

THE DIPLOMA DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses political behavior to support the argument that affirmative action is still necessary in today's culture to create more tolerant campuses, and in turn, a more tolerant American population. The sunset provision in previous Supreme Court cases, such as Bakke and Grutter, demonstrates that affirmative action should not be a forever policy, but is necessary in order to provide opportunities to students of all backgrounds and ultimately strive towards the American ideal of equality. Studies have shown that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to be more tolerant of people outside of their own in-group due to social learning theory, contact theory, and increased levels of personal efficacy. Data also shows that this tolerance is enduring over a lifetime. The so-called "diploma divide" can also be explained by the aftermath of attending a university.

Another election passed, and so another series of analytical articles, journals, editorials, and op-eds flood the news cycle, all trying to answer the question, “why and how did this happen?” Following the election, Bernie Sanders openly criticized his former party, noting that the Democrats have embraced the educated elite and left behind the working class, so it should come as no surprise “that the working class has abandoned them.”¹ This comes even after the Supreme Court decision in *Students For Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, which effectively overturned affirmative action and racial balancing in university admissions. Why is there this growing gap between party supporters, especially concerning education levels, and how can it be rectified? Political scientists have been trying to explain this, and have come up with the “diploma divide” as an all-encompassing term for why the supporters of the two political parties are moving further and further apart.

The “diploma divide” describes the growing trend of the Democratic party attracting more college-educated voters than the Republican party. On the surface, this can be a vague partisan attack that only cleaves a bigger divide between the two parties of the American political system. However, there may be valid psychological explanations for the trend. Those who attend college encounter a greater variety of people compared to those who stay in their respective homogeneous communities. The contact theory and social learning theory both help to explain how simple exposure to different minority groups can increase a person’s overall tolerance, in addition to an educated person’s social connectedness. These concepts are vital because tolerant or intolerant attitudes can often turn into lifelong beliefs.

The top universities around the world have made it their mission to attract a diverse student body, understanding the impact that a multicultural community has on campus culture, student perspectives, and even their future tolerance towards different marginalized groups.

¹ Sanders, Bernie [@BernieSanders]. X, 6 Nov. 2024, <https://x.com/BernieSanders/status/1854271157135941698>.

Since the ruling in *Students For Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, admissions rates for student populations like black and Hispanic Americans have dropped significantly. Brown reported that the rate of black and Hispanic students in the incoming undergraduate class dropped from 15 to 9 percent and from 14 to 10 percent, respectively.² Additionally, Democratic or liberal policies, especially those in relation to race, tend to align more with these tolerant beliefs and social systems, which could explain why college-educated voters have gravitated towards the Democratic party in recent years. Social safety nets, income redistribution aimed at reducing inequality, expanded and affordable healthcare, and better public education have all become trademark Democratic policy platforms, and are generally aimed at improving the greatest number of lives, especially for those who are in the most need.

To assert that Democratic voters are, on average, more inclined to vote in accordance with socially tolerant policies is a defensible claim. Many liberal policies backed largely by Democrats aim to support those who are disadvantaged and promote progressivity, which has created an association, at least in the minds of Americans. According to the Pew Research Center, “About six-in-ten adults (57%) say the phrase ‘respectful and tolerant of different types of people’ describes the Democratic Party very or somewhat well, compared with 38% who say it describes the Republican Party.”³ The contact theory, however, provides one explanation for why those who receive a higher education tend to be more tolerant and therefore support Democratic policies. Proposed by Gordon Allport, the contact hypothesis states that “social contact between social groups is sufficient to reduce intergroup prejudice.”⁴ Being consistently

² Rosenberg, John S. “Admissions after Affirmative Action.” *Harvard Magazine*, 9 Sept. 2024.

³ Pew Research Center. “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System.” *Pew Research Center*, 9 Aug. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>.

⁴ Mcleod, Saul. “Contact Hypothesis.” *Simple Psychology*, April 12, 2023. www.simplypsychology.org/contact-hypothesis.html

exposed to outgroups can begin to reduce stereotypes or hostility towards that group. Between living, working, and studying, the people who attend university tend to have consistent exposure to groups other than their own. Today, diversity and inclusion are still at the forefront of many educators' and administrators' minds. Kelly Slay, an assistant professor of higher education and public policy at Vanderbilt University, says colleges must continue to emphasize diversity in their student populations. Not only does this bring higher levels of cultural awareness and acceptance, but diverse organizations are also “more profitable,” “more innovative,” and “more competitive in a global society.”⁵ College admissions want to implement policies that allow students to interact with a variety of groups of students.

