutch parliamentarians perceive their roles as representatives? Data from the Dutch Parliament Surveys (see Figure 6) show that the view of

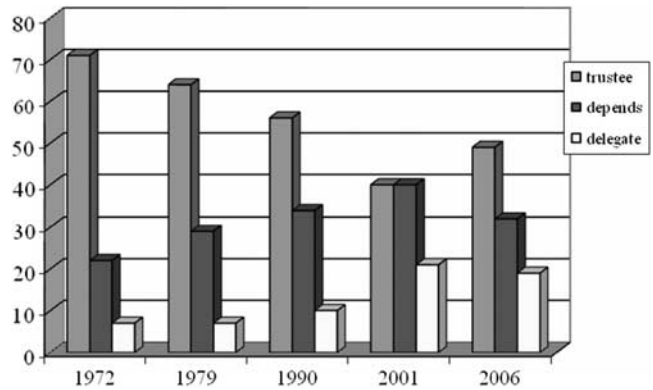

Figure 6: Representation styles of MPs 1972–2006 (per cent).
Source: Parliament Survey.

strong and responsible leadership, related to a 'trustee' image of political representation, has been dominant since the period of consociationalism in the Netherlands. The proportion of politicians who perceive their role as acting independently, as trustees who follow their own understanding of the best action to pursue – the Burkian view of representation – declined from 71 per cent in 1972 to 49 per cent in 2006. The percentage of MPs who perceived their role as a representative as one of a delegate, bound by strict mandates of the voter, increased somewhat, from 7 per cent in 1972 to 19 per cent in 2006 (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2007, p. 16). Although this may indicate a shift towards a more responsive style of representation, Burke's ideas still echo loudly in the way the majority of parliamentarians view and seek to carry out their role as representatives (cf. Koops and Holsteyn, 2008).

The trustee style of representation of the Dutch MPs does not match very well with the style of representation which is preferred by most contemporary citizens. Findings from the NKO and the Parliament survey indicate that a majority of citizens (based on the 2002 DES) think that the most important task of a representative is 'to translate preferences of citizens into policy'. Nearly four out of every five voters support this perspective of *representation from below*, but only a third of the MPs shared this view. They support alternatively a view of *representation from above*. This means that the political elites are out of touch with the electorate regarding the nature and style of political representation. They still perceive representation as taking initiatives to address the people by asking their consent on policy proposals. Three out of four MPs considered this as the as the most significant aspect of their relationship with voters (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2007, p. 16).

MPs, furthermore, are not at all supportive of new venues for popular participation, such as referenda or the direct election of political executives. They have been very reluctant to support the use of referendums; in fact, most MPs considered the 2005 national EU referendum as an unfortunate incident that should not be repeated in the future (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2007). Very few MPs favour the introduction of more direct elections of political executives such as mayors and the Prime Minister, as can be seen from Table 4. This makes democratic renewal one of the areas in which there is a major divide between the preferences of the less and medium educated citizens on the one hand, and the well-educated representatives on the other.

The decoupling of representation by civic groups

Interest groups, civic associations and social movements are increasingly integrated in representative democracies. Many of these groups have become increasingly professionalized (Saurugger, 2007, pp. 397–398). They no longer try to influence policy via the mobilization of large numbers of members and supporters but through the deployment of expertise and technical knowledge (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). 'Members are a non-lucrative distraction' as Skocpol (2003, p. 134) put it. Beginning in the 1970s, civic groups lost much ground among many less-educated citizens. The professionalization in the 1980s was one in which local volunteers were replaced by paid professional staff. Increased financial support and funding of citizen interests groups by governmental organizations ruled out the need for financial contributions by members. Seeking and servicing members becomes unnecessary when funding by governmental bodies permits an interest group to focus fully on professional activities. Why spend a great deal of organizational resources on grass-root membership? Consequentially, members of these groups became less connected, and the people who did the lion's share of the outreach in associations became less embedded in organizations. These transformations of associational life also illustrate the need to update contemporary understandings of representation of citizens by civic organizations. The willingness of governments to 'bring citizens in' by giving civic organizations more access and resources has, as a side effect, actually driven the least educated citizens out (Greenwood, 2007).

Distrust and distaste

Will the permanent absence of less-educated representatives in Parliament, Cabinet and more informal political arenas lead to a crisis of confidence, as large segments of the citizens with medium and lower levels of educational

attainment no longer identify with the governing political elite and hence become cynical and indifferent towards politics? This is termed the *disaffection hypothesis* in the survey literature on trust (Nye *et al*, 1997; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). It suggests that citizens with low education levels, in particular, will have a low or decreasing amount of trust in government and politics because they feel excluded from meaningful political and social participation.

