

# Intergenerational Foundation Fifth Demography Prize 2014/15

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## Questioning the turnout-raising potential of educational expansion: to what extent will supporting a more educated youth electorate boost youth turnout?

The positive relationship between education and electoral turnout at the individual level is, according to Mayer, so well-established that it is largely uncontested (2011: 633). Thought to confer the necessary skills and knowledge required for voting and to raise levels of political interest, studies consistently find significant effects across Western democracies; electors with higher levels of education demonstrate a greater likelihood of turning out than those with lower levels (Verba et al 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Hillygus 2005; Berinsky and Lenz 2011; Mayer 2011; Burden 2009; Galston 2001; Dee 2004; Gallego 2009, 2010; Straughn and Andriot 2011; Tenn 2007). It could reasonably be assumed that as the demographic profile of the UK becomes more educated, the population will become increasingly electorally participative. Writing as early as 1978, Brody highlighted a ‘puzzle of participation’ however, suggesting educational expansion had been accompanied not by a rise but decline in voter turnout. This can be especially notable among young people, arguably the most educated generation of all and yet the least participative. To what extent, therefore, can a more educated youth electorate be forwarded as a remedy to low youth electoral participation?

Despite extensions to compulsory schooling in the UK and increased numbers of young people entering higher education (HE)<sup>1</sup> – a 44 percent increase in HE students between 1999 and 2009 (UCAS 2010) – only 44 percent of 18-24 year olds were estimated to have voted in the UK’s 2010 general election. This compares to a 65 percent average (Ipsos-MORI 2010). These observations generate concerns that young people are at risk of growing political marginalisation, parties increasingly gearing policy programmes towards a ‘grey majority’ (Goerres 2008; Berry 2014b). Equally, with voting being a

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<sup>1</sup> UK education at degree-awarding institutions on courses where level of instruction is above GCE/VCE A Levels or SCE Highers/Advanced Highers (HESA 2012c).

habitual act (Plutzer 2002) fears are that if young people are not voting now, generational replacement will see electorate-wide turnout fall even further. Questions subsequently arise as to why educational expansion has seemingly failed to engender a more electorally participative youth and whether when devising strategies aimed at reversing current trends education can be relied upon to act as a key agent of political socialisation.

In this paper I choose to examine the contribution of less-well educated young people to the youth turnout puzzle, considering how and to what extent educational expansion has impacted on their participation behaviours. This makes a departure from theories which focus almost exclusively on those individuals at the top of rising education, namely university students<sup>2</sup>. Certainly, nearly all young people today are 'more' educated than in the past - in 1974 as many as 72 percent of British Election Study respondents left school at 16 years compared to just 29 percent in 2005 (Whiteley 2012: 48) - and yet individuals outwith HE cannot be assumed necessarily to have experienced educational expansion in the same way as those attending university. Taking inspiration from Nie et al's sorting model (1996) in which any aggregate increase in education does little to alter an individual's relative education status, I argue education performs an important positioning role. A young person's relative position can influence their political recruitment and the ways in which they view the political system as well as themselves as potential participants in it. These then affect turnout with the relatively low educational positioning associated with non-HE experiences today leaving this group lacking mobilisation, feeling inefficacious, and ultimately reluctant to vote. Using data from the 2011 Citizens in Transition Study (2011) and structural equation modelling I find both social networks and internal efficacy can mediate education's impact on turnout. I conclude by highlighting the implications this has for the potential role of education in remedies designed to encourage participation, suggesting that alone educational expansion will

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<sup>2</sup> For example, increased entry into HE delaying many more individuals' transition to 'adulthood' (Smets 2012) and education encouraging a move from citizen duty to engaged citizenship (Dalton 2008).

fail not only to boost turnout but also to minimise educational turnout inequality.

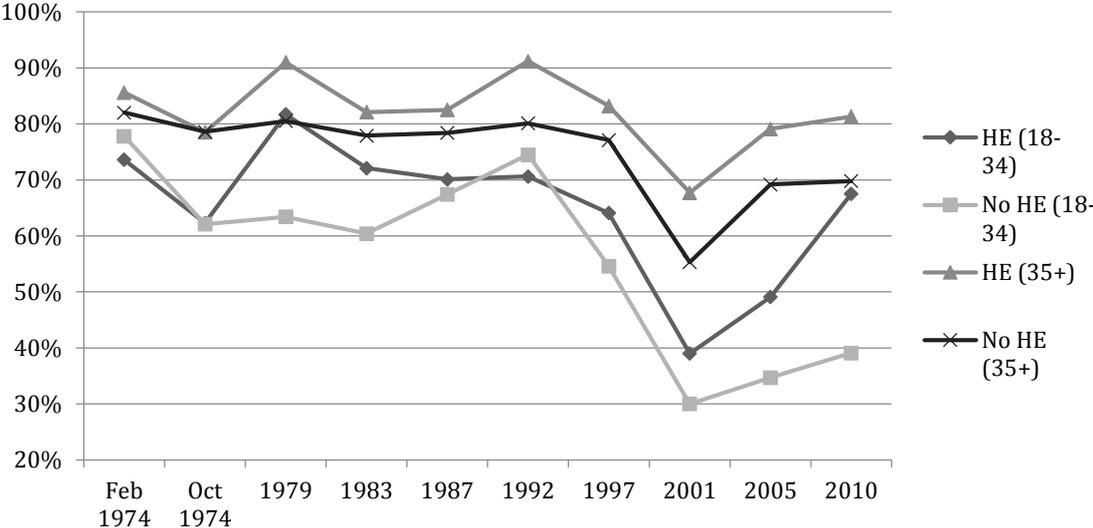
## 1. Education and electoral participation

Education is consistently associated with an increase in electoral participation potential. For example, Dee finds each additional year in education increases the likelihood of voting by an average of 3.8 percentage points (2004: 1713; see also Tenn 2007). It is not within the remit of this paper to explore the reasons for this correlation and with a wide pool of literature already available to scholars it is possible simply to summarise the key arguments. Within classic civic education theory, arguments are made that education supports the development of political skills, knowledge, and interest, all of which are considered necessary for voting (Hillygus 2005; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba et al 1995). Individuals become more capable of participating while they assess there to be greater reason to do so. Through education, individuals can also acquire practical understanding, for instance on how to register and cast a ballot (Gallego 2009, 2010, 2015). Without this knowledge they may lack confidence and feel ill-equipped to participate. Indeed, studies show that where young people report lacking sufficient understanding of politics they are more likely to abstain (Henn and Foard 2012: 53-4). Frequently viewed within a rational choice framework, education can therefore lower anticipated costs of voting while raising the prospective benefits.

Importantly, this occurs both through formal teaching *and* more informal extracurricular activities. Evidently within certain subjects, for example social sciences and humanities, skills involved in document analysis and critical thinking might be especially relevant in supporting political participation (Hillygus 2005). Equally, with citizenship education introduced into UK schools in 2001 all young people entering the electorate today should have at least some comprehension of politics, and more so than would be expected for

previous generations (see Keating et al 2010; Whiteley 2014)<sup>3</sup>. Given its recent introduction however, its precise impact is still being assessed. At the same time, within universities and colleges student unions run elections and campaigns, political parties are represented by student societies, debates are held, and political figures frequently invited to speak (Cone et al 2001: 6). Students can therefore become politically informed while gaining experience of democratic processes prior to any formal electoral participation and irrespective of variation in academic learning. Thus there is reason to believe education can support involvement in politics.