Studies have proven contact theory to be influential when it comes to different groups of students engaging with one another. Mitchell Chang's PhD dissertation for UCLA sought to prove this, and found that “after controlling for student background characteristics, college environmental factors, and college experiences, we find that racial diversity has a positive impact on the white student's inclination both to socialize with someone of a different racial group and to discuss racial issues. This implies that a racially diverse student body is a direct causal factor in how frequently white students socialize cross-racially and discuss racial issues.”⁶ Simply going to school with different groups other than your own does not immediately correlate with an increase in tolerance towards that outgroup, but it has been shown that consistent exposure and positive experiences with minority groups do. Having a campus with a diverse student body allows majority and minority groups to interact and forge a bridge between people who have historically been forcibly separated. Coming into frequent contact with a diverse student body is

⁵ Slay, Kelly. “How Can Universities Diversify Their Classes in a Post-Affirmative Action Admissions Landscape?” *Vanderbilt University*, 20 Oct. 2023, <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2023/10/20/how-can-universities-diversify-their-classes-in-a-post-affirmative-action-admissions-landscape/>.

⁶ Chang, Mitchell James. *Racial Diversity in Higher Education: Does a Racially Mixed Student Population Affect Educational Outcomes?* PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1996. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses

one way that education (particularly higher education) can be associated with an increase in tolerance.

Social learning theory also provides an explanation for any those who receive a higher education are more likely to adopt tolerant views. College students and graduates are known to have a higher social connectedness given their higher level of education and exposure to media and are therefore more prone to accepting popular cultural views. The NIH cites this social trust and openness, saying that a college experience “expands the horizon of individuals on economic and social change, makes individuals more open-minded to accept otherness from heterogeneous groups.”⁷ Those with more education are also less likely to view their status in society as threatened by another group and are therefore more personally efficacious. Over time, tolerance has grown to include those of lower classes; social programs that advocate for minority groups have highlighted racial and gender equality, in addition to the acceptance of LGBTQ individuals.

Education not only promotes tolerance for specific outgroups—it creates a general feeling of tolerance and reduces outgroup hostility for a wide array of racial minority and religious groups. Depending on whether or not they hold prejudices, stereotypes, and outgroup hostility, voters behave differently when it comes to political participation, such as which candidates or policies they choose to support. This is seen to a higher extent as of late, as “scholars have argued that both racial resentment... and authoritarianism... have become stronger predictors of political behavior.”⁸ Education and the subsequent tolerance and acceptance that stems from it can predict political behavior, such as voting, which can help both sides of the aisle determine which groups make up their base and possible voting bloc. It also

⁷ Oreopoulos, Philip, and Kjell G. Salvanes. "Priceless: The Nonpecuniary Benefits of Schooling." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2011, pp. 159–184. *PubMed Central*, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3183293/>.

⁸ Zingher, Joshua N. "Diploma Divide: Educational Attainment and the Realignment of the American Electorate." *Political Research Quarterly* 75, no. 2(2022)

allows psychologists and political scientists to study who is voting for whom, and why, allowing for a deeper look into political and, more broadly, human behavior.

Some argue that race should simply be eliminated as a consideration in education and that administrators should focus more on individual students or economic considerations. Economic considerations are essential to creating an equitable world, but we have not moved so far as to completely ignore the current situation in the United States concerning race, especially when it comes to its presence in our current political atmosphere. Racial attitudes have real-world implications, which were highlighted in the 2016 election. Though increasing partisanship has been a recent pattern, the 2016 election was especially notable due to the strong personality of President Trump, who ran on policies and mottos that encouraged the maltreatment of racial minorities. According to the study, “high levels of racial and anti-immigrant animus were associated with a much greater likelihood of supporting Trump in the Republican primary... and supporting Trump over Clinton in the general election.”⁹ Exit polls have shown that Trump voters were significantly less educated than Clinton voters, 29% compared to 43% respectively.¹⁰ Uneducated voters tend to have lower personal efficacy and feel that their status in society is threatened by others, which can lead to outgroup hostilities. This is enhanced by “misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and mistrust between the two groups... because there is little or no first-hand interaction experience.”¹¹ Evidently, Trump used this embedded hostility to rouse his following by promoting intolerance toward minority groups, specifically immigrants. Although this is a recent research example, it highlights how education, tolerance, and politics

⁹ Zingher, 2022.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. *An Examination of the 2016 Electorate Based on Validated Voters*. August 9, 2018. www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters

¹¹ Stark, Rodney. "Ingroups and Outgroups." *Research Starters: Sociology (Online Edition)*, EBSCO, 2006, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/ingroups-and-outgroups>.

shape American political culture, as reflected in the two-party system alongside the views of its respective supporters.

