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Does Higher Education Matter for MPs in their Parliamentary Work? Evidence from the Swedish Parliament

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ABSTRACT

Individuals who have a higher education are highly overrepresented in national legislative bodies worldwide. In spite of an extensive body of literature interested in educational background and its relation to political activity, significantly fewer studies have engaged with the qualitative advantages and drawbacks of legislators' educational background in their legislative work. The aim of this paper is to explore whether higher education functions as a resource for legislators in their political office. We use data from a unique elite survey conducted in the Swedish Parliament, which had a response rate of 82% ($n=287$), to investigate the relation between educational background and the internal efficacy and influence of MPs. The quantitative findings indicate that there is little or no difference between legislators with and without higher education in terms of internal efficacy and influence. Contextualising the findings with 33 elite interviews, we find that while legislators value skills acquired through higher education in their work—such as the ability to handle large amounts of text and information—MPs without higher education display similar skills acquired in alternative ways.

Introduction

People with formal higher education are vastly overrepresented in legislative bodies worldwide (Best & Cotta, 2000; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). As an example, 95% of the members of the United States Congress and 90% of British MPs have a college degree. This skewed social representation is often justified by an argument based upon supposed meritocracy—those with a higher education make better leaders. Previous research has detected a strong relationship between people's level of education and their disposition to engage in politics (e.g. Franklin, 2004; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Wolfinger, 1980). Having a college degree does in fact appear to provide an advantage in respect to virtually all types of political activity, including recruitment to legislative office (Hillygus, 2005; Lindgren, Oskarsson, & Dawes, 2017).

But although there is an extensive body of literature interested in educational background and its relation to political activity, a significantly smaller number of studies have addressed the qualitative advantages and shortcomings of legislators' educational

backgrounds in respect to their legislative work. Carnes and Lupu, who provide one of the first empirical studies of the topic, note that 'there simply is not much empirical research on the link between politicians' educational attainment and their performance in office' (Carnes & Lupu, 2016, p. 36). They find no relation between educational background and political performance when measured in terms of such differing outputs as national prosperity, level of corruption and bill enactment across different political contexts, concluding that 'college-educated leaders perform about the same or worse than leaders with less formal education' (Carnes & Lupu, 2016, p. 35).

In this paper, we explore whether formal education functions as a resource for political leaders on the individual level. Stated otherwise, instead of focussing on the outputs of politics, we address resources from the perspective of individual legislators. For instance, formal education might provide individuals not only with skills and knowledge that are relevant for their political responsibilities but also with political self-confidence, which promotes political efficacy. On the basis of new and original quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the Swedish Parliament, we ask (1) whether MPs' educational backgrounds matter for how they perceive their competence and influence and (2) which resources associated with formal education MPs find useful in their parliamentary work. The Swedish Parliament comprises a suitable case for exploring these questions because it displays a significant variation in the educational backgrounds of legislators, with a sizable proportion of MPs having no college degree or experience of formal higher education.

Our survey data, collected in 2016 (with a response rate of 82%, $n = 287$), includes items concerning the self-perceived competence and influence of MPs in relation to their colleagues. We also have access to statistical data concerning the formal positions legislators hold in Parliament. In addition, we conducted 33 in-depth interviews with MPs with different educational backgrounds, asking whether and how formal education matters in Parliament. Although we cannot measure output in terms of behaviour, we are able to provide new insights regarding the importance of educational attainment for legislators on the individual level. In this article, we assess whether those who lack formal education are disadvantaged in terms of lower internal efficacy and influence, and provide an initial answer concerning the importance in politics of qualitative resources, such as skills and knowledge, that are associated with formal education.

Our findings show that while legislators value the skills they have acquired through higher education, there are little or no systematic differences between legislators with and without a formal higher education in terms of their internal efficacy and influence in the Swedish Parliament. The interviews indicate that legislators with lower levels of formal education possess a number of the skills often associated with higher education and thus do not appear to be significantly disadvantaged because of their educational background. We conclude that although a college degree seems to provide legislators with substantial resources, these resources are not associated exclusively with formal education.

