

New research explores why some voters are more susceptible to 'demagogue' candidates

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Many low-education voters who embrace social welfare programs vote against their own beliefs, new UC Riverside research holds.

The mitigating factor is education: The more education one has, the more likely one is to stick to one's policy preferences.

"It means candidates who employ tactics such as fear and attaching patriotism to certain concepts can persuade people to [vote](#) for candidates who are in opposition to their social beliefs," Diogo Ferrari, a professor of political science at UC Riverside, wrote in his recently published paper, "Education, Belief Structures, Support for Welfare Policies, and Vote," published in the journal *Education & Society*.

For the study, Ferrari looked at public opinion surveys collected in 2016 in more than 30 European, Asian, and North American countries. The surveys included information about peoples' education, and 18 questions gauging attitudes toward social welfare policies including [social security](#), unemployment, education, health spending, industry financing, and income redistribution. Lastly, the survey asked which [political party](#) the respondent voted for in the last general election.

Among people with low education, [social programs](#) such as old-age pensions and giving financial aid to low-income students are met with support. Unemployment insurance, in particular, is popular among those with low education, defined as having a [high school education](#) or less. The program is about three times more popular than among those with high education, meaning at least an undergraduate degree.

"The least-educated support social protection more than the most-educated, as do the poorest groups within the same education group," Ferrari wrote.

But support for left-wing policies among people with low education doesn't translate to support for left-wing parties. It's not just left-wing beliefs and voting that are misaligned among the least educated voters: Attitudes against social welfare don't necessarily align with right-wing

voting, either.

"It's only when schooling is high that ... positions are harmonized with the vote for right-wing or left-wing parties," Ferrari wrote. "Less-educated groups contradict, in behavior (vote), their attitudinal tendency to support welfare policies."

Ferrari wrote it makes them prey to the "demagogue candidate" who uses "caricatured notions of right and left to position himself politically before less attentive voters."

That could mean aligning party politics with patriotism, religion, or the promise of eliminating political corruption. And so, voters with low education can end up voting against their own interests.

"The idea is to deviate people's attention from some of the things they care about and focus on their attitudes on other areas," Ferrari said. "A candidate can emphasize anti-illegal-immigration policy, or economic nationalism, or anti-political-elite positions.

"The implication of the study is that, everything else the same, (such tactics) seem more effective among those who are less educated."

More educated voters, meanwhile, are less likely than low-educated voters to sacrifice their policy preferences and vote for parties more distant in terms of policy positions.

Ferrari's findings build on a long-held position among political scientists. In 1964's "The Nature of Belief Systems," political scientist Philip Converse argued citizens can't process large quantities of political information, which leads to a lack of structure and stability in their views. He asserted that, when people are asked to pair the terms "liberal" and "conservative" with ideology, they struggle.

Ferrari's new research qualifies that argument, asserting formal education can prevent that misalignment.

"The idea is that formal [education](#), or schooling, makes people more likely to use broad organizing conceptual schemes such as notions of 'conservatism' and 'liberalism' to evaluate political affairs and categorize political actors," Ferrari said. "The fact is that we can clearly distinguish policy preferences between some social groups, and the match between those preferences and vote is stronger among the most educated, which indicates they are less likely to 'sacrifice' their overall [policy](#) preferences in favor of a few other 'issues of the day' when voting."

More information: Diogo Ferrari. EDUCATION, BELIEF STRUCTURES, SUPPORT FOR WELFARE POLICIES, AND VOTE, *Education & Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1590/es.242109](https://doi.org/10.1590/es.242109) in

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