Education in context: how democratic legacy shapes the impact of education on democratic commitment in Latin America

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Abstract: Education is considered the main factor in explaining political behavior. In studies of legitimacy, education is a strong predictor of support for democracy: the more education, more democratic are the attitudes. However, would this relationship be the same everywhere? In this article, we show through data from 18 Latin American countries produced by the AmericasBarometer that the effect of education on democratic commitment varies according to the democratic legacy of the countries. The results show that education always has a positive effect on the democratic commitment. However, in countries with the highest democratic legacy, the effect is stronger. The article also discusses the implications of these findings for the debate on political legitimacy and democratic consolidation in Latin America.
Introduction

In explaining political behavior, no other variable is as important as education (Converse, 1972). In studies of political legitimacy is no different. The relationship between education and democracy is well documented in the literature, both at the macro level and the micro level. It is known that countries with higher educational levels are more stable democracies (Lipset, 1959; Barro, 1999; Glaeser, 2004). Likewise, for each year of the education, support the democracy is significantly higher (Almond and Verba, 1963; Dalton, 2004; Lagos, 2006; Booth and Seligson, 2009; Norris, 2011).

Few studies, however, have analyzed how the political environment interacts with education on shaping democratic attitudes. Is the effect of education always the same, regardless of the political context? We argue that the democratic experience accumulated over the years in a country, that is, its democratic legacy, has a key role in the impact of education on democratic attitudes. More specifically, the greater the democratic legacy of a country, the greater the effect of education on democratic commitment.

We tested this argument for Latin America. Despite the similarities shared, especially because, with a few exceptions, they are “new democracies”, they are significantly different between the countries (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Salinas and Booth, 2011). They range from very long and stable democracies (Costa Rica) to countries whose democratic experience is very recent (Paraguay) or very unstable (Haiti). Each of these pathways leads to a democratic legacy that cannot be ignored when explaining political attitudes.

To advance these issues the article is divided into four sections besides this introduction. The first section will show the theoretical framework. In the second, data and the methodology of the research will be presented. The third section presents the results and discusses the implications of these findings for the theory of democratic legitimacy. Finally, we close the paper discussing the remaining gaps and future research agenda.

1. Theoretical framework

We argue in this article that both schools and countries with long democratic legacy are environments that promote democratic attitudes, especially the commitment to democracy. Our main argument, however, is that the effect of education is not the same everywhere, but it depends, to some extent, on democratic legacy.

In order to address these arguments, it is necessary first to answer some questions. Why education and democratic legacy affect democratic commitment? How does the democratic
legacy interact with education? Throughout this section, these questions will be discussed, starting with the definition of the democratic commitment.

**Democratic commitment**

According to Rose (2002, p 12) democratic legitimacy has a very simple essence: a majority of people who believe in this political regime as the best form of government, or at least the best of the possible alternatives. In other words, a democratic system is legitimate just when becomes the “only game in town”, not only among elites, but also within mass publics (Linz and Stepan, 1995, p. 32).

Therefore, an important question is how to measure the democratic legitimacy. A simple and an intuitive answer is asking directly to people if they support or not this kind of regime (Rose, 2002, p. 10). Indeed, most surveys use direct questions about support for democracy (Mishler and Rose, 2001).

However, many researchers have criticized this approach (Inglehart and Welzel, 2006, p. 122; Booth and Seligson, 2009, p. 32). They argue that the inclusion of “democracy” in questions about regime preferences inflates levels of support since the term focuses respondents’ attention on forms of government in abstract settings rather than in practice or under more realistic contexts. The result is that many people say they support democracy, but that preference does not reflect a real commitment to the regime, especially in face of social and political threats (Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007; Torcal, 2008; Norris, 2011; Carlin, 2012).