Alongside racial attitudes, stereotyping—a negative association with outgroups often resulting from ignorance or lack of contact with outgroups—has also been shown to stem from a lack of education and intelligence. This is unsurprising, as people without interpersonal experience with these outgroups are less likely to challenge or combat the stereotypes presented. In a survey done by *The Journalist's Resource*, “survey respondents with better scores on the verbal ability test were much less likely to have a negative view of black people’s intelligence and work ethic. For example, 45.7 percent of respondents who scored the lowest on the test reported that they think ‘blacks are lazy.’ About one-quarter (28.8 percent) of the highest scorers agreed with the statement.”¹² Whether it is a result of natural intelligence or the benefits that come with an education, educated people are found to be more tolerant. Perpetuating these kinds of harmful stereotypes is detrimental to these outgroups and to society’s overall tolerance. Though some stereotypes derive from deep-seated and generational hate, most come from the lack of knowledge about groups other than one's own coupled with the desire to believe one's group is superior to others. Education not only provides the knowledge to combat this dangerous ignorance but also allows for intermingling among groups, promoting tolerance. There is a clear difference between educated and uneducated voters when it comes to specific policies that generally promote tolerance or benefit the well-being of others.

Attitudes towards outgroups, often traced back to one’s level of education, have been shown to directly influence the specific policies people support. Those who have received more education have higher levels of support for liberal attitudes, “such as freedom of expression,

¹² Ordway, Denise-Marie. "Are Smart People Less Racist? New Research." *The Journalist's Resource*, January 14, 2016.

ethnic diversity, gay and lesbian rights, and non-traditional gender roles.”¹³ Those who have received higher education are more equipped and likely to adapt to societal changes and tolerate those with different lifestyles from their own. The acceptance of the LGBTQ community and alternative family structures marks a new century of acceptance for all people and is a sign of progress in a modern nation.

In addition to accepting those with “non-traditional” lives and families, education also affects feelings of nationalism, even through the lens of globalization as a whole. In a cross-national study, Bekhuis et al. “found that the effect of globalization on nationalist attitudes was conditional upon education. People with higher levels of education were less likely to experience an increase in nationalistic attitudes in response to higher levels of immigration.... increased levels of schooling caused more positive attitudes toward immigrants and lower levels of support for anti-immigrant political parties.”¹⁴ When presented with the same situation, the less educated subjects turned towards outgroup hostility more quickly than their educated counterparts. This may also arise from their seemingly threatened social status. People who view themselves as “low on the totem pole” are quicker to try to ostracize the groups around them to make them feel more secure in the perceived social hierarchy. Education is key to breaking this cycle. This study provides evidence that education was the isolated variable that led to a statistically significant increase in tolerance for outgroups.

Higher levels of education are also correlated with lower levels of religiosity, which “are associated with higher levels of trust in science and scientists... and more liberal values on gay and transgender rights and abortion.”¹⁵ The inverse relation of religion and general tolerance of others is noteworthy, especially when the Republican demographic has been more consistently

¹³ Zingher, 2022.

¹⁴ Zingher, 2022.

¹⁵ Zingher, 2022.

religious, particularly among white protestants and catholics.¹⁶ Reflected in specific policies, and we can see how those policies divide into the respective liberal and conservative lines. These divides often align with party ideals, as liberal policies are more likely to promote “tolerant” ideas and practices that advocate for the acceptance of minority groups.

The connection between education, tolerance, and partisanship is seen in a CES analysis revealing that “holding a bachelor’s degree has been a significant predictor of Democratic partisanship in each year since 2008. Perhaps more importantly, the effect increased markedly starting in 2014. The impact of having a college degree doubled between 2013 and 2020, with degree holders being nearly 0.75 points more Democratic along the seven-point scale.”¹⁷ Though the diploma divide is a relatively new phenomenon, it is significant. As the two parties become more politicized, their respective voting blocs become more pronounced. These differences between Democratic and Republican voters and the overall tolerance stemming from higher education are markedly important, given that many of these beliefs can be held for a lifetime.

Education and intelligence can be influential in childhood as well, as early education significantly correlates with attitudes towards political tolerance in adulthood. A “2008 study published in *Psychological Science*, for example, indicates a strong association between children’s general intelligence and their social attitudes as adults. The researchers learned that children with higher intelligence levels at age 10 tended to have more liberal, nontraditional attitudes at age 30.”¹⁸ This study does not account for contact theory, which states that exposure to outgroups creates more tolerance for those outgroups and others; instead, it isolates the

¹⁶ Pew Research Center. “Party Identification Among Religious Groups and Religiously Unaffiliated Voters.” *Pew Research Center*, 9 Apr. 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/party-identification-among-religious-groups-and-religiously-unaffiliated-voters/>.

¹⁷ Zingher, 2022.

¹⁸ Ordway, Denise-Marie. "Are Smart People Less Racist? New Research." *The Journalist's Resource*, January 14, 2016.

correlation between the individual's political beliefs and their levels of intelligence and education during formative years. Intelligence in a person's youth directly translates to more liberal attitudes as an adult, further supporting the theory behind the diploma divide and explaining why more educated voters, even without higher education, tend to gravitate towards the Democratic party.