Data from the trust surveys appear to support the dissatisfaction hypothesis. Citizens with little schooling are far more cynical and distrustful than highly educated citizens when it comes to politics (Hall, 1999; Elchardus and Smits, 2002, p. 54; Van Holsteyn and De Ridder, 2005, p. 85; Li and Marsh, 2008). In the Netherlands, the differences are striking. Educational background is the strongest explanatory variable with regard to dissatisfaction with politics (Dekker, 2009). The lowest levels of trust in government and politics can be found among the least educated, non-religious, lower classes (Becker and Dekker, 2005, p. 351; WRR, 2005; Tammes and Dekker, 2007, p. 79). According to the 2008 data of the Citizens Outlook Barometer of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 57 per cent of the least educated have little or no trust in Parliament, compared to 34 per cent of the well educated, and 62 per cent of the less educated think that MPs and ministers do not care about the opinions of 'people like us', compared to 34 per cent of the well educated (Dekker, 2009, pp. 117–118; Dekker and Van der Meer, 2009, p. 135). The less educated, much more often than more educated people, dislike and distrust politicians. They perceive politics as a flow of abstract speeches made up by 'fine talkers' and 'profiteers'. Only a third of the less educated think that politicians can solve problems in society (compared with nearly half of the higher educated), and only a fifth of the lower educated believes that politicians are reliable, as can be seen from Table 5.

Even more disturbing are the large proportions of lower educated in Table 6, who think MPs and parties are not interested in their opinions. They feel that politicians are not listening to them and that the way politics is currently run ignores the opinions of the common person. The higher educated are considerably more positive and favourable in their attitudes towards politicians. This pattern of results suggests that many less-educated people feel shut out of the political process by 'a careerist elite whose lifetime political preoccupation has separated them from most people' (Ehrenhalt, 1991, p. xx).

The rise of populist parties

These representational distortions and feelings of distrust may occasionally lead to serious political instabilities. The rejection of the European convention in

Table 5: Public images of politicians (per cent) in the Netherlands in 2006 by education

(Fully) agree	*Education respondent*			*Gap (H-L)*
	Low	*Mid*	*High*	
Politicians are capable of solving problems in society	36	46	47	+11
Politicians are reliable	19	21	28	+9
Politicians are honest	15	17	24	+9
Politicians keep their promises	7	7	8	+1
Politicians only have fine talk	38	24	15	−23
Politicians are profiteers	27	15	6	−21
Politicians are corrupt	7	4	2	−5
Politicians get a kick out of power	39	34	37	−2
MPs do not care about opinions of people like me	54	37	22	−32
Parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion	63	47	33	−30
Ministers and junior ministers are primarily self-interested	57	35	25	−32
Politicians promise more than they can deliver	95	93	89	−6
Friends are more important than ability to become MP	52	42	47	−5

Table 6: Vote in 2006 election by education (per cent)

Voted for	*Education respondent*		
	Low	*Mid*	*High*
CDA	32	27	26
PvdA	26	19	19
VVD	8	15	18
GroenLinks	2	4	10
SP	16	20	14
D66	0	2	3
ChristenUnie	5	4	5
SGP	1	1	1
Partij vd Dieren	1	2	1
Partij vd Vrijheid	9	5	2

Source: NKO/DPES (2006).

the Dutch referendum of 2005 was a serious defeat for the Dutch government and has slowed down the process of European integration for years. One of the more notable aspects of the referendum was, indeed, that the group backing the European Constitution and those opposing it were not divided along the traditional political clefts, but mainly differed according to educational

background. According to some exit polls, among the group with the highest level of education, only a tiny majority (51 per cent) opposed the Constitution, a proportion that rose to nearly three-quarters among high school graduates (72 per cent), to become an overwhelming majority (82 per cent) among voters with a low level of educational attainment.[8]

Similarly, some of the major swings in voter preferences in the 2002, 2003 and 2006 elections in the Netherlands, and the emergence of more radical populist parties at both ends of the political spectrum, are connected to the dissatisfaction of the least educated with the dominant political elites in the traditional political parties and arenas. Particularly the LPF and the PVV, both parties that attracted relatively high percentages of the less-educated voters, as shown by the results in Table 6 for the PVV, campaigned on a platform of non-structural topics, such as crime, asylum seekers, cultural integration and the EU unification issues, where the discrepancies in preferences between the well-educated political elite and the less-educated citizenry were highest.