To work around this problem, recent researches (Chu e Huang, 2007; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2013; Recabarren-Silva, 2014) has suggested that support for democracy may consist of two sides: the positive and the negative. On the positive side is the abstract support for the regime. The negative, however, is the rejection of military coups as a solution to serious social and political problems. In terms of political attitudes “grammar”, the support for democracy shows the “direction” of attitude, while the rejection of coups, its “strength” (Krosnick, 1991). In other words, the preference for democracy, in abstract terms, shows whether democracy is seen as positive. The rejection of military coups shows whether this preference remains even in an adverse conditions.

Based on this literature, democratic commitment requires both an abstract preference for government formed by inclusive and contested elections and a rejection of non-democratic alternatives, even in times of crisis (Kiewiet de Jonge, 2013). The possible combinations of the two components helps differentiate between what Shin (1999, p. 71) calls as “authentic” and
“superficial” supporters of democracy. The construction of democratic commitment measure will be described in the next section.

**Education and democratic commitment**

The relationship between education and democratic attitudes and behavior is well documented in the literature, both at the macro and the micro level. Many studies show that countries with higher education have better and more stable democracies (Lipset, 1959; Barro, 1999; Glaeser et al., 2007; Castelló-Climent, 2008). They also show that education promotes individual’s democratic profile, including support for democracy (Norris, 1999; Dalton, 2004; Booth and Seligson, 2009) and tolerance (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Gibson, Duch and Tedin, 1992).

However, the literature is not as clear and consensual as regards the understanding of how education works as such a powerful explanatory variable (Hillygus, 2005, p. 25). Although the literature is not systematic about it, we can distinguish two mechanisms by which education promotes democratic attitudes: cognitive and socialization. In the cognitive perspective, schools and universities provide citizens with information and the ability to process them (Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996). In these places, individuals acquire knowledge about the political events and skills to interpret them.

According to Mattes and Mughogho (2010, p. 1), the formal education may facilitate democratic citizenship via a “cognitive path”, increasing both people’s verbal and cognitive proficiency and their ability to construct their own ideas and critical thoughts. Having more knowledge, people will, in a rational balance of what they learned about authoritarian forms of government and democracy, choose the latter, remaining loyal to it.

A second view, however, argues that schools are environments where political and social norms are learned and internalized. More than a purely cognitive process, individuals learn the support democracy and its norms while interacting in an environment in which this value is widespread and enhanced (Glaeser et al., 2007, p. 82). For instance, inside the classroom, students learn what is democracy and also to be proud of it. As Mattes and Mughogho argue (2010, p. 2), formal education may promote democratic citizenship through a “socialization path” whereby students are explicitly trained to see democracy as preferable to its alternatives, accept the authority of the democratic system and its officials, and take part in the duties of democratic citizenship.

Adopting the “socialization path” perspective, we argue that education will have a positive impact on the commitment to democracy, even when controlling for cognitive factors,
such as political knowledge. Our hypothesis is that the higher the education, the greater the democratic commitment, even when controlled by political knowledge.

**Democratic legacy and democratic commitment**

According to the theory of political culture, the distribution of citizens' attitudes in a democracy has an important role in its stability (Almond and Verba, 1963). However, some scholars have shown that the causal relationship can work the other way around (Muller and Seligson, 1994, p. 635). The institutions would be responsible for developing an appropriate environment for the promotion of the rules of the system and the continuous experience with democracy would lead individuals to learn and be loyal to his principles.

Based on this argument, there as a number of studies that investigates how democratic institutions affect the citizens’ attitudes. Two variables are particularly important in these studies: the duration and the quality of democratic regimes. On the one hand, time is a key element to democracy. Time is necessary for institutions to develop rules, symbols and historical facts that serve as a reference for citizens as well as it is also important for individuals to be able to internalize its rules, norms and main values.

Rustow (1970, p. 358), for instance, argues that an important step in the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes is the “habituation”. At this stage, both politicians and citizens learn from the successful resolution of some issues to place their faith in the new rules and to apply them to new issues. Over time, the beliefs and behaviors become habits, being practiced naturally. In an empirical study with seventeen countries, Peffley and Rohrschneider (2003, p. 243-244) concluded “political tolerance should be greater in more stable democracies which have endured over time (the longer the better)”.