**Figure 1 Absolute turnout at UK General Elections by age and HE experience, Feb 1974 to 2010**



Source: British Election Studies Feb 1974 to 2010, n ranging from 1,874 to 3,955 (weighted by official turnout)

Analysis using British Election Studies, February 1974 to present day, demonstrates that while turnout has been falling across all groups in the UK, this has been most pronounced among young people *without HE experience* (Figure 1). Just two-fifths reported voting in 2010 (39.1 percent) compared to 67.5 percent of their HE counterparts. Evidently, we might think they do not

<sup>3</sup> Changes to education since this date, notably the creation of academies and free schools which operate under less government control and outside of the National Curriculum, alongside more general variability in teaching of citizenship education may have led to differential experiences of young people (Kerr 2014).

vote because they miss out on many of the politicising forces associated with HE (see Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980: 57) and/or experience comparatively less education (measured in years). Superficially, there is support for a civic education hypothesis. However, the school leaving age has risen over time so it remains unclear as to why these extra years alongside experience of citizenship education has left this group being under-participative to such an extent within the electorate as a whole where the participation gap is widening. Additionally, Figure 1 further justifies this paper's focus on those individuals 'left behind' by educational expansion, those who do not enjoy its full rewards – namely, entry into university – since they appear to contribute more than others to low and falling youth turnout.

## 2. The mechanisms of relative education and social sorting

A number of authors have considered the possibility that individual-level education effects are conditional on levels of education in the environment, most notably in Nie et al's sorting model (1996). Contrasted with additive effects theories in which rising education levels generate growing support for democracy across all groups (Helliwell and Putnam 2007), they claim a more educated electorate negatively impacts individual turnout by affecting *relative* education (1996; Campbell 2009; Persson 2011, 2013; Tenn 2005; Rolfe 2012). They argue that while education levels may have risen, an entrenched educational hierarchy remains and so mitigates the possibility that the *relatively* less well-educated individuals in each generation will come to vote in line with absolute education expectations. In previous generations, staying in school beyond the age of 14-16 years in the UK may have been sufficient to ensure an individual felt able and inclined to participate in society, and by association politics. It was a common phenomenon. Now with increasing entry into HE school-level-only qualifications have fallen in value. There is educational inflation; as 'average levels of education in the population have risen, each individual has needed ever more education to be positioned at the top of the class hierarchy' (Campbell 2009: 772; Tenn 2005; Nie et al 1996; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). The authors maintain that education is thus a

proxy for social position, absolute skills and knowledge playing only a minor role in determining turnout.

Most research here adopts a multi-level approach by modelling electors' turnout potential based on their individual education interacted with that of the society in which they live (Tenn 2005; Campbell 2009; Helliwell and Putnam 2007; Persson 2011, 2013). While there are clear merits in this approach the underexplored question of *why* relative differences in education matter for turnout remains, particularly given the act of voting is not in itself competitive (one person voting does not prevent another) nor directly related to social position. As Pattie and Johnston state:

'Showing that voting patterns are consistent with contextual effects is not the same as demonstrating that such effects operate. It is necessary to uncover the mechanisms by which these contextual effects bring their influence to bear.' (2000: 44).

According to Persson, by focusing only on empirical tests of the relationship between individual and aggregate education, studies do 'not allow for direct examination of the causal mechanism(s)' (2014: 726) so suggestions can only go so far in their inferences. By specifically studying the causal mechanisms it is possible to strengthen any thoughts about why a lower level of education continues to see non-HE young people abstain and overwhelm the positive impact of their absolute education. The analysis in this paper therefore moves away from classic tests of the sorting model which use longitudinal turnout and educational environment data. Rather I examine the extent to which differential turnout relates to social positioning's mediating of education effects.

Typically these mechanisms have been considered with *social network centrality*, focusing on the nature of the contacts and connections individuals can access and cultivate through their social position (Nie et al 1996; Persson 2014). As the authors themselves suggest, this is not necessarily appropriate

for young people who, often still being in education, are yet to be *formally* sorted (Nie et al 1996; Tenn 2005; Campbell 2009; Persson 2011). However, given young people's lack of electoral habits, political inexperience, and lifecycle stage they may still be susceptible to processes connected to the wider concept of relative education and positioning (Bennett 1991; Fieldhouse and Cutts 2012; Henn and Foard 2014; Munson 2010). Different social networks and status levels are arguably already found to operate across different educational settings and young people do not need to have graduated to feel or experience these (see Brennan and Osborne 2008). It is thus my contention that social positioning effects may help to explain patterns of non-HE youth turnout.

For Nie et al a high level of education is associated with high social status which supports interaction with influential social and political networks (Nie et al 1996; Persson 2014; Campbell 2009; Rolfe 2012). These determine the likelihood that individuals are subject to direct political recruitment, those at the centre of these networks being invited to participate by peers who have an interest in encouraging greater participation by those with whom they share a stake in society. This is important because as Verba and colleagues explain, being asked to participate remains a powerful mobiliser for political action (1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 193). By being both direct and targeted, such a 'push factor' can overcome other obstacles or misgivings about participating (Condon and Holleque 2013; Armingeon and Schädel 2015).

Student-led voter registration drives on university campuses offer a good example relevant to the youth population, demonstrating how these effects may be present even before formal sorting takes place. They are a direct attempt by individuals to target their peers and support their participation (Ulbig and Waggener 2011). Non-HE young people are less easily targeted (being more widely dispersed) and as a group already less likely to vote they can instead present as more costly to mobilise (Tenn 2005). They are consequently often neglected by such activities. With the decline of alternative traditional mobilising forces, for instance trade unions and even the family, an

'institutional lacuna' for non-HE young people is perhaps now especially apparent (Flanagan et al 2012; Gallego 2009; Wray-Lake and Hart 2012; Gray and Caul 2000; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Armingeon and Schädel 2015). Thus the settings in which education positions young people may have a direct impact on the level of political mobilisation they encounter.

Crucially, positioning within socially important networks, those assumed to be more politicised, can generate less overt yet still powerful normative forces to encourage voting. Individuals frequently respond to political cues and adhere to the expected behaviours within their immediate networks. The reputational cost of not voting, for example, could be higher for those who have strong political connections than for those for whom voting and civic engagement are not dominant social norms (Franklin 2004: 51; Blais 2000; Campbell 2013; Gerber et al 2008). Moreover, being in an environment in which politics is discussed and peers are politically active can have informational spill-over effects. It encourages greater awareness of politics to make voting at elections appear more relevant (Kenny 1992; Shulman and Levine 2012). These influences can be particularly strong among the young who are yet to develop their own electoral habits (Campbell 2013; Pattie and Johnston 2000; Fieldhouse and Cutts 2012; Cutts and Fieldhouse 2009). Thus while HE students are still in the process of becoming highly educated, if we are to talk of social positioning the role of universities in being able to transmit these pro-voting norms should not be ignored. Contrastingly, disadvantaged young people, typically those with no HE experience are less likely to encounter these vicarious experiences, thus reducing their compulsion to vote (Condon and Holleque 2013; Armingeon and Schädel 2015).

I would argue, however, that the role of positioning and networks within traditional sorting model approaches can and should be developed further when thinking about young people in their formative political years. Building on a body of work exploring the significance of efficacy on turnout in youth (Levy 2013; Beaumont 2011; Condon and Holleque 2013; Henn and Foard 2012, 2014; Gecas 1989), and factors accounting for differential efficacy within

this, I suggest that to truly understand how social positioning operates to mitigate absolute education effects attention must be paid to its potential role in shaping individual's perceptions of self and of politics.

