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Political partisanship, voting abstention and higher education : changing preferences in a British Youth Cohort in the 1990s

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relationship between education and political partisanship, using the British Household Panel Study (1991-1999). It is known that partisanship has been falling in Britain since the mid-1950s. However, voting abstention rose only gradually until the June 2001 election where the turnout (at 59 per cent) was the lowest since 1918. Partisanship also fell sharply during the 1990s. Although social class and education are associated with turnout in the USA, no relationship has been reported in the UK, and voting seems to have been perceived as a citizen duty. However, in the light of recent changes in voting patterns and educational participation, this paper investigates the role of education, contextualising education effects in social class and gender effects. The preferences of young people are observed in their late teens, before entering the labour market or higher education, and are compared with those of the same young people in their early 20s, after completing higher education courses or gaining labour market experience. The BHPS yielded a

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sample of about 500 young people with the required data over the time period. It was hypothesised that dissatisfaction with government performance would take different forms for the more and the less educated, with the more educated shifting preferences to minority parties while the less educated shift preferences to voting abstention. The hypothesis was confirmed for young men.

Endorsement of abstention was very high for adolescent women who also seemed to be more influenced by their family's social class. However, by early adulthood a lower proportion of young women endorsed abstention than young men. Strong effects of education were still found with more highly educated young women (as with more highly educated young men) being more likely to have party preferences. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)