Higher education does, however, affect many crucial aspects of an individual's social identity, which can cement beliefs and last a lifetime. This can include beliefs about racial, religious, and gender groups, separated loosely along party lines. Both can affect and be affected by the identity that someone has built through their years of higher education and beyond. When studying these lasting effects, "Mason (2015) and others have noted, the party coalitions have sorted along demographic lines, with people of color, urbanites, and the non-religious moving toward the Democrats and Whites, rural America, and the religious becoming more Republican."¹⁹ Groups of people with similar beliefs, including the educated, tend to gravitate toward members of their own in-group. This can create entire communities that share common belief systems, which often translate to corresponding political affiliations. This phenomenon has been seen specifically among college graduates, as they have "become more likely to live near and work with other college graduates. As a result, it stands to reason that educational attainment might operate as an increasingly strong signal of identity and shape political behavior in ways unrelated to policy, racial attitudes, and the like."²⁰ No one would generalize that every educated voter votes Democrat—or that every uneducated voter votes Republican—but education affecting social identity is significant.

¹⁹ Zingher, 2022.

²⁰ Zingher, 2022.

Even if a workplace or home residence was not intentionally chosen for these reasons, “living and working around a set of people with comparable experiences works to reinforce a shared set of values.”²¹ If college-educated people are moving to and working in similar areas, one can infer that these people are continuing to socialize with like-minded individuals. The salience of education as a strong indicator of identity and political behavior is a very important trend within the American political system—a trend that can offer insightful commentary about the Democratic and Republican bases. Once crystallized, identity rarely dissipates; college and post-graduate students base life decisions on the values they learned at university and the people they have surrounded themselves with. This gives them a

Moratorium — a time and a place in which they can experiment with different social roles before making permanent commitments to an occupation, to intimate relationships, to social and political groups and ideas, and to a philosophy of life. Gurin argues that such a moratorium should ideally involve a confrontation with diversity and complexity, lest young people passively make commitments based on their past experiences, rather than actively think and make decisions informed by new and more complex perspectives and relationships.²²

The opportunity of higher education is a playground for a vast array of life experiences that shape a student’s mindset and can continue to influence their decisions for decades to come.

The long-term effects of surrounding oneself with a diverse group of people and receiving a higher education are clear: a higher level of tolerance and a higher likelihood of supporting liberal candidates and policies. However, the short-term effects of mixing many

²¹ Zingher, 2022.

²² Gurin, Patricia, Eric L. Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin. "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes." *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 3 (2002): 334.

different groups of people together who either have a limited or even negative view of one another can be harmful. A study examining on-campus hate crimes at American universities highlights the violent effects of having a diverse campus, finding that “the more diverse a student population is, the more likely it is that there would be hate crimes on campus.”²³ The study noted a variety of potential explanatory factors and found that “what makes college campuses unique is how they gather people from different backgrounds and put them all together in one space. Some of these students come from very homogenous backgrounds.”²⁴ Coming from an extremely homogeneous background, surrounded mostly by others, presumably in your own in-group, can cause a high amount of exposure to different people to be experienced as a stark change. For some individuals or groups, this sparks hostility and even violence towards outgroups, particularly other racial and religious groups. Though this evidence can be disheartening, the “research shows that exposure to other groups can reduce prejudice in the long term... but in the short term, you also have the opportunity for victimization to increase when all these people from different backgrounds come together in a physical space.”²⁵ Campuses should pay attention to student safety and be particularly mindful of students on campus who may be targeted by hate crimes, namely minority groups.

This is not to discourage campuses from actively seeking to establish a diverse student population. The United States has come a long way in its history, but it is understandable why the seemingly glacial pace of change can be frustrating. Since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the U.S. Federal Government has implemented policies to encourage integration and equality between all of its citizens, and many universities decided to follow suit. Tolerance for minority

²³ Bryant, Jessica. “Hate Crimes on College Campuses.” *BestColleges*, November 10, 2021. www.bestcolleges.com/news/analysis/2021/07/22/hate-crimes-on-college-campuses/. Accessed 3 May 2023.

²⁴ Bryant, 2021.

²⁵ Bryant, 2021.

groups was deemed a manner of such importance that for decades the Supreme Court upheld universities' right to cultivate a diverse student body through a variety of admissions methods, known broadly as affirmative action. *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* both upheld narrowly tailored affirmative action as legal. Education was a compelling interest, particularly in the context of integrating groups of students who had previously been legally and socially restricted from attending. From countless pieces of evidence, one can see the essential benefits of promoting a more diverse, educated society in order to make America more tolerant, and programs like affirmative action expedite that process.

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