Research tells us that a perceived lack of civic skills and understanding can lower electors' confidence in participating at elections (Gallego 2010; see also Nie et al 1996: 11-94). While this can be influenced by absolute education and based on formal knowledge, relative education considerations may also play a role. For instance, when viewing their political knowledge and skill in the context of levels assumed to be possessed in wider society, non-HE individuals may feel especially ill-prepared to participate. They may have sufficient skills with citizenship education, for example, in theory supporting all young people to participate politically (Keating et al 2010; Whiteley 2014) and the rising of the school leaving age ensuring a higher level of 'basic' education than previous generations. Their relative position, however, may leave them believing themselves less capable in fields deemed 'intellectual'. Increasingly viewed as 'below average' (Tenn 2005) a self-fulfilling prophecy could take effect. Contrastingly, individuals attaining high levels of educational success are more likely to possess a general self-efficacy given their top position in an academic hierarchy. They are typically more confident in their cognitive abilities being transferable from academic and life pursuits into electoral activity, whether they are wholly politically informed or not (Condon and Holleque 2013; Levy 2013; Gecas 1989; Collingwood 2012). There is therefore a potential exacerbating effect related to internal political efficacy.

Individuals might also make assessments of their influence in the political system itself on the basis of their relative position. For example, they can draw on experiences of success (or failure) in influencing others as well as how much control they hold over situations important to them. Young people lacking their own political history will look to non-political life experiences such as how effective they are in their local communities, workplaces, and colleges to determine how efficacious they feel (Condon and Holleque 2013; Gecas 1989; Levy 2013; Leighley 1995: 186). Those with high levels of

education tend to enjoy greater attention from elites and experience more opportunities for engagement in decision-making, thus increasing their sense of influence. Their high social status can also ensure they feel in possession of political voice, adopting 'upwardly mobile' thinking based on expectations of future position (Kaufmann and Feldman 2004: 482-3; Weakliem 1992: 153-5). Contrastingly, individuals without HE experience, as a marginalised group, may feel they lack a voice given their distance from important decision-making networks (Levy 2013; Tenn 2005; Condon and Holleque 2013; Henn and Foard 2014; Wray-Lake and Hart 2012; Gecas 1989; Dimer and Li 2011). Moreover, as the demographic profile of politicians often reflects societal trends and university qualifications have seemingly become almost a prerequisite (Smith Institute 2010), they may also feel unrepresented. There is thus potential for a 'critical citizen' among disadvantaged groups who is cynical about politics' openness and responsiveness to those of a relatively lower status (Holmes and Manning 2013; Diemer and Li 2011; Cammaerts et al 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Henn and Foard 2014; Harris et al 2010).

The following analysis subsequently examines the potential mediating effects of social networks, internal efficacy, and external efficacy when studying education and turnout. From this it becomes possible to consider whether rising education levels on their own are ever likely to have a positive impact on the turnout potential of those individuals at the bottom of the educational hierarchy.

### 3. Data and methods

The analysis employs cross-sectional data and causal modelling. As Persson states, 'If we have data on the causal mechanism it is possible to use cross-sectional data – without information about the contextual levels of education' to test relative education effects (2014: 726). The aim here is to assess whether education operates through three hypothesised mechanisms – internal efficacy, external efficacy, and social network interactions – and equally if one carries more explanatory power than another. Furthermore, how might these forces interact and vary in their effects across different educational groups?

My dependent variable is individual turnout at the 2010 general election. While this is a self-reported figure, methodological studies suggest using this indicator is unlikely to significantly corrupt either the relationships between variables or their estimated effects in regression models (Bernstein et al 2001; Cassel 2003; Katosh and Traugott 1981; Sigelman 1982). To test this the following analyses have been conducted both unweighted and using a youth turnout weight<sup>4</sup> to control for self-report biases. However, while absolute turnout levels demonstrate over-reporting, the strength and significance of relationships in the models appear unaffected.

The data are taken from the online component of the Citizens in Transition Study (CITS). The survey received responses from 2,010 18 to 25 year olds across the UK to investigate attitudes and behaviours within civic engagement, including their political views, citizenship learning, and perceptions of 'citizenship' (Sturman et al 2012; see also Whiteley 2012a: 5-12). A major advantage is its youth focus meaning there is both a larger youth sample and a wider array of youth-specific variables than typically found in other UK surveys of citizenship and political activity. This extends to a more nuanced record of current education status which can differentiate between HE and further education (FE)<sup>5</sup>, for example. As a quota sample from a pre-existing panel community there are limits on the extent to which inferential techniques can be confidently applied (Gschwend 2005: 89; Fowler 2009: 46; Schofield 2006: 36-7). Research in the field of political participation nevertheless suggests internet quota samples can often compare favourably with those collected through in-person interviews and probability sampling (Sanders et al 2007; Sapsford 2007; see Webb 2013: 751-2). It should not prevent robust analysis. Equally, to increase confidence in results' representativeness respondents have been compared against available population statistics with satisfactory results (Sapsford 2007: 98; Gschwend 2005: 90).

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<sup>4</sup> Based on 44 percent youth turnout in 2010 UK general election (Ipsos-MORI 2010).

<sup>5</sup> 'Any study after secondary education that's not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree).' (UK Government 2014)

To study the proposed causal paths, I employ structural equation modelling (SEM) using IBM SPSS Amos 21 and supported by logistic regression<sup>6</sup>. Such techniques have been used recently to start testing sorting model-type effects – specifically its traditional assumptions regarding social network centrality – in Sweden (Persson 2014), suggesting it as a suitable method for this analysis. SEM also permits the creation of latent indicators which can capture the three key concepts thought to be mediating the role of education on turnout. In order to mitigate the possibility that not all respondents were eligible to have voted in 2010 due to their age I exclude those who would not have been 18 years old at the time of the election<sup>7</sup>. Where age is subsequently referenced it refers to age at the time of the election. A five-category education scale variable is used in initial descriptive statistics (No HE or FE; FE student; HE undergraduate; HE postgraduate; HE graduate no longer studying), collapsed to what appears – as demonstrated by these initial summaries – a more useful three-category scale when modelling (No HE or FE; FE student; HE experience).

To establish if and how participation patterns can be explained through social positioning I use six variables, all measured on Likert scales of agreement (strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; strongly agree). These are displayed in Table 1 and cover the three mediating concepts. While social network interactions are not strictly measured in terms of position and connections, the variables here reflect the degree to which young people themselves believe they interact within politicised circles, capturing the likelihood of political norms being transferred. A purely social network position indicator, in contrast, requires greater assumptions about the level of politicisation attached to particular occupations or roles, and is less appropriate for young people who are yet to leave education and make these formal connections. The external and internal efficacy variables consider the extent to which individuals believe they can influence politics and affect change, and how politically literate and capable they believe themselves to be.

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<sup>6</sup> To ensure consistency with the SEM, all reported statistics relate to unweighted data unless stated otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> 5 May 2010

When applied within the SEM and regression, each is coded between zero and one with reverse coding applied where relevant to ensure a score of zero reflects a negative response and a score of one a positive response.

