

Mind that Gap: What PIAAC Has to Say on Why and Where Education is Associated with Political Efficacy

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Philosophers from Aristotle to Rousseau have held the belief that functioning democracies are founded on an educated citizenship. Evidence suggests that better educated individuals are more likely to be politically involved. However, the association between education and political involvement varies across countries and we do not know if and how variations across countries depend on how the political system is organised. [In a recent paper¹](#), we used actual test data from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) to examine why and where education matters for political efficacy. PIAAC asked respondents if they strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree that “people like me do not have a say in what the government does”. Political efficacy – the feeling that political action can have an impact on the political process – is crucial for political involvement because it determines if individuals perceive that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties. Our findings are based on data from over 150,000 respondents in 28 countries².

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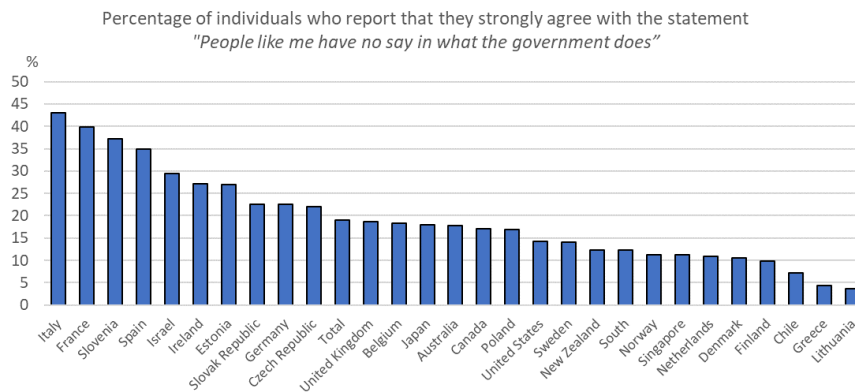
¹ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2017.03.006>

² Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Singapore, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland), and the United States.

Countries differ in overall levels of political efficacy...

Figure 1 illustrates large differences between countries in the extent that individuals agree/disagree that people like them have no say in what the government does. Can PIAAC say anything about why in some countries political self-efficacy is comparatively high and in others it is comparatively low? We find that, in countries where individuals have higher levels of literacy and numeracy, political efficacy is higher. Interestingly, there is no statistically significant association between political efficacy and key features of the political system such as high levels of respect for the rule of law, low levels of corruption, high levels of GDP per capita and electoral rules (e.g., first past the post, majority systems or proportional systems).

Fig. 1 Between-country variation in political efficacy



Source: PIAAC 2012 and 2015 Databases.

...but also in how polarised levels of political efficacy are

Successful democracies involve all citizens in decision making. Our study shows that the importance of cognitive abilities in explaining differences in political efficacy differs systematically across countries. Some countries manage to involve all citizens. In others, citizens with low levels of literacy and numeracy are only involved to a small extent. A key finding is that, in countries with high quality public institutions, cognitive abilities play a less important role in explaining who expresses political efficacy than in countries with lower quality public institutions. In contrast, cognitive abilities play a very important role in countries with proportional representation and a minor role in countries with first-past-the-post or majority representation. These results suggest that the development of political efficacy is closely tied with the cognitive capacity individuals have to evaluate information.

Winner-take-all systems are simple and transparent, since the number of political parties is small compared to the number of potential electoral choices enjoyed by systems opting for proportional representation.

This text has been posted on the blog international-education.blog and it is available in different languages on international-education.blog

Borgonovi, F. & Pokropek, A. (2019). Mind that gap: What PIAAC has to say on why and where education is associated with political efficacy. Retrieved from <https://international-education.blog/en/mind-that-gap-what-piaac-has-to-say-on-why-and-where-education-is-associated-with-political-efficacy/>

The blog International-Education.Blog is an outcome of the project OCCAM. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 76500.

