

Compulsory Education and Women’s Political Participation

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1 Research Question

The advancement of gender equality has become a focal point in contemporary social science and policymaking. The World Economic Forum (WEF) publishes the annual *Global Gender Gap Report*, which offers insights into the state of gender equality across countries. The 2024 WEF report reveals that while global gender equality scores have reached 60.5% in economic participation, 94.9% in educational attainment, and 96.0% in health and survival, the score for political empowerment remains at a mere 22.5% (WEF 2024). The stark underrepresentation of women in politics highlights the persistent gender inequality in the political arena and has sparked widespread debate on how to promote women’s political participation.

How can the gender gap in politics be reduced? A substantial body of research has underscored the significance of institutional factors. For instance, the design of single-member district plurality systems tends to discourage political parties from nominating female candidates and reinforces the incumbency advantage that disproportionately favors men (King 2002). Conversely, the implementation of gender quotas has been shown to effectively increase both the candidacy and election of women (Schwindt-Bayer 2009). However, such institutional discussions have largely focused on the elite level. When we shift the lens to mass politics, new concerns emerge. Recent studies suggest that gender quotas either have no effect on female voters (Kerevel and Atkeson 2017) or provoke negative reactions that may even depress women’s political participation (Clayton 2015). These findings suggest that while institutional reforms have enabled more female elites to enter politics, they have not necessarily addressed the persistent gender gap in political engagement and participation among the broader female public. This study seeks to address how such disparities might be overcome.

Taking an institutionalist perspective, this study turns to the educational system and emphasizes the importance of public compulsory education. The “patriarchal dividend” often manifests in the unequal allocation of resources within families and private relationships, where boys are more likely to attain higher levels of education and human capital.

However, state-led compulsory education—by virtue of its mandatory, universal, and free nature—not only reduces the gender gap in years of schooling but also offers opportunities for women to improve their socioeconomic status, overcome resource constraints, and enhance their political confidence and interest. Simultaneously, rising educational attainment at the societal level may also shift public attitudes toward women’s political participation, fostering a more supportive external environment. These advantages could collectively contribute to higher levels of political engagement among female citizens.

This study begins by reviewing the theoretical literature on education, political engagement, and political participation, with a particular focus on the potential impact of compulsory education on women. It then integrates data from the *Taiwan Social Change Survey* and employs a regression discontinuity design (RDD), using the 1968 implementation of Taiwan’s nine-year compulsory education policy as an exogenous treatment. We examine whether individuals exposed to extended compulsory schooling exhibit differences in political interest, political efficacy, and political participation—and whether these effects are more pronounced among women than men. Preliminary findings suggest that women who received nine years of compulsory education experienced significant growth in political engagement compared to their male peers. However, this effect did not translate into increased political participation. Finally, we explore the potential mechanisms linking education to political engagement. The evidence indicates that women with longer schooling are more likely to engage in discussions about social issues, and such civic dialogues may, in turn, stimulate their political interest and sense of efficacy.

2 Theoretical Perspective

As a mandatory and universal policy, compulsory education plays a critical role in promoting women’s political participation through at least three key dimensions. First, it provides the basic knowledge and skills necessary for political engagement. Through instruction on the functioning of political institutions, civic rights and responsibilities, schools help students acquire essential abilities such as participating in public discussions and voting (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba et al. 1995). Moreover, schools emphasize political participation as a core element of civic responsibility (Campbell 2006). This process of political socialization is especially meaningful for narrowing the gender gap. Compulsory education allows women, like men, to develop the capacity to engage in public affairs and to cultivate civic confidence and a sense of responsibility, thereby increasing their likelihood of political engagement and participation.

Second, education significantly enhances human capital, yielding long-term effects on society as a whole. Free and mandatory education further serves as a mechanism for redistributing resources, thereby reducing gender disparities. This is particularly important because unequal access to resources is a key structural barrier for women.

By improving women’s human capital, compulsory education not only transforms their economic roles but also helps to close the gender gap in patriarchal societies. Studies show that when women’s economic status improves, their bargaining power increases—an effect especially pronounced in developing countries, as seen in higher female survival rates and delayed decisions regarding marriage and childbirth (Heath and Mobarak 2015; Qian 2008).