#### 4. Results

In a simple two-way test, turnout is found to vary in the sample according to educational experiences and in such a way that supports traditional assumptions, including those within a relative education effects model (even if in the unweighted sample over-reporting is evident)<sup>8</sup>. Graduates and postgraduates were most likely to report having voted in 2010 (75.5 and 72.3 percent) suggesting completion of a degree, closer proximity to ‘adulthood’, and more years spent in HE engenders greater turnout potential. Interestingly however, while HE undergraduates were unsurprisingly next – 63.4 percent – the least participative were those young people currently studying in FE. They voted at a rate of just 44.4 percent compared to 56.0 percent of young people not pursuing any post-compulsory schooling [ $\chi^2(4, n=1,845) = 76.803, p = .000$ , Cramer’s  $V = .204$ ]. Therefore while an education advantage is very apparent for HE students and graduates, this is less clear for those in FE. This starts to suggest social position considerations attached to different types of education might be important and not just objective absolute education levels since FE, while in theory providing ‘more’ education than experienced by the non-student group, is typically afforded less prestige (Janmaat et al 2014).

Table 1 presents summary statistics across each of the proposed positioning-effects variables. These demonstrate that social network interactions – specifically the likelihood of discussing politics with other people – has the highest correlation with turnout in 2010. This supports the view that socio-political positioning and associated network experiences are especially important in determining whether an individual votes. However, simply being around politically interested individuals does not seem to be as significant, downplaying the likelihood that turnout is influenced by environmental

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<sup>8</sup> To ensure consistency with the SEM, all reported statistics relate to unweighted data unless stated otherwise.

positioning alone. Social network effects may therefore need to be direct, overt, and forceful to support electoral recruitment, perhaps since young people are still in the process of forming political identities.

**Table 1 Sorting model variables across educational groups and correlated with turnout at the 2010 UK General Election**

Variable	% strongly agree and agree					Correlation with 2010 General Election turnout (Cramer's V)	
	No HE/FE	FE	HE (UG)	HE (PG)	Grad.		
<b>Social network interactions</b>	My friends are not interested in politics ( <b>fnotint</b> )*	46.3 (606)	40.6 (202)	39.3 (453)	32.1 (187)	39.5 (296)	.084 (.017), Negative
	I often discuss politics with other people ( <b>discuss</b> )*	26.5 (654)	34.6 (208)	40.8 (465)	44.2 (190)	36.5 (304)	.219 (.000), Positive
<b>External efficacy</b>	People like me can have real influence on government if they get involved ( <b>infgov1</b> )*	29.0 (599)	32.3 (195)	40.8 (434)	39.8 (186)	37.2 (290)	.122 (.000), Positive
	When local people campaign together they can help to solve problems in the community ( <b>loccam1</b> )*	57.3 (613)	57.3 (197)	70.0 (438)	65.2 (187)	70.2 (295)	.082 (.023), Positive
<b>Internal efficacy</b>	Sometimes politics seems so complicated I cannot understand what's going on ( <b>complR1</b> )*	62.4 (650)	64.7 (207)	57.7 (461)	49.7 (189)	56.4 (305)	.139 (.000), Negative
	I know less about politics than most people my age ( <b>knowR1</b> )*	25.9 (627)	25.7 (202)	19.9 (449)	19.5 (189)	15.2 (295)	.193 (.000), Negative

Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses); youth turnout weight; total N for each educational group on each question from which to interpret percentages displayed in parentheses;\*Chi-square test p<.01

Individuals lacking post-compulsory education are most likely to agree that their friends are not interested in politics. This implies any form of post-compulsory education can be important in determining whether individuals feel located in politically engaged networks. On discussing politics however, with on-course HE students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) being most likely to do so, there are suggestions that universities themselves can be

especially politicising and offer distinct opportunities for participation which are not necessarily enjoyed by other young people.

Internal efficacy variables also appear related to voting; respondents strongly disagreeing with both statements, implying they feel confident in their political knowledge, are more likely to have voted in 2010. This is marginally stronger when they are asked to make subjective comparisons against other young people ('I know less about politics than most people my age'). There are also indications from these variables that individuals appear to alter their assessments of their own political understanding between absolute and relative measures. A quarter of young people with no HE experience strongly agreed and agreed with the statement 'I know less about politics than most people my age' (25.9 percent). In contrast, just 18.3 percent of those respondents with HE experience (both current and past) strongly agreed and agreed with the statement [ $\chi^2(4, n=1,762) = 24.619, p = .000$ ], despite 55.7 percent still claiming politics often feels too complicated for them to understand. FE students, despite their ongoing education and skills development, albeit more vocational than academic, do not appear to perceive themselves as equal in political knowledge to young people attending university. This suggests that among the current generation of young people, post-compulsory education is only positively associated with increased confidence in political knowledge when it is pursued at the HE level (Henn and Foard 2014: 369).

On external efficacy, the impact of the two component variables on turnout is comparatively weak, suggesting young people pay less attention to how they can affect policies and their perceptions of politics more broadly when deciding whether or not to vote than they do towards their own abilities. There is nevertheless a slightly greater chance of voting in respect of those individuals who believe they can influence politics, and this is also positively correlated with education. Young people with HE experiences are more likely than those without – again including FE students – to believe their participation can affect change. Thus individuals may still give weight to the

prestige and status enjoyed by their different types of educational experience when assessing external efficacy with existing institutions (Levy 2013: 368) even if this is less significant for turnout.

Logistic regression can provide an initial exploration of how, when combined, the factors identified above contribute to young people's turnout decisions (Table 2)<sup>9</sup>. The first model includes all those variables discussed above while the second includes further demographic controls to test whether observed relationships remain after taking account of additional variation within the youth population. Comparing Models I and II, the inclusion of demographic controls results in only minor changes to the effect sizes of the mechanism variables and relative stability in whether these make significant contributions. Education has been collapsed into three categories based on the distinctions identified within Table 1. There is also improved model fit with an increased Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>. Both models correctly classify just under two-thirds of cases in the sample and report good Hosmer-Lemeshow tests.

By studying Model II it is found that despite controlling for the proposed relative education mechanisms, education continues to exert significant influence over turnout decisions. HE young people are more likely to have voted in 2010 than FE students *and* those individuals with no post-compulsory education. FE students are again the least likely educational group to have voted, being 60.5 percent less likely than HE individuals to turn out, whereas for young people with no HE or FE experience the probability of voting is only 40.4 percent lower. Therefore despite FE students having experience of post-compulsory schooling and an arguably higher educational level than those never attending either an FE or HE institution, they are not more likely to vote, even when including controls. This reaffirms claims that absolute education may not tell us the whole story. It nevertheless also suggests that positioning,

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<sup>9</sup> Binary logistic models using these variables were compared between youth turnout weighted and unweighted to reveal no noticeable disparities across coefficients – in magnitude, direction, and significance – or in model fit statistics.

at least through the concepts and indicators tested here, is also not solely responsible for the patterns we observe.

