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Want a Stronger Democracy? Invest in Education

By [Edward L. Glaeser](#)



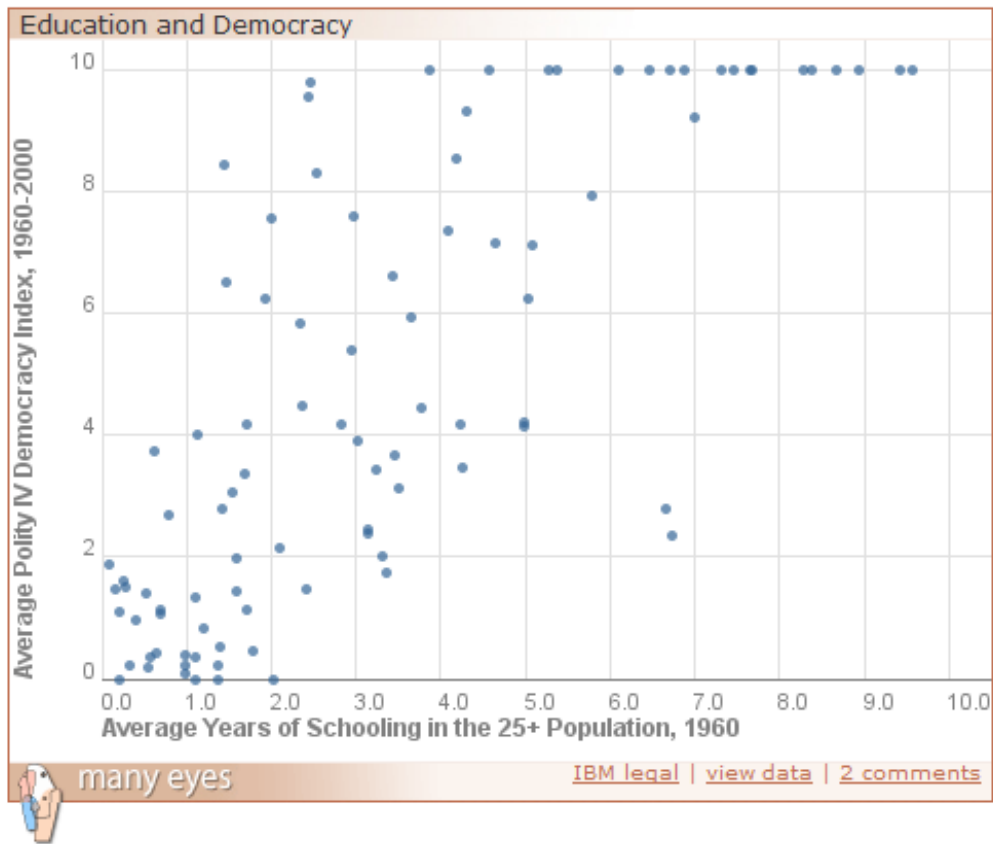
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Argentina's poor economic performance during the 20th century reflects, in part, political instability and the mistaken policies of dictatorial regimes. Before 1930, Argentina had seemed a stable republic, but for 53 years from 1930 to 1983, Argentina was whipsawed by frequent military coups and uprisings.

Why was Argentina unable to remain a stable democracy? Education, education, education.

The chart below shows the 77 percent correlation between education levels in 1960 (measured by the average years of schooling in a country as [estimated by Robert Barro and Jong-Wha Lee](#)), and the subsequent 40-year average of the [Polity IV democracy index](#). That democracy index runs from zero to 10, where countries with index values less than three don't look remotely democratic and countries with index values of about seven are reasonably well-functioning democracies.

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One way to read the graph is that there are basically no countries with very low levels of education that have managed to be democratic over the long term, and almost every country with a high level of education has remained a stable democracy.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” In 1960, 36 nations had less than 1.74 years of schooling (which happens to be the level that Afghanistan has today). Of those 36 countries, only two — India and Botswana — managed to have average democracy scores above 4.2.

Out of the 19 countries in this sample with more than 5.3 years of schooling (the current level in Iran) in 1960, 17 have average democracy scores above 7.9. Fifteen of these have been perfectly democratic, at least by the standards of Polity IV. Only Poland and Hungary were dictatorships, and one can certainly argue that those places would have been democracies in 1960s if it were not for Soviet troops.

But in the middle ranges of education, between two and five years on average, almost anything goes.

Some places, like Costa Rica and Italy, have been extremely democratic, while others, like Kuwait and Paraguay, have not. Iraq falls into this category today, which suggests a fair amount of uncertainty about that country’s political future.

Why do I think that the chain of causality runs from education to democracy rather than the reverse? Democracy in 1960 is essentially [uncorrelated](#) with subsequent growth in the levels of education. Education in 1960, on the other hand, does an extremely good job of predicting increases in democracy.

The ability of education to predict the durability of democracy is well illustrated by the paths of former Communist bloc countries. Initially well-educated places, like the Czech Republic and Poland, have managed to transition toward being well-governed republics. Poorly educated places have not.

Why is there a connection between human capital and freedom?

Giacomo Ponzetto, Andrei Shleifer and I have [argued](#) that the connection reflects the ability of educated people to organize and fight collaboratively.

Dictators provide strong incentives for the ruling clique; democracies provide more modest benefits for everyone else. For democracy to beat dictatorship, the dispersed population needs to have the skills and motivation to work collaboratively to defeat dictatorial coups and executive aggrandizement.

Education teaches skills, like reading and writing, that enable people to work collaboratively. At younger grades, teachers spend a lot of time teaching children how to get along. In the United States, education is strongly linked to civic engagement and membership in social groups. The ability to work together enables the defense of democracy.

One of the key moments in the recent history of democracy was the [1991 Soviet coup](#), in which the die-hard Soviets seemed poised to stop Russia's rush to freedom.

The coup was thwarted by mass uprisings that were organized by well-educated Muscovites. They distributed fliers that brought out the crowds and used trolleys and street-cleaning machines to block the movements of tanks. One of my favorite episodes from this defense of democracy was the constant playing of music from Boris Godunov, a wordless reminder of the need to fight for freedom.

Argentina's relatively low level of education in 1930 left it ill equipped to defend its democratic institutions against would-be dictators, who then adopted policies that impoverished the nation. Today, Argentina is well enough educated that its political prognosis is far more positive.

Instead, we must worry about the future of a democratic Afghanistan. The problematic recent elections in that country are unsurprising given its dearth of human capital. Given just the historical connection between education and democracy, the fight to foster freedom in that country is likely to be a long, uphill struggle.

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