A new conflict dimension: Cosmopolitans versus nationalists

The rise of these new populist parties ran parallel to the emergence of a new conflict dimension in western politics (Achterberg, 2006; Tiemeijer, 2006, pp. 191–195; Pellikaan *et al*, 2007; Aarts and Thomassen, 2008; Houtman *et al*, 2008; Kriesi *et al*, 2008). Traditionally, most voters and political parties in the Netherlands can be positioned along a left–right, social–economic dimension and along a religious–secular dimension. In addition to these traditional conflict dimensions, which reach back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a third, cultural conflict dimension has manifested itself in the past three decades – first among the citizenry and only much later among the political parties (Aarts and Thomassen, 2008). The crucial themes along this dimension are immigration and integration, globalization and European unification.

On the one side of this new line of conflict stand the citizens and parties who accept social and cultural heterogeneity and who favour, or at least condone, multiculturalism. These are the well-educated, cosmopolitan urban gentry, who are internationally oriented and in the Netherlands vote for D66, GroenLinks, the PvdA and for the VVD of Dijkstal. On the other side one finds the citizens and parties who are very critical about multiculturalism and prefer a more homogeneous national culture. These are predominantly the lesser-educated residents of the post-WWII suburbs and the urbanized countryside, for whom the pace of immigration and internationalization has gone much too fast. Before 2002, their concerns were hardly addressed by the traditional political

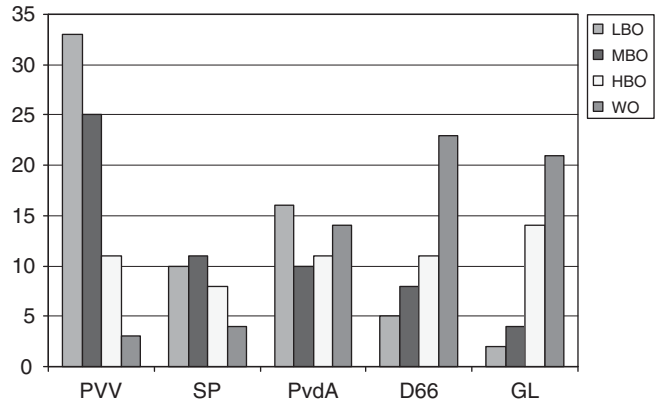

Figure 7: Voting behaviour and educational background EP elections 2009 (per cent of educational group that votes for party).
Source: TNS NIPO.

parties, with the exception of the VVD of Bolkestein. Since 2002, several nationalist parties have emerged in the Netherlands, first the LPF of Fortuyn, later also the PVV of Wilders and TON of Verdonk. The SP, too, is at the nationalistic end of this conflict dimension, given its views on immigration and its campaign against the EU convention.

Educational background is the dominant element in this new social cultural conflict dimension in the Dutch political landscape. The nationalistic parties, such as PVV and SP, attract very large proportions of the least-educated voters but relatively few well-educated voters, whereas for the parties with a cosmopolitan orientation, such as D66 and GL, the situation is almost exactly the reverse, as can be seen from Figure 7.

In the June 2009 elections for the European Parliament, one-third of the electorate that had primary school or lower vocational training as its highest qualification voted for PVV and another 10 per cent for the SP. Of the university graduates (WO) only 3 per cent and 4 per cent voted for these eurosceptic parties. On the other side of this political spectrum, a mere 8 per cent of the least-educated voted for the cosmopolitan D66 and GL, compared to no less than 44 per cent of the university graduates.

This new, cultural and political cleft between the less- and well-educated can be observed in many West European democracies (Fligstein, 2008; Kriesi *et al*, 2008). Less-educated citizens with little cultural capital, who have traditionally voted for social democratic parties, have turned to nationalistic and authoritarian parties, because they value social order and traditional moral values. The well-educated, on the other hand, who possess extensive social and

cultural capital, vote for leftist liberal parties because they value individual freedom and cultural tolerance (Achterberg, 2006; Houtman *et al*, 2008).

The political visibility of the less educated

Educational background is of major importance for the form and extent of political participation of Dutch citizens. The well educated currently comprise less than a third of the population, yet they dominate every political venue in the Netherlands. Their voices resonate stronger in the ballot box, are heard more loudly in campaigns for participation and protest, and are absolutely dominant in interest groups, deliberative settings, Parliament and Cabinet. The less educated, on the other hand, have virtually disappeared from most layers of the participation pyramid.