**Table 2 Binary logistic regression: youth turnout at the 2010 General Election**

	<i>I</i>		<i>II</i>	
	B (s.e)	Exp(B)	B (s.e)	Exp(B)
<b>Educational status (comparison = HE experience)</b>				
No post-compulsory education	.505 (.122)***	.603	-.517 (.135)***	.596
FE student	-.943 (.175)***	.389	-.929 (.186)***	.395
<b>Internal efficacy</b>				
Sometimes politics so complicated cannot understand (high = strongly disagree)	.300 (.237)	1.350	.293 (.258)	1.340
I know less about politics (high = strongly disagree)	.754 (.250)***	2.125	.583 (.266)**	1.791
<b>External efficacy</b>				
People like me can influence government by getting involved (high = strongly agree)	.165 (.227)	1.180	.398 (.240)*	1.490
Local people campaigning can solve problems (high = strongly agree)	.300 (.278)	1.351	.189 (.291)	1.208
<b>Social networks</b>				
My friends are not interested in politics (high = strongly disagree)	-.081 (.232)	.922	.123 (.248)	1.131
I often discuss politics with other people (high = strongly agree)	1.009 (.226)***	2.742	1.060 (.244)***	2.885
<b>Age (reference = 22-24 years)</b>				
18-19 years			-.401 (.149)***	.670
20-21 years			-.392 (.145)***	.676
<b>Gender (comparison = male)</b>				
			-.127 (.133)	.881
<b>Ethnicity (comparison = White British)</b>				
			-.928 (.146)***	.395
<b>Parent social class (reference = higher managerial)</b>				
Never worked/LT unemployed			.602 (.311)*	1.825
Routine and manual			-.283 (.152)*	.754
Intermediate			-.139 (.148)	.870
<b>Constant</b>	-.432 (.241)*		.092 (.294)	
<b>-2LL</b>	1890.225		1703.176	
<b>Model significance</b>	117.758***		165.595***	
<b>Hosmer-Lemeshow</b>	1.675		4.963	
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></b>	.101		.150	
<b>% correctly classified</b>	65.2		67.7	
<b>N</b>	1528		1435	

Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses); unweighted; \*\*\*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*p<.1

The results relating to the social positioning variables are mixed. Internal efficacy appears important but only when related to young people's subjective assessments of political literacy. When comparing themselves to other young people, individuals strongly disagreeing that they know less about politics than others are 1.8 times more likely to have voted in 2010 than those who strongly agree. This reflects propositions that relative education impacts on

perceptions of self and ability through comparative reflection. External efficacy is only significant when thinking about political influence, and just at a level of  $p < .1$ . Young people who believe they can influence government through their involvement are 1.5 times more likely to have voted in 2010 than those who do not. On the third proposed mechanism, that of the individual's experiences within their social networks, there is again strong support for suggesting individuals who discuss politics with others are more likely to vote. Here they are almost three times more likely to have voted than those who do not.

What the logistic regression cannot tell us however is the extent to which the proposed mechanisms may interact and mediate the effects of absolute individual-level education on turnout. SEM can be used to develop these investigations further (see Schreiber et al 2006; Persson 2014). I have conducted an initial confirmatory factor analysis (Figure 2) to develop the three latent concepts of internal efficacy, external efficacy, and political interactions within social networks (RMSEA  $< .06$ , CFI  $> .95$ ). The total sample size is 1,883 with missing data handled by expectation-maximisation.

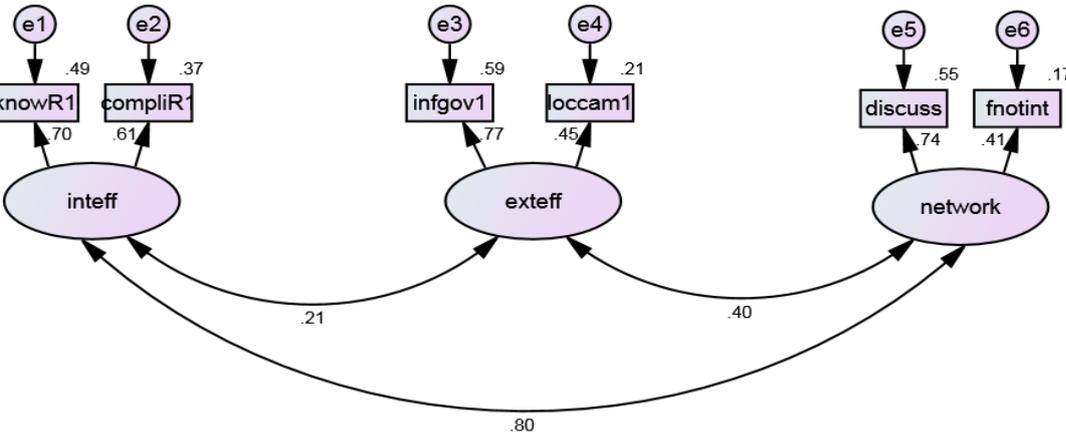


Figure 2 Confirmatory factor analysis: internal political efficacy, external political efficacy and social and political environment (standardised results). Chi-square 240.020 (6 d.f.),  $p = .000$ , RMSEA = .055, CFI = .974. Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses),  $n = 1,883$

After a process of model testing, Figures 3, 4 and 5 appear most helpful for examining these issues based on both theory and model fit statistics. Building

on the confirmatory factor analysis' suggestions of positive correlation between the three mediating latent variables, the path diagrams estimate not only their individual impacts on turnout but also how they relate to each other. For instance, it may be that individuals who engage in political discussions can increase their political knowledge and understanding by doing so. Alternatively, individuals with high levels of political knowledge and understanding may seek out networks of politically engaged individuals. In reality, it is likely to be a bit of both with mutually reinforcing effects. However, adoption of relative education thinking – which is concerned more with environment – would suggest the former will be more significant, individuals assessing their levels of efficacy based not simply on absolute education but social positioning also. Including paths of this nature in the models improved model fit (RMSEA <.06, CFI >.95). They explain 11, 8 and 9 percent of the variance in turnout respectively. Each path diagram compares two specific educational groups and excludes the remaining third group. This is to test where variation across educational groups specifically emerges. Significant relationships are identified by bold arrows.

In each instance, individual educational experience has a significant and positive effect on how politicised an individual's social networks are, which offers early support for a proposed social positioning role. This is strongest when distinguishing between HE individuals and those with no post-compulsory schooling; having HE experience generates a .22 standard deviation increase in the likelihood of being located among politically engaged social networks. Interestingly, this effect size is weakest when comparing only FE and HE individuals (a standardised coefficient of just .08) suggesting educational positioning effects on networks are less evident between young people with at least some post-compulsory education. This is further observed where FE students have an increased probability of being positioned in political networks compared to those with no post-compulsory schooling (Figure 5). Thus positioning does appear to take effect in youth, and educational experiences can play an important role in determining this. Individuals with HE experience will nearly always encounter stronger political

mobilisation forces within their social networks than any other young person, while those at the very bottom of the educational hierarchy, absent from any educational institution, face a disadvantage in this regard. FE students, while perhaps enjoying lower status than HE students, may still access political groups, the UK's National Union of Students, for example, representing both educational sectors, for example.