Theoretical Background

Numerous studies have focussed on the relationship between MPs' background characteristics and their performance and output in office by examining, for instance, the

implications of gender and ethnicity (e.g. Anzia & Berry, 2011; Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Tate, 2001; Thomas & Welch, 1991), as well as incumbency and seniority (e.g. Kerevel & Atkeson, 2013; McKelvey & Riezman, 1992), for MPs' legislative work. The level of educational attainment on the part of legislators is a social trait of great importance in politics, as is indicated by the considerable overrepresentation of highly educated individuals in decision-making bodies. Nonetheless, education has seldom been the main focus in parliamentary research. Studies that direct attention to educational background have often done so indirectly by using it as a proxy for the competence of political leaders. For instance, Galasso and Nannicini use years of formal schooling to assess whether electoral competence is associated with more competent politicians (Galasso & Nannicini, 2011). In a similar vein, Franceschet and Piscopo suggest that female legislators' higher educational credentials in Argentina indicate that they are more competent than their male colleagues (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2014).

Of particular interest for this study, however, is the small body of literature concerned with the impact and importance of MPs' educational background, both for individual politicians' power and authority (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Daniel, 2013), and for macro-level outcomes, such as GDP and the level of corruption (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2011; Carnes & Lupu, 2016). Besley and Reynal-Querol (2011) find evidence that economic growth rates are higher when leaders are highly educated. Similarly, Daniel (2013) finds a positive relationship between political decision-makers' level of formal education and the assignment of influential posts in the European Parliament, with formal education appearing to be particularly important for inexperienced legislators. In contrast, the most comprehensive test to date of the relationship between educational attainment and political competence or ability, that of Carnes and Lupu (2016), does not find that education has a positive effect upon the performance of MPs. Their cross-national study of random leadership transitions, close elections for the United States Congress and randomly selected municipalities in Brazil identifies no conclusive evidence that highly educated individuals make better politicians. Political leaders with college degrees do not govern over more prosperous nations, do not pass more bills and are no less likely to be corrupt (Carnes & Lupu, 2016). Nevertheless, these few studies represent exceptions in the field, and knowledge concerning how legislators' level of education is related to their competence, performance and opportunities to influence policy remains limited.

Another issue that has been scarcely addressed by previous research is *in what way* formal education might matter at the individual level. Does formal education function as a resource for legislators, and if so, how? Scholars in the field of political participation argue that formal education has an absolute effect upon political engagement in that it provides individuals with resources in terms of beliefs, skills and knowledge that are beneficial for political activity (e.g. Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Verba et al. (1995, p. 305) state in their seminal work that 'Education enhances participation more or less directly by developing skills that are relevant to politics—the ability to speak and write, and the knowledge of how to cope in an organisational setting'. It has also been claimed that higher education favours individuals' political efficacy, which is associated with self-confidence concerning one's political abilities and competence. *External efficacy* pertains to the belief that an individual is able to influence what the government does, while *internal efficacy* is associated with the conviction that an individual is

capable of understanding and participating in politics (Jackson, 1995). The general argument in this regard is that a high level of education has a positive effect upon how people perceive their competence, their ability to understand and engage in politics, and the possibilities they have to influence politics (e.g. Balch, 1974; Converse, 1972; Jackson, 1995). Briefly stated, previous work in the field of political participation has suggested that formal education provides individuals with absolute and substantial resources.

In contrast, others claim that formal education merely has a social and symbolic function. Bourdieu's famous notion of cultural capital constitutes a way in which to conceptualise how education may, within a specific context, provide individuals with social power and advantage (Bourdieu, 2007, 1977). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital, understood in terms of educational qualifications and access to cultural goods, both functions as a symbolic resource for individuals and reproduces social stratification within a given society. Although the value ascribed to a given type of cultural capital may vary across contexts in respect to its scarcity, the benefits acquired through the possession of cultural capital are often recognised as legitimate, unlike those generated simply by economic capital (Bourdieu, 2007, 1977; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). A similar argument has been presented in certain studies of political participation which maintain that the function of higher education is above all social and relative in character insofar as it provides individuals with a social status that is beneficial for their political participation (Campbell, 2013; Nie, 1996).