These disparities need not be a problem if the various educational groups share the same preferences on the most salient issues. The well-educated could then act as active spokesmen for the least educated, who are less able and willing to devote their time to engage in political debate and advocacy. However, as we have shown, educational background is not politically neutral. Less- and well-educated voters sometimes have disparate issue agendas, and, for those issues which they both find important, can have very divergent political preferences.

What are the political consequences of these various educational gaps? First, there is no such thing in the Netherlands as a general cleft between citizens and politicians. The major gap is one between less- and well-educated citizens. The less educated tend to be very distrustful and cynical about politics and politicians, whereas the well educated tend to be much more positive about government and political institutions. The former feel that politicians are not listening to them and that the way politics is currently run ignores the opinions of the common person. The higher educated are considerably more positive and favourable in their attitudes towards politicians.

Second, the education gap has been most manifest with regard to socio-cultural issues, such as crime, the admittance of asylum seekers, cultural integration of immigrants and EU unification. Regarding these issues, differences in the level of formal education will lead to very divergent political opinions. The new conflict dimension in the Dutch political landscape between cosmopolitan and more nationalist voters and parties, to a very large extent runs along the educational fault lines. The less educated have turned to nationalistic and authoritarian parties, because they value social order, national identity and traditional moral values. The well-educated, on the other hand, vote for cosmopolitan and liberal parties because they value individual freedom and cultural tolerance.

Third, one could argue that thanks to the recent emergence of populist parties the less educated have become more visible in the Dutch political landscape. New eurosceptic and nationalist parties, with a populist style, such as the LPF, SP and PVV, have successfully campaigned on a platform that addresses the issues and preferences of the less- and middle-educated parts of the electorate. It may well be that this is not a temporary correction of the disparity in issue agendas, but a more permanent shift in the Dutch political landscape, as it has been elsewhere (Houtman *et al*, 2008; Kriesi *et al*, 2008).

The ultimate consequence may very well be that the less educated will become a politically visible group with a clear shared interest, demanding equal rights or an improved position, and, consequently, that educational background will no longer be seen as a 'usual', but as a 'prime' suspect in political research.

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Notes

1 Compare, among others, Verba and Nie (1972, pp. 95–101), Verba *et al* (1978), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), Verba *et al* (1995, p. 433), Nie *et al* (1996), Lijphart (1997, pp. 2–3), Putnam (2000), Gesthuizen (2005), APSA (2006, p. 1).

2 Following the standard classification of the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS).

3 However, the CBS has limited itself to the workforce (the 15–64 year olds who are not enrolled). The overall percentage of the less educated among the citizens will be higher, as the elderly citizens (65 and older) will have fewer educational qualifications.

4 However, we have to be careful here, because inclination may not equal action. This measure of voting turnout relies on the accuracy of the reports supplied by survey respondents. Days, weeks or even years after the election they were asked whether they had voted. Verbal self-reporting, to be sure, is not a totally reliable way of capturing actual behaviour. Non-voters may be too embarrassed to admit their failure to vote (Lewis-Beck *et al*, 2008, p. 86); and, in the United

States, the well educated are most likely to over-report voting (Silver *et al*, 1986).
Self-reported turnout rates in NKO/DES surveys also overestimate actual turnout (Schmeets, 2007). Actual turnout at the 2006 elections was 80.1 per cent, whereas 93.1 per cent of the NKO respondents indicated that they had voted in the 2006 elections.

5 Compare similar studies of participation and political equality in Europe: 'the widest gulf between activists and non-participants are in terms of educational attainment' (Teorell *et al*, 2007, p. 410). Recent research by Li and Marsh (2008) in the United Kingdom shows that educational differences have a far more pronounced effect than other variables, and the latest studies performed under auspices of the OECD in Austria (2007) and Norway (2007) show that education's impact on civic engagement is strong.

6 Compare the survey *21minuten.nl 2006* (www.21minuten.nl), pp. 28–29.

7 Standard Eurobarometer 66/Autumn 2006; First Results, pp. 6–16.

8 These data derive from the exit polls on website of Maurice de Hond (www.peil.nl; accessed 7 July 2005). The DES/NKO 2006 data on the EU referendum (N=1637) show similar, but less extreme differences. Of the well-educated respondents in the DES/NKO 2006, 47 per cent reported to have voted against, compared to 62 per cent of the least educated.

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