Besides duration, the quality of democracy works also matters. According to Magalhães (2014, p. 3), if democracies vary in terms of “how well” they work, such variation should be reflected in citizens’ attitudes about democracy. Once citizens interact with democratic institutions and are affected by their quality, this experience should reflect on their support to norms, rules and principles of democratic regime.

Empirical evidence has given support to these explanations, even in the context of the new democracies. Studies in Africa (Mattes and Bratton, 2007), Asia (Chu at. Al., 2005, Chu and Huang, 2007) and Latin America (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Salinas and Booth, 2011), shows that the greater the nation's experience with democracy in the past, the greater the democratic support in the contemporary era. At the same time, comparing a large number of countries, Magalhães (2014, p. 3) shows that in democratic regimes, government effectiveness,
understood as the quality of policy-making formulation and implementation, is linked to higher levels of support for democracy.

Based on this evidence, we use of the concept of “regime legacy” (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2014) to examine the relation between democratic institutions and democratic commitment. The regime legacy can be defined as the accumulated experience with regime in a country over the years. Although simple, this definition takes into an account that the quality of the regime and its duration combine cumulatively to form its “legacy.” In countries where the legacy of the regime is more democratic, we can say that there is a greater democratic legacy. The construction of our measure of “democratic legacy” will be described in detail in the next section.

**Democratic Legacy, education and democratic commitment**

Prior studies have provided explanations and evidence about how democratic attitudes are affected, on the one hand, by the duration and the quality of democracy and, on the other, by “the micropolitical culture of schools within these nations” (Ichilov, Salomon and Inbar, 2005, p. 303).

Few studies, however, have made an effort to understand the relationship between these two environments (Weil, 1985). As we discussed earlier, by increasing cognitive skills and political socialization schools have a decisive role in shaping an environment that promotes democratic attitudes. Studies in authoritarian regimes or new democracies, however, have shown that the effect of education is not always the same everywhere. In a comparative analysis, Weil (1985) argues that the effects of education on liberal values are not universal, but rather, vary systematically cross-nationally.

According to Weil (1985, p. 459) and as we discussed earlier, schools not only promote knowledge, but also are political socialization agencies. In these environments, norms and values spread in society are taught, reinforced and internalized through the socialization process (Hyman, 1959; Easton and Dennis, 1969; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1977; Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin and Keeter, 2003).

Studying political tolerance in the USSR, Gibson et. al. (1992) stress that the effect of education in authoritarian regimes or regimes undergoing political transition could be distinctive, since the citizens have little or no experience with democratic institutions, norms and values (Gibson et. al., 1992, p. 354). In another study, Gibson and Dutch (1993) show that, even in the USSR, the higher the education, the higher are the democratic values. They explain that regardless of the context “Education is also associated with a host of other variables (e.g.,
reading, travel) that tend to give one exposure to a broader range of political and social ideas.” (Gibson and Duch, 1993, p. 290).

Based on these studies, our argument is that, due to cognitive gains, the school should have a positive effect on democratic attitudes. However, the process of socialization can maximize or minimize these effects. In a context of greater democratic legacy, with more stable and effective institutions and ingrained democratic convictions, schools, through the “path of socialization”, will be more efficient in fostering commitment to democracy. In contrast, in countries with less democratic legacy, where democratic institutions and values are still inchoate, this effect should be smaller.

2. Data and methodology

Our data come from AmericasBarometer surveys conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 2010. In this year, 26 countries were included and over 43,000 individuals were surveyed. Samples in each country were developed using a multi-stage probabilistic design (with quotas at the household level for most countries), and were stratified by major regions of the country and by urban and rural areas within municipalities. In each country, the data have been weighted to adjust the sample size to 1,500 per country, giving an error margin of approximately 2.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence interval. Some variables we use in our model were not available for all countries, so these cases are excluded. The analysis includes the following 18 countries: Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and Dominican Republic.