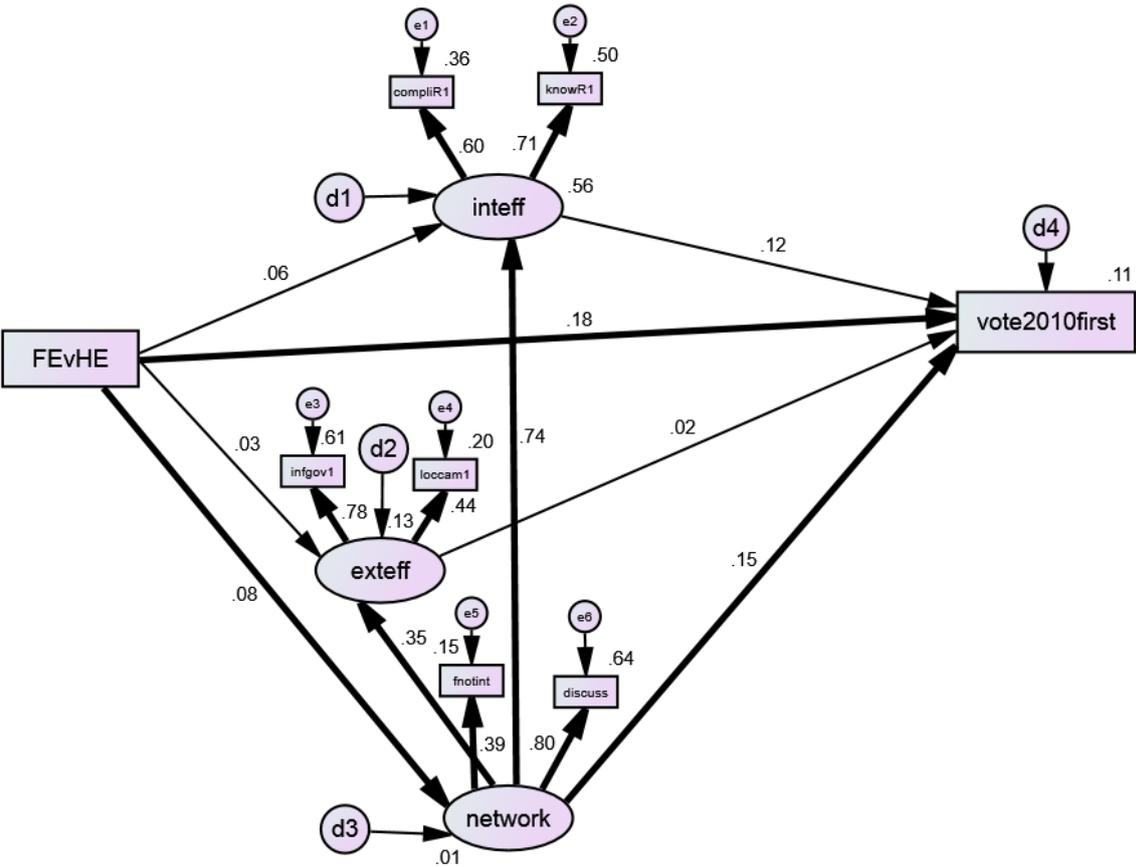


Figure 3 FE versus HE experience and 2010 turnout (standardised results); Chi-square 263.840 (13 d.f.),  $p=0.000$ , RMSEA =.046, CFI =.965. Source: 2011 CITS (Online responses),  $n=1,883$

The effects of individual education on internal and external efficacy are by contrast much smaller and insignificant. Social networks are nevertheless found to have significant and positive relationships with internal and external efficacy constructs within each model. For example, by applying the causal direction implied by the sorting model, a one point increase in political network interactions leads to a .74 or .75 standard deviation increase in internal efficacy in each model. The average effect size on external efficacy is

much smaller (only a standardised coefficient of .35). Absolute education may not therefore determine differences between young people on these latent constructs but their educationally-influenced socio-political interactions with others do, suggesting this effect of education is only ever indirect for these attitudinal characteristics. While this to some extent undermines expectations about efficacy, it reinforces and elaborates on the role of social networks in shaping how young people view their own political ability. It also suggests that educational positioning potentially has a two-stage process. It first situates young people within particular contexts, locations, and networks. It is then from this that they develop their own perceptions of their ability to engage in and influence politics.

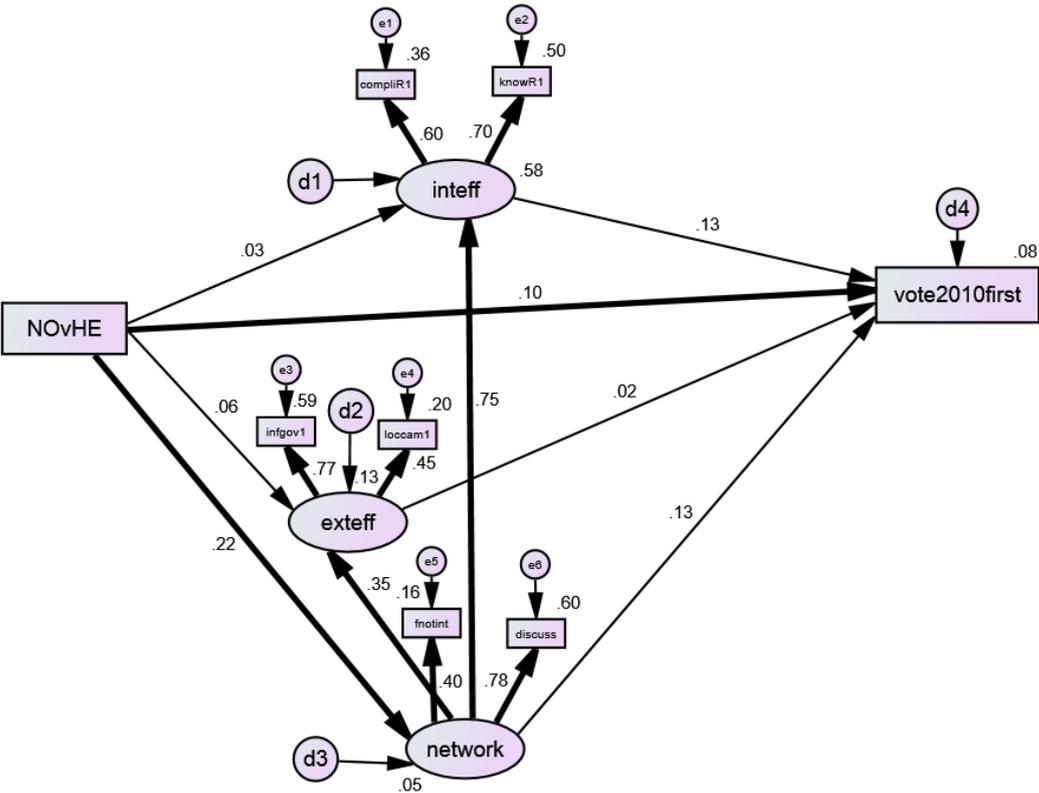


Figure 4 No compulsory schooling versus HE experience and 2010 turnout (standardised results); Chi-square 276.012 (13 d.f.), p=.000, RMSEA =.051, CFI =.958. Source: 2011 CITS (Online responses), n=1,883

