

Higher Education Participation and Democracy: Trends and Insights from Authoritarian Countries

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Educational theorists, such as John Dewey, have argued that higher education acts as a catalyst for democracy by fostering critical thinking, civic engagement, and the nurturing of democratic values. Gert Biesta's conceptualisation of subjectification further emphasizes the role of education in developing independent thinkers capable of challenging prevailing norms and structures. Meanwhile, sociologists of education have shown that higher education can also perpetuate existing political structures and cultural norms. This study examines how the expansion of higher education participation is linked with democratisation in authoritarian regimes through two primary mechanisms: the expansion of domestic higher education and international student mobility. Utilising dynamic panel models, we analyse cross-national time-series data from 1999 to 2018 across 88 countries. We compliment these with insights from 700 semi-structured interviews. Our findings demonstrate a complex interplay between the expansion in higher education participation—both domestic and international—and democratic development within authoritarian contexts.

Full paper

Education has long been acknowledged as a fundamental requisite for democracy (Dewey, 1916; Lipset, 1959). Literature highlights the importance of expanding access to higher education in fostering democracy and suggests that studying abroad might also help accelerate democratisation in students' home countries. This study examines how the expansion of higher education participation is linked with democratisation in authoritarian regimes through two primary mechanisms: the expansion of domestic higher education and international student mobility.

The conceptualisation of the role of higher education in supporting democracy builds on the idea that educational environments can develop democratic values and citizenship, and promote critical discussions (Biesta, 2014; Sen, 1999). This, in turn, enhances individuals' capabilities to support democracy by fostering emancipative values that uphold freedom and personal choice (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010) and encouraging active participation in civil society (Glaeser et al., 2007). Research also shows that people with higher education are more likely to take part in social movements advocating for democracy, as seen in student protests (Ibrahim, 2010). Consequently, expanding access to higher education is a vital element of democratisation.

Some literature has also argued that international student mobility plays a key role in enhancing democracy in individuals' home countries. When students study abroad, they experience different cultures, ideas and networks, which helps them see the world in new ways (Netz, 2021; Rizvi, 2011). This experience can position them to support democratic changes when they return home (Mercier, 2016). Previous research on international higher education indicates that individuals educated abroad can influence the political landscape of their home country by bringing back new political ideologies and practices absorbed in the host country (Chankseliani, 2018; Kwak & Chankseliani, 2023; Spilimbergo, 2009). However, international higher education tends to make a difference in enhancing democracy only when students have studied in democratic countries. Moreover, host countries often use international student scholarships as a means to spread their own cultural and political ideas (Campbell & Neff, 2020). International higher education, therefore, can sometimes feel like a battleground where countries seek to extend their influence by shaping the beliefs of international students. From this standpoint, we hypothesise that students studying abroad, especially in democratic countries, contribute to promoting the democratisation of their authoritarian home country by spilling over democratic values to those who remain at home and by actively engaging in politics as leaders.

To examine the dual mechanisms behind the expansion of higher education for democratisation, this study compiles a cross-national time-series dataset covering 88 authoritarian countries from 1999 to 2018. Data for all the variables in the analysis are sourced from various open databases, including Polity5, Freedom House, the World Bank, and the UNESCO Institute Statistics. Following Hadenius and Teorell (2007), we adopt a composite measure of democracy, calculated as the mean value of each country's Polity and Freedom House indices scaled from 0 (autocracy) to 10 (democracy). This study utilises dynamic panel models employing the System Generalized Methods of Moments (GMM) estimation (Roodman, 2009). This approach is well-suited for our data analysis as it tackles potential endogeneity concerns arising from the correlation between the lagged dependent variable and error term. Additionally, it aids in mitigating potential reverse causality, indicating the plausible causal direction from democracy to the expansion of higher education. We complement this quantitative analysis with insights from 700 semi-structured interviews conducted in 70 countries. These interviews provide narratives from change makers, highlighting the link between international higher education experiences and individuals' efforts to promote democracy in their home countries.

Our preliminary findings indicate that the expansion of international mobility, particularly to democratic host countries, has a positive impact on democratisation in authoritarian countries. However, the expansion of domestic higher education does not seem to contribute to democratic development. In conclusion, our research offers a holistic perspective on the role of higher education, revealing a nuanced interplay between the increase in higher education participation—both domestic and international—and democratic progress within authoritarian contexts.

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