As discussed previously, our goal is to assess the impact of education and democratic legacy on democratic commitment, as well as the interactive effects of these environments. Thus, an important step is to create the dependent variable, the democratic commitment, and the main independent variable, the democratic legacy.

To measure the democratic commitment, we use a combination of three questions available in the AmericasBarometer. The first is the preference for democracy, as measured by the following question: “Now changing the subject, which of the following statements do you agree with the most: (1) For people like me it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or nondemocratic, or (2) Democracy is preferable to any other form of government, or (3) Under some circumstances”. The “democrats” are only those who answered that democracy is always preferable. This is the positive side of democratic commitment: the support for democratic regime in more general and abstract terms.
In addition to this question, we use two other that expresses rejection to military coups. The circumstances that would justify a military take-over are high crime, constant problem in the region, especially in Central America (Pérez, 2009), and corruption, virtually endemic in Latin America (Seligson, 2002). The questions are: “When there is a lot of crime (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified (2) A military take-over of the state would not be justified” and “When there is a lot of corruption: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified (2) A military take-over of the state would not be justified”. Only those who said that democracy is preferable to any other form of government and that a military coup is not justified in any circumstance are classified as “committed” to democracy. Those who provided any other combination of answers we classified as “not committed”.

Figure 1 shows the democratic commitment in the Latin America:

![Figure 1 - Percentage of democratic commitment in Latin America in 2010](image)

To measure the democratic legacy, we use Mainwaring, Brinks, and Pérez-Liñán index (2001). The authors define democracy as a regime that: 1) sponsors free and fair competitive elections for the legislature and executive; 2) allows for inclusive adult citizenship; 3) protects civil liberties and political rights; and 4) in which the elected governments really govern and the military is under civilian control. They classified the political regimes in Latin America throughout the period 1900-2010 as democratic, semi-democratic and authoritarian. A
democracy has all the four characteristics listed above, a semi-democracy has only the first and authoritarian regimes has none.

Following the steps taken by the authors, we assign the value of 1 for democracies, 0.5 for semidemocracies and 0 for authoritarian regimes. The democratic legacy is the sum of these values for each country each year. This index takes into account the two essential factors we identified in the literature: the quality and the duration of democracy. To facilitate interpretation of the data, the index was recoded in order to vary between 0 and 10. The result can be seen in Figure 2.

![Figure 2 - Average democratic legacy in Latin America in 2010](image)

Due to the properties of the data, the appropriate statistical method is multilevel regression (Raudenbush & Brik, 2002), which allows to use in the same model characteristics of the countries (system-level features) and characteristics of the citizens (individual-level features) to explain the attitude of a respondent. Because the dependent variables are binary, the statistical model is a multilevel logistic model.

Our dependent variable is the democratic commitment. The two independent variables are the democratic legacy and education (years of study). To control the effects of other relevant factors, we include in the model demographic variables such as gender, age, urban and wealth. To isolate the effect of socialization in the school environment, we also added political
knowledge and political interest as control variables. Finally, interpersonal trust and assessment of economic conditions were also added to the model.

At the macro level, as we have only 18 countries, we opted for a parsimonious model with one control variable. Due to the great importance attached to the thesis of modernization for the democratic legitimacy (Lipset, 1959), we add to the model the GDP per capita. In order to make the interpretation more intuitive, we change the scale of $ 1 to $ 100.

3. Results and Discussion

Not surprisingly, Model 1 in Table 1 shows that education has a large and significant impact on democratic commitment. Figure 3 shows more clearly that each year of schooling increases the probability democratic commitment. Confirming what the evidence from previous studies (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Salinas and Booth, 2011), we find that also in Latin America education plays important role in promoting democratic attitudes.