Finally, beyond its impact on political competence and economic capital, compulsory education can also enhance women’s self-confidence and reshape their attitudes toward public affairs. Existing research finds that compulsory education increases political interest and encourages more egalitarian gender role attitudes (Le and Nguyen 2021; Du et al. 2021). More specifically, when women gain confidence in their ability to handle political matters, they may be more willing to participate in politics (Fox and Lawless 2011). Empirical evidence also indicates that women with higher education levels are more likely to vote and engage in other political activities (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006; Krook and Norris 2014). Taken together, compulsory education contributes not only to building women’s capabilities and enhancing their human capital, but also to strengthening their political confidence—mutually reinforcing mechanisms that help boost their motivation to participate. In short, better-educated citizens are generally more capable of articulating their needs and preferences, and compulsory education provides women with both the objective knowledge and skills required for public involvement and the psychological foundation for political confidence, thereby narrowing the gender gap in the political realm.

Based on this theoretical framework, this study proposes two hypotheses: (1) Compulsory education significantly increases women’s political engagement and participation; (2) The gains in political engagement and participation resulting from compulsory education are greater for women than for men.

3 Empirical Strategy

3.1 Model Specification

As discussed in the previous section, many scholars have found a correlation between education and political attitudes or participation. However, this does not necessarily imply a causal relationship. It is plausible that education merely serves as a proxy variable. In other words, whether an individual is able to access secondary or higher education may reflect the person’s economic background or family’s social status. Individuals from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to attain higher levels of education and are also more likely to engage in politics and possess a greater sense of political efficacy (Kam and Palmer 2008). Thus, both education and political participation may be jointly

determined by socioeconomic conditions, or there may exist a confounding variable that influences both. In short, the strong correlation between education and political participation observed in empirical studies may be driven by endogeneity, rather than a true causal effect.

From the perspective of causal inference, concerns about endogeneity are typically addressed through randomized controlled trials (RCTs). However, because education is a long-term process of political socialization, it is neither possible to retrospectively randomize individuals' school choices nor ethically permissible to prevent students from continuing their education for research purposes. As a result, researchers must rely on observational data to infer causality. Yet, it is also clear that we cannot observe the counterfactual—that is, the same individual both receiving and not receiving higher levels of education. To address this fundamental problem of causal inference, the most feasible solution is to identify comparable treatment and control groups to isolate the causal effect of education (as a treatment) on women's political participation.

This study argues that compulsory education provides a compelling quasi-experimental setting. Leveraging the timing of the reform, we adopt a regression discontinuity design (RDD). In RDD, the treatment is assigned based on whether an individual's value on a running variable crosses a predetermined cutoff, allowing researchers to compare individuals on either side of the threshold who are otherwise similar. In the case of Taiwan's education reform, individuals born before August 31, 1955 were not entitled to nine years of tuition-free education, while those born on or after September 1, 1955 were required to complete compulsory junior high school. Thus, two cohorts with similar backgrounds may differ in education only due to a slight difference in birth date. These treatment and control groups are similar in age and experienced similar social and economic conditions; the only meaningful difference lies in their schooling, which makes them suitable counterfactuals for evaluating the causal effect of education on political participation.

The RDD model used in this study is specified as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha + \rho D_i + \gamma \text{female}_i + \delta(D_i \times \text{female}_i) + f(X_{ij}) + \eta_{ij} \quad (1)$$

Here, Y_{ij} represents the outcome variable—namely, political engagement and participation. $D_i = 1$ indicates that the individual is in the treatment group, while $D_i = 0$ denotes the control group. The coefficient ρ captures the causal effect of the nine-year compulsory education policy. γ reflects the baseline gender gap in political engagement and participation, and the interaction term δ measures whether women benefited more than men from increased years of schooling. α is the intercept; $f(X_{ij})$ denotes the control variables, with subscripts i and j representing individual-level covariates and survey wave fixed effects, respectively; and η_{ij} is the error term. This model specification is not original to this study. For example, Chen et al. (2023) and Bai et al. (2023) employed

similar designs to examine how curriculum reform following regime transition influenced national identity and democratic support. Their approach involved classifying respondents into treatment and control groups based on birth year in order to estimate the causal effects of education reform. Building on this strategy, this study shifts the focus to an earlier reform in the 1960s to assess whether increased years of schooling due to compulsory education shaped political attitudes—and whether this shift helped narrow the gender gap in political participation.