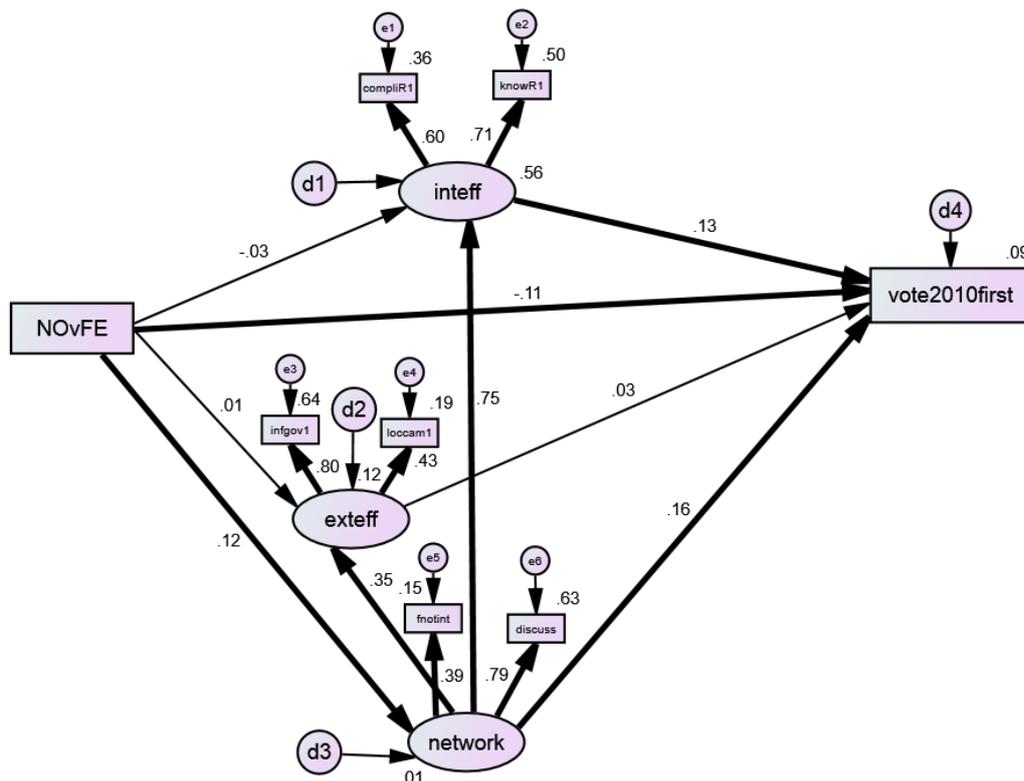


Figure 5 No compulsory schooling versus FE experience and 2010 turnout (standardised results); Chi-square 254.698 (13 d.f.),  $p=.000$ , RMSEA =.041, CFI =.971. Source: 2011 CITS (Online responses),  $n=1,883$

However, in agreement with the dominant emphasis on social networks in existing discussions of relative education effects, of the three latent constructs it is social networks which most consistently have a significant ( $p<.05$ ) direct impact on whether an individual voted at the 2010 general election, evidenced both when comparing HE and FE *and* no post-compulsory education and FE. In both the relationship is positive. This supports recent research which has suggested social networks can be more important for individuals with low levels of education when turnout decisions are made (Armingeon and Schädel 2015). Differing levels of perceived political ability, while also positively associated with greater turnout, is significant however in just one model (Figure 5 – FE vs. no post-compulsory education). Thus the two-stage process, while evident, may not be important for turnout in all instances. For individuals with HE experience, for example, it would seem that social networks are more central, implying mobilisation and not perceived ability explains their higher level of turnout. Nevertheless, social networks are not a

significant turnout indicator when comparing HE with no post-compulsory education.

The SEM approach, as with the logistic regression, additionally suggests education acts through mechanisms not covered by the chosen conceptualisations of relative education effects here. It has a significant direct effect on turnout in each model. Consequently, when controlling for concepts of perceived political understanding and social environment, we still find individuals with HE experiences being more likely to vote than those without. This to some extent undermines the adoption of a solely relative education model. There may, for example, be support for still assigning some role to a more absolute education concept, perhaps relating to objective indicators of knowledge and skill. However, absolute education has a negative association with turnout in Figure 5. It consequently suggests that the relationship is still not straightforward. Additional education, if only pursued at a FE level, does not provide a turnout advantage.

The findings therefore offer some support for the view that one of education's most important roles in affecting turnout and preventing non-HE young people from voting at higher rates is in shaping the networks with which young people come into contact. The higher the level of their education, the higher the probability that they interact with others in a way which could be considered politically stimulating. Importantly, this then influences efficacy which can, on occasion, further strengthen this impact of positioning.

To explore the potential interaction effects I have conducted a second logistic regression model with an interaction between social networks and educational experiences. New variables have been computed for the three latent variables by averaging each respondent's scores across the two component indicators. Demographic variables have also been re-introduced at this stage to ensure any variation is controlled for. The results (Table 3) suggest there are significant positive interaction effects between education and social networks. Figure 6 presents this interaction showing that political

social networks are particularly important for boosting turnout potential in HE and non-post-compulsory education groups. Both see turnout potential increase as the social networks score increases. This is most marked for individuals with no additional education which suggests they may be particularly dependent on being mobilised by others to vote, whereas individuals with HE experience already have a stronger predisposition to do so. Interestingly however, social networks appear to have a negative impact on turnout for FE students. This suggests alternative factors may be intervening to lower their turnout potential and counteract any positive influence of politically engaged peers. Equally, it might be that as a (perceived to be) marginalised group, increased political awareness and discussions may in fact encourage greater cynicism and disaffection – a more critical citizen response – in which alternative participation preferences develop (Norris 2011; Holmes and Manning 2013, Diemer and Li 2011).

**Table 3 Binary logistic regression: youth turnout at the 2010 General Election (with interactions)**

	<b>B (s.e)</b>	<b>Exp(B)</b>
<b>Educational status (comparison = HE experience)</b>		
No post-compulsory education	-.801 (.300)***	.449
FE student	.229 (.442)	1.384
<b>Internal efficacy (high = highly efficacious)</b>	.990 (.307)***	2.691
<b>External efficacy (high = highly efficacious)</b>	.745 (.299)**	2.106
<b>Social networks (high = highly politicised networks)</b>	1.294 (.406)***	3.646
<b>Social networks*Educational status (comparison = HE experience)</b>		
Social networks*No post-compulsory education	.786 (.625)	2.194
Social networks* FE student	-2.506 (.839)***	.082
<b>Age (reference = 22-24 years)</b>		
18-19 years	-.403 (.150)***	.668
20-21 years	-.369 (.145)**	.692
<b>Gender (comparison = male)</b>	-.115 (.132)	.891
<b>Ethnicity (comparison = White British)</b>	-.957 (.145)***	.384
<b>Parent social class (reference = higher managerial)</b>		
Never worked/LT unemployed	.622 (.308)**	1.863
Routine and manual	-.288 (.153)*	.750
Intermediate	-.154 (.148)	.858
<b>Constant</b>	-.097 (.302)	
<b>-2LL</b>	1696.969	
<b>Model significance</b>	171.802***	
<b>Hosmer-Lemeshow</b>	8.453	
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></b>	.155	
<b>% correctly classified</b>	67.8	
<b>N</b>	1435	

Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses); youth turnout weight, \*\*\*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*p<.1