It is important to stress that the effect of education is consistent even when we control for political interest and political knowledge. This result reinforces the interpretation that is not only knowledge that leads to democratic commitment but also the socialization process that takes place in schools (Mattes and Mughogho, 2010). Regardless of the acquisition of political information, years of education matters.

![Figure 3 - Predicted probabilities of democratic commitment by education](image-url)
What about the democratic legacy? Once again, confirming findings in recent studies (Gibson and Duch, 1992; Chu and Huang, 2007; Booth and Seligson, 2009; Salinas and Booth, 2011), we can see in Model 1 that the legacy of the regime has a positive and significant effect on democratic commitment. It is worth mentioning that this effect occurs even when controlled by GDP. Figure 4 shows more clearly each point increased on the democratic legacy scale also increases the probability of democratic commitment in Latin America.

This result reinforces the thesis that the building a democratic tradition and the proper functioning of democratic institutions are important for the maintenance of democratic legitimacy (Muller and Seligson, 1994). Obviously, this is not a “one-way” process. Once formed, it is likely that the democratic legitimacy also help preserve and improve democratic institutions (Almond and Verba, 1963; Almond, 1990; Lipjhart, 1990; Diamond, 1994; Norris, 2011). Our study contributes to explore one face of this dynamic, showing that in countries where democratic institutions are durable and work as they should democratic attitudes are more widespread, particularly democratic commitment.

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4 - Predicted probabilities of democratic commitment by democratic legacy**

The results so far have shown that there are two environments favorable to the formation of democratic attitudes: school’s environment and the broader national context, characterized by the democratic legacy. Therefore, we can say that both schools and the country with a high democratic legacy have an important role fostering citizen's democratic attitudes.

What about the interaction between these two environments? What is new about this study is to examine the interactive effect of democratic legacy and education, more specifically,
the extent to which democratic legacy not only explains democratic commitment but also affects education’s impact on democratic commitment.

In order to explore this question, we added in the last model an interaction term between democratic legacy and years of education. We believe that a context of high levels of democratic legacy expands education's effect on democratic commitment. Therefore, we expect that the interaction term coefficient will be positive and significant.

The Model 2 in Table 1 confirms the positive our hypothesis. The effect can be better viewed in Figure 5. In this figure, we divided the democratic legacy scale in tertiles: low, medium and high democratic legacy. Then we calculated the predicted probabilities of democratic commitment by years of education for each group of legacy.

![Figure 5 - Predicted probabilities of democratic commitment by education and democratic legacy](image)

As we can see, everywhere, regardless of the level democratic legacy, an increase in education brings more democratic commitment. However, it is apparent that, compared to other groups, in countries with high democratic legacy, increases in education enhances the probability of democratic commitment. In other words, the years of education is even more important when democratic regimes works longer and well.
TABLE 1 - Multilevel logistic regression. Dependent variable: democratic commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef. (Std. Err.)</td>
<td>Coef. (Std. Err.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constante</td>
<td>-2.156*** 0.184</td>
<td>-1.936*** 0.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>-0.024 0.029</td>
<td>-0.025 0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
<td>0.018*** 0.001</td>
<td>0.018*** 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives in an urban area</td>
<td>-0.184*** 0.038</td>
<td>-0.176*** 0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth</td>
<td>0.001 0.008</td>
<td>0.001 0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (in years)</td>
<td>0.047*** 0.004</td>
<td>0.022 0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High political sophistication</td>
<td>0.081** 0.041</td>
<td>0.092** 0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in politics</td>
<td>0.149*** 0.031</td>
<td>0.137*** 0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal trust</td>
<td>0.295*** 0.031</td>
<td>0.289*** 0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy assessment</td>
<td>0.051*** 0.013</td>
<td>0.052*** 0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>System-Level Variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime Legacy</td>
<td>0.109** 0.049</td>
<td>0.021 0.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita ($100)</td>
<td>0.006 0.025</td>
<td>0.023 0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction Term</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime Legacy * Education</td>
<td>0.006* 0.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Random-effects Parameters</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>sd(_cons)</td>
<td>0.320 0.056</td>
<td>0.531 0.006</td>
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<tr>
<td>sd(escol)</td>
<td>0.029 0.105</td>
<td>0.029 0.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corr(escol,_cons)</td>
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<td>-0.830 0.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of observations</td>
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<td>20448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of groups</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01.
Source: LAPOP, 2010