3.2 Variable Measurement

This study uses data from the Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS). To distinguish between treatment and control groups, we follow the previous model setup and use birth month as the cutoff. Respondents born on or after September 1955 are considered to have received nine years of compulsory education (treatment group), while those born before September 1955 are categorized as having received six years or fewer of education (control group). Conceptually, this constitutes a basic sharp regression discontinuity (Sharp RD) framework, under the assumption that all individuals complied with the treatment assignment—those born after the cutoff received compulsory education, and those born before did not.

Although noncompliance under Taiwan’s compulsory education policy was relatively rare (i.e., “never-takers”), the presence of “always-takers” must also be acknowledged—those who obtained more than six years of education even before the policy took effect. Theoretically, a more precise analysis would employ a fuzzy RD design, which accounts for imperfect compliance and incorporates instrumental variables to estimate the local average treatment effect. Nevertheless, this study adopts a sharp RD design as a first step, given its simplicity and transparency in detecting overall trends. This strategy facilitates preliminary exploration without substantially biasing the direction or interpretation of the results.

In addition, this study controls for gender, birth month relative to the cutoff (i.e., the running variable), and wave fixed effects. The outcome variables include three measures: political interest (“How interested are you in politics?”; 5-point scale), political efficacy (“People like me have no influence on what the government does.”; 5-point scale), and political participation (“Did you vote in the last election?”; binary variable). The first two are treated as continuous variables and estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS), while voting behavior is analyzed using logistic regression to estimate the odds ratio. Respondents with missing values or ineligible responses (e.g., under 20 years of age and thus not eligible to vote) are excluded from the analysis.

4 Preliminary Findings

4.1 Did the Compulsory Education Increase Attainment?

As noted above, some "always-takers" had already attained junior high education or higher before the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education policy. For these individuals, the reform had no effect on educational attainment. More importantly, if "always-takers" made up the majority of respondents, then the policy would fail to serve as a valid exogenous instrument for estimating the causal effect of education on political attitudes or behavior. Therefore, before proceeding to the main results, we must first evaluate whether the policy had a measurable impact on education.

Table 1 presents two indicators of educational attainment. The dependent variable in Column 1 is whether the respondent has attained a junior high school education or higher (a binary variable). Logistic regression was used and the coefficients were converted into odds ratios. On average, respondents in the treatment group—those exposed to the nine-year compulsory education policy—were approximately 2.635 times more likely to have completed junior high school or higher than those in the control group. This finding confirms that the policy effectively increased access to formal education, justifying its use as an exogenous treatment for analyzing the causal impact of education on political attitudes and behaviors.

Next, we use a continuous measure of educational attainment in Column 2. The dependent variable is the number of years of formal education, with primary school coded as 6 years, junior high as 9, senior high/vocational as 12, and so on. This variable is estimated using simple linear regression. The results indicate that, on average, those in the treatment group received 0.737 more years of education than those in the control group. Meanwhile, women received 2.911 fewer years of education than men, a substantial difference equivalent to one level of education—for instance, women may have completed junior high while men completed senior high, or women may have finished vocational school while men attained a university degree. However, the interaction term for "Compulsory Education \times Female" is significantly positive, suggesting that the education gains among women were larger than those among men. This implies that the policy had a particularly strong effect in improving educational opportunities for women.

In summary, the results indicate that the challenge posed by "always-takers" does not undermine the identification strategy. The implementation of the nine-year compulsory education policy significantly increased both the likelihood of attaining a junior high school degree or higher and the number of years of education. These effects are particularly pronounced among women. In other words, the reform not only expanded educational opportunities overall, but also created more favorable conditions for women in a context of gender inequality, thereby helping to close the gender gap in education.

Table 1: Effect of Nine-Year Compulsory Education on Educational Attainment

	(1) Junior High or Above	(2) Years of Education
Compulsory Education	2.635*** (0.627)	0.737** (0.323)
Female	0.269*** (0.036)	-2.911*** (0.279)
Running Variable	1.008*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.001)
Compulsory Education \times Female	1.342 (0.324)	2.411*** (0.333)
Constant	3.043*** (0.379)	10.127*** (0.220)
Wave Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Num. Obs.	3915	3916
Log Likelihood	-1150.386	-11661.557
R^2	—	0.366

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

The next question is whether, once women attained educational levels comparable to men, the gender gap in political interest, engagement, and participation diminished—or even disappeared.

4.2 Did Education Change Political Participation?

We now turn to the central question of this study. Table 2 presents the effects of compulsory education on political interest, political efficacy, and voting behavior. Higher values of the dependent variables indicate more positive political attitudes or behavior.