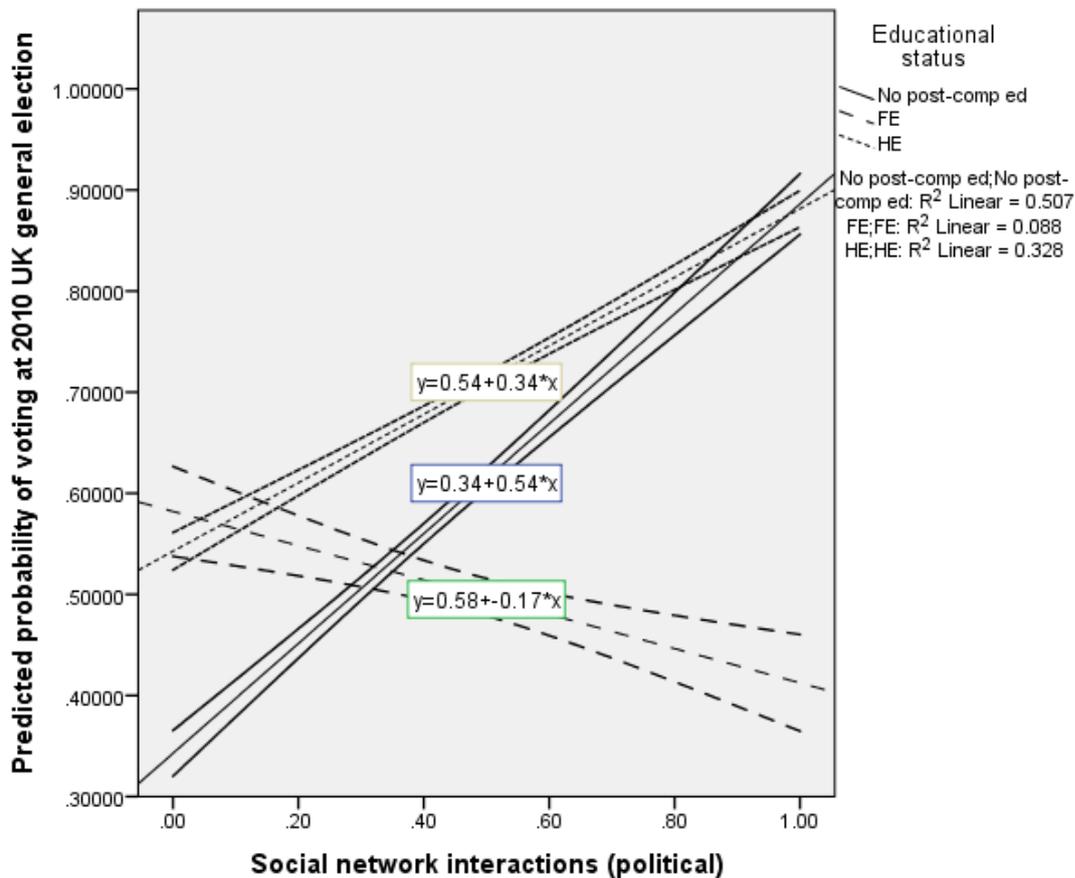


Figure 6 Mean predicted probability for 2010 General Election turnout by social network interactions and educational status

## 5. Discussion

The analysis suggests a number of contributions can be made to existing thinking on how relative education effects help explain persistent turnout inequalities in youth. These in turn offer thoughts for why the increase in young people's average education level on its own has so far failed to raise youth turnout and is unlikely to do so in the future. Of interest is that the theories associated with relative education and social positioning do appear to be applicable to young people, at least in a UK context. Previous research on the sorting model has concentrated almost exclusively on those over the age of 25/6 years, arguing that by still being in the process of becoming educated younger people do not present as comparable cases (Nie et al 1996; Tenn 2005; Campbell; Persson 2011). Analysis here, however, suggests young people with HE experience, past or ongoing, are more likely to report having

interactions within politically engaged social networks than those without. This is true even against those young people with FE experience, suggesting status and position attached to education can be especially important in determining the type and level of political socialisation an individual is subject to during their formative years. In addition, there is a positive association between this and whether or not an individual turns out. The implication is that education's positive effects on electoral participation are mediated by the types of people individuals come into contact with through their educational experiences. Simply entering a university environment can therefore boost turnout potential through these mechanisms (Dee 2004; Tenn 2007). In contrast, even if individuals outwith HE are staying at school longer and completing higher levels of qualification, they will not necessarily encounter pro-voting mobilising forces.

It must also be acknowledged, however, that the positive impact of more political social networks is not universally felt across young people. It appears particularly important for young people without any post-compulsory education experience, implying that if political actors are to encourage their turnout, increasing mobilisation through network interactions will be key to any success. This might mean developing strategies which generate new and alternative forums for political discussion and encourage peer-to-peer debate. Citizenship education may present such an opportunity, targeting young people before more noticeable educational distinctions emerge. However, with demographic variation across schools and the freedom many schools can use to bypass the National Curriculum it is at present limited in its potential effectiveness. FE students, on the other hand, demonstrate falling turnout potential when they come to interact in politicised social networks. For this group it therefore appears not enough to hope that raising interest and awareness through social network activities will improve their propensity to vote. Thinking about their relative status, they may engage in more critical discussions of politics when opportunities for debate arise, perceiving themselves as marginalised or unrepresented. Additionally, alternative

interventions may be needed. Information on these can be taken from another key finding of the analysis.

Relative education's relationship with turnout appears to be not solely connected to social networks but also to internal efficacy, albeit indirectly. For instance, FE students are found to sit closer to individuals with no post-compulsory education on efficacy indicators despite their continued presence in educational institutions. This implies feelings of political ability are not shaped purely by formal learning processes as is commonly assumed. While absolute education differences could undoubtedly influence the skills and knowledge transferred to individuals to facilitate or discourage political participation, suggestions within this analysis are that it is through the networks young people engage with, often resulting from their varied educational experiences, which lead them to develop different levels of political confidence. This implies being located within politically engaged circles can heighten individuals' feelings of political comprehension and literacy, young people judging their capacity for participation against that of other young people. Where individuals feel and are excluded from political networks they appear less confident in their ability to participate and may subsequently envisage increased costs due to their perceived 'deficiencies' or disadvantage. They will also likely encounter fewer opportunities to build their confidence in this area if they do not have the chance to converse with politically engaged individuals. While internal efficacy is not always a significant determinant of turnout, it does appear to be important in the decision-making process of FE students. Thus strategies here will need to consider how the political discussions many of these individuals appear to have can be supplemented by activities which will boost political confidence. It may be that initiatives with a greater focus on *electoral* politics need to be integrated into existing discussions to ensure all young people are encouraged to make linkages between the politics they encounter in their daily lives and the formal political world.

Significantly however, external efficacy is not a significant or powerful determinant of turnout, nor is it directly related to education. As with internal efficacy, social networks appear to play some role in shaping perceptions of influence and power in politics – again providing possible evidence of relative education effects – and yet no educational group appears to decide their electoral behaviour on these considerations. This is interesting in that it suggests their abstention relates less to their demands of the political system and more to their position and experiences in politics and society. Thus for non-HE individuals, strategies would still appear best directed at improving their political socialisation and learning.

Finally, we see that education has an effect on turnout beyond the proposed positioning mechanisms. It continues to exert a significant influence even controlling for efficacy and social networks. This suggests there are untested effects our proposed and tested operationalization of a relative education model cannot adequately explain. These could relate to absolute education effects – for example, a more objective measure of political knowledge – as is frequently posited by a civic education hypothesis (Hillygus 2005). This would imply that educational expansion may yet have a role to play in boosting youth turnout. However, there may also be other indicator variables reflective of relative education effects could develop the model, for example wider social environmental factors and alternative efficacy measures which are not available in the CITS.

What do these contributions mean for the youth turnout? Support is found for a view that youth turnout will fail to rise in line with education because access to political social networks continues to vary according to the type of education a young people has received and is receiving. HE today affords young people a much higher status than other types of education and consequently provides them with more opportunities to be mobilised and recruited into politics. Moreover, it can go on to shape young people's perceptions of their own understanding of politics and, it can be inferred, their overall ability to participate in politics. Individuals without HE, regardless of

their absolute education level and how this corresponds to the education levels of earlier generations, are contrastingly less likely to interact with political networks. The probabilities of their encountering direct encouragement and/or risking social costs by abstaining are therefore lower. Social inequalities will persist and in turn so too will participation inequalities; average levels of education can be altered but the existence of a corresponding hierarchy appears entrenched. Educational settings may still provide a vehicle for politicisation and yet it will not be sufficient to rely on building a more educated electorate to increase turnout. Instead, remedies will require looking at those factors related to education in a relative sense – the networks it positions individuals in and the resultant internal efficacy this engenders – to overcome obstacles which remain to the (relatively) less well-educated youth participating.

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