Substantively, these findings have important implications for the discussion on democratic legitimacy. First, it leads us to rethink the role of education in democratic regimes. Many studies have attributed a central role to education on the development democratic attitudes and values. Having more education is usually interpreted as a basic requirement for a full democratic citizenship. While this is true, we found that the effect of education is linked to the broader political and social context. Therefore, there is a more complex dynamics related to the effect of education on attitudes.
In countries where democracy operates a long time and the democratic institutions are dispersed in whole society, schools and universities work as a great tool to spread its values, starting with one of the most fundamental of them: the commitment to the regime. These values, in turn, probably also help preserve and improve these institutions. It creates thus a "virtuous circle" where democracy is constantly reinforced. However, in democracies that are just starting to build its legacy, the education effect remains limited.

Our results partially converge to those found in the East European countries (Weil, 1985). However, we find no evidence that the low democratic legacy brings negative effects of education on democratic commitment. However, it is true that low democratic legacy weakens this effect. In fact, what our study brings new is to show that not only the type of regime matter (democracies and non-democracies), but even among democracies democratic legacy interacts significantly with education.

The evidence from our study does not support a deterministic thesis. In the context of Latin America, we find relevant trends, but also important exceptions. Figure 6 shows the effect of education for each of the four countries with the highest democratic legacy in the region. We can see that in all countries, except Venezuela, the effect of education is very strong: the higher the education, the more likely is the democratic commitment.
In countries with less democratic legacy, we are dealing with something different. We can see that the effect of education on democratic commitment is weaker and even not statistically significant, as is the case of Guatemala, Nicaragua and Paraguay. In these countries, unlike those who have greater democratic legacy, education seems to have a less important role in the socialization of democratic commitment, Mexico being the exception.

Venezuela and Mexico are good examples of how other factors change the expected path. However, our analysis shows an important trend that cannot be ignored. In countries such as Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile, it is apparent that citizens not only learn about democracy in schools, but also learn to support it, despite current problems.

Other countries, such as Paraguay, Guatemala and Nicaragua, have an important challenge ahead. Certainly, education holds an important function in building these democracies. However, it is risky to take it as the road to democratic consolidation, especially for democratic legitimacy. Before building a solid democratic legacy, the socializing effects of education remain with modest.
Concluding Remarks

Education is probably the main factor in explaining political behavior and, more specifically, political attitudes. More recently, it has been shown that longevity and the quality of democracy also shape political attitudes. We showed, in this study, how the two environments related to education (schools) and to democratic regime (democratic legacy) interact each other in the context of Latin America. We conclude that, independent of environment, education has a positive effect on the democratic commitment; however, in countries with more democratic legacy that effect tends to be stronger than in countries with lower legacy.

Despite the advances presented here, there is a long research agenda ahead. First, for now, we tested only “democratic commitment”. However, other political attitudes are equally important for building political legitimacy, such as political tolerance and support for rule of law. Secondly, in order to support a valid thesis, our findings must be tested in other contexts. Therefore, it is important research be expanded to other regions of the world. Third, throughout the article we work with “years of schooling”. However, some studies (Evans and Rose, 2007) have shown that we should take account of the different phases of education, such higher education.

Finally, as we have suggested, there are factors specific to each country that should be explored in more detail. We therefore believe that historical and qualitative comparative research would be contribute to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms that links democratic environment to educational environment and both to democratic attitudes.

References