Starting with political interest, the results show no significant average effect of compulsory education. Additionally, women exhibit significantly lower levels of political interest than men, likely reflecting women’s historically disadvantaged position in political spaces. However, the interaction term between compulsory education and female is positive and statistically significant. This suggests that the implementation of nine-year compulsory education increased women’s access to political knowledge and civic engagement opportunities, thereby enhancing their interest in public affairs. From this perspective, the findings support prior work by Fox and Lawless (2011) and Campbell (2006), which show that education can help reduce gender disparities in politics by empowering women to take political issues more seriously.

Turning to political efficacy, we again observe that women report significantly lower levels than men. Yet when we consider the interaction between compulsory education and gender, we find that women’s political efficacy improves significantly. This suggests that the policy not only heightened women’s interest in politics, but also increased their sense of political agency. In other words, education did not merely expand women’s knowledge—it also enhanced their belief in their ability to influence political outcomes. This finding aligns with recent studies by Wolak (2020) and Preece (2016), which argue that self-confidence is a key mechanism driving women’s political behavior. In societies marked by gender inequality, women often perceive their roles in the political system as

limited. Compulsory education provides a chance to challenge this perception by instilling greater confidence in women and weakening the notion that “politics is a man’s domain.”

Finally, we examine whether these attitudinal changes translate into political participation. Since voting is a binary variable, the coefficients in Model (5) of Table 2 are reported as odds ratios. The results show that neither exposure to compulsory education nor gender alone significantly predicts voting behavior. This suggests that voter turnout may be influenced by more complex social and structural factors. The interaction term “Compulsory Education \times Female” is positively associated with voting but does not reach statistical significance. This may indicate that structural support beyond education is still necessary to shift women’s participation in electoral politics.

Overall, the regression analysis supports this study’s primary hypothesis: compulsory education has improved women’s political interest and political efficacy. However, whether changes in political attitudes can translate into actual political participation remains an open question. Yang Wan-Ying (2007) has argued that political involvement, rather than voting alone, may better explain gender differences in political engagement. Yet, our findings suggest that although compulsory education increases women’s political interest and efficacy, it does not significantly boost their likelihood of voting.

Table 2: Effect of Compulsory Education on Political Attitudes and Behavior

	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Political Interest	Political Efficacy	Voted (Odds Ratio)
Compulsory Education	-0.072 (0.065)	-0.143* (0.081)	0.876 (0.188)
Female	-0.465*** (0.056)	-0.123* (0.073)	0.743 (0.158)
Running Variable	0.000** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.997*** (0.000)
Compulsory Ed. \times Female	0.239*** (0.067)	0.205** (0.086)	1.459 (0.342)
Constant	2.158*** (0.044)	2.526*** (0.056)	10.156*** (1.683)
Wave Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3887	3763	3586
Log Likelihood	-5306.761	-5938.379	-1598.600
R^2	0.031	0.006	—

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4.3 What Mechanisms Link Education to Political Attitude?

We have observed that the implementation of compulsory education significantly enhances women’s political interest and efficacy. This may reflect gains in knowledge and confidence, which in turn lead women to pay more attention to politics and believe in their ability to influence the government. In this section, we explore the mechanisms that connect education to political attitudes. We consider two potentially complementary channels:

First is *civic discussion*. Higher education may empower women to express opinions more freely and participate in public discourse, thereby enhancing both their interest in politics and their sense of political efficacy.

Second is *government evaluation*. Drawing on the notion of “critical citizens” (Norris 1999), higher education may increase people’s expectations of government performance. Thus, compulsory education may foster a more critical political outlook, encouraging individuals to engage more deeply with politics and to believe in their capacity to influence political outcomes.

To test the *civic discussion* mechanism, we use the following TSCS item: “In the past year, how often have you discussed public affairs (including politics, economics, etc.) with others?” This is measured on a 4-point scale. We use linear regression to estimate the effect, with higher values indicating more frequent discussion. As shown in Table 3, individuals exposed to nine-year compulsory education report significantly higher levels of civic discussion. This suggests that education not only provides knowledge but also increases individual concern for public issues. The interaction between compulsory education and female is also significantly positive, indicating that the policy had a particularly strong effect on women. This highlights the role of education in promoting gender equality by equipping women with the capacity and confidence to express their opinions in the public sphere.

As for the *government evaluation* mechanism, we use the TSCS item: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the government’s performance?” This is a 5-point scale, and we again use linear regression with higher values indicating greater satisfaction. Table 3 shows that compulsory education significantly reduces satisfaction with government, consistent with the critical citizen thesis: education promotes critical thinking and raises expectations, leading to more negative evaluations of government. However, the interaction with gender is not statistically significant, suggesting that although education fosters more critical attitudes, it does so equally across genders. This may imply that men and women differ in their modes of political criticism or how they articulate political dissatisfaction.

Taken together, these findings clarify the pathways through which education shapes political attitudes. Compulsory education increases the frequency of public discussion—especially among women—highlighting its role in building women’s political confidence and civic awareness. At the same time, the rise in critical political evaluation among educated citizens further supports the idea that education creates critical citizens who are more attentive to politics and more likely to believe in their influence. However, this attitudinal transformation appears to occur similarly across gender lines, indicating that while education reduces gender gaps in civic confidence, it does not necessarily differentiate men and women in their capacity for political critique.

Table 3: Mechanisms: Effect of Compulsory Education on Political Attitudes

	(6) Civic Discussion	(7) Gov't Evaluation
Compulsory Education	0.130** (0.065)	-0.306*** (0.070)
Female	-0.398*** (0.056)	0.116* (0.061)
Running Variable	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Compulsory Ed. \times Female	0.339*** (0.067)	-0.078 (0.073)
Constant	2.254*** (0.045)	3.070*** (0.048)
Wave Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	3914	3860
Log Likelihood	-5399.898	-5580.876
R^2	0.081	0.079

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

5 Conclusion and Research Limitations

This study uses the implementation of Taiwan’s nine-year compulsory education as a cutoff point within a regression discontinuity design to investigate the causal effects of educational attainment on political attitudes and participation. A key finding is that compulsory education significantly enhances women’s political interest and efficacy relative to men, helping to reduce existing gender disparities in the political sphere. However, these improvements in interest and efficacy have yet to translate into greater political participation.

We also explored the mechanisms through which education shapes political attitudes. The evidence suggests that *civic discussion* may be a particularly important channel for gender researchers to consider. Women who received compulsory education were significantly more likely to engage in public dialogue. This indicates that the policy may have increased women’s knowledge and confidence, making them more willing to discuss public issues and, in turn, strengthening their political interest and sense of efficacy. Such mechanisms may offer a pathway toward narrowing the long-standing gender gap in politics.

Due to data limitations, our empirical findings are based on two waves of the Taiwan Social Change Survey. In the future, we hope to validate our hypotheses using international datasets. For cross-national comparisons of education systems, the *Education Policies and Systems Across Modern History* (EPSM) database offers comprehensive information on compulsory schooling implementation, curricular content, and years of education across countries (Del Río et al. 2024). To compare voter attitudes, resources such as the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (CSES) and the *World Values Survey* (WVS) could provide more detailed data on political behavior and gendered participation. For the Taiwan case, voter record microdata from the Central Election Commission may serve as a more accurate measure of participation and help mitigate the issue of

men’s tendency to overreport turnout in surveys (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2023).

There are also notable limitations in the research design. Specifically, our regression discontinuity model lacks robustness checks typically required for causal claims. These include tests of higher-order polynomial specifications, sensitivity to bandwidth selection, and validation of key RDD assumptions such as the absence of discontinuities in covariates around the cutoff (Yang 2018). These robustness checks are necessary for building stronger causal inferences and should be pursued in future work.

Moreover, even if the model passes these checks, the source of the treatment effect remains ambiguous. The nine-year compulsory education reform not only extended the length of schooling but also revised the curriculum content. According to Hsu (2022), the reform was accompanied by moral and patriotic education that emphasized Confucian orthodoxy and the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. Because changes in educational content and duration occurred simultaneously, it is difficult to disentangle whether shifts in women’s political attitudes and behavior were driven by increased schooling or by ideological indoctrination.

In conclusion, this study provides preliminary evidence that education affects women’s political attitudes and behavior. The natural experiment of compulsory education in Taiwan reveals that exogenous exposure to schooling significantly improved women’s political interest and efficacy compared to men. However, due to data constraints, it remains uncertain whether these findings can be generalized to other countries or contexts. In addition, several methodological issues remain unresolved, suggesting that future research is needed to validate and expand upon these initial findings.

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