Although the skills and motivations useful for engaging in politics may differ from those at play within a legislative body, the approaches outlined above may be useful for gaining a deeper understanding of the implications of formal education for individual legislators in their daily work. In light of the fact that individuals with a college degree are overrepresented in national parliaments, it is imperative to inquire whether their education provides them with resources that foster self-efficacy, influence and other useful skills, such as expertise in a given policy area and the ability to obtain relevant information. It may also be the case, however, that the skills acquired through formal education are of little relevance in politics, and that formal education is merely symbol of social status. It is important to point out that being a member of parliament is very prestigious, and that legislators have successfully competed with many others in obtaining their position. It may thus be possible that legislators with lower levels of education have acquired useful political skills by means other than formal study.

The aim of this study is to advance knowledge and make an empirical contribution concerning the role of formal education for individual legislators. Not only will we examine *whether* educational attainment functions as a resource for legislators on the individual level, we will also seek to understand *in what way* formal education might be a political resource in parliamentary work.

The theory that education has an absolute effect upon political engagement would lead us to expect that MPs with a higher level of education possess an advantage after being elected to office. Stated differently, MPs with a college degree should then be better equipped to meet their parliamentary responsibilities in comparison to those without a higher education because of the skills, knowledge and political efficacy such education provides. In contrast, an absence of differences between legislators with and without a higher education may suggest either (a) that education per se has no effect, and that it might merely be a proxy for something else (such as social status) or (b) that those without a

higher education have, through other pathways, acquired skills and political efficacy similar to those with a college education.

In the first part of the results section, we focus on resources in two respects, namely, legislators' internal efficacy and influence, with the latter measured in terms of MPs' self-perceived influence and the actual positions they hold in parliament. Although we cannot account for actual behaviour, it is reasonable to expect that this approach provides a fairly good indication of whether MPs with a higher education enjoy an advantage in politics and, consequently, whether higher education functions as a resource for politicians. In the qualitative results part of the paper, we contextualise our findings and attempt to identify the role that education plays for individual legislators. Before moving on to the results, however, we will describe our case, our data and the methodological approach we employ.

The Case of Sweden

Sweden is typically characterised as a consensual democracy with strong political parties (Arter, 2004). After the change to unicameralism in the 1970s, the Swedish *Riksdag* consists of 349 legislators who are currently divided between 8 political parties and elected through a closed list PR electoral system in 29 multimember constituencies. Governments are both recruited from and responsible to the Parliament, with stable and productive minority or coalition governments being common in recent decades (Arter, 2004). A majority of the Swedish MPs have a college education—72% in comparison with 42% of the adult population (Statistics Sweden). Although Swedish politicians are highly positively selected, Dal Bó et al. (2017) have described Sweden as an 'inclusive meritocracy' in which representation across social backgrounds is extraordinarily even and the proportion of legislators without a college education (almost 30%) is comparatively high.

The social status attached to having a higher education varies across contexts, and this variation has implications for political recruitment patterns (Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2017). Elite universities provide an important pathway to political power in countries such as France and the United Kingdom (Bourdieu, 1996; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). In contrast, Sweden's historically strong labour movement and popular education, such as folk high schools, have created alternative routes into politics and contributed to making political recruitment more diversified (Broady, 1990; Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2017). The social status of education might consequently be more ambiguous in Sweden than in other countries.

Nevertheless, while these features provide a variation in the years of schooling among Swedish MPs, which is of great importance for our study, there are no obvious reasons as to why education would matter less for individual legislators *within* the Swedish parliament in comparison to other parliaments. On the contrary, the Swedish parliament is similar to other legislatures in the Western world in that it is highly specialised. In addition, administrative support is rather limited. Legislators are consequently expected to perform a great deal of highly specialised work on their own, which suggests that higher education would be of importance in this context.

In summary, we propose that Sweden, for methodological reasons, comprises a case that is appropriate for our research goals since the variation in MPs' educational backgrounds enables us to empirically explore its importance for their internal efficacy and

influence. It would be difficult to investigate this issue in countries where nearly all legislators have a college degree. Furthermore, if skills associated with higher education are important for Swedish MPs, they should then be relevant in other similar parliaments as well since we have no reason to assume that the organisation of the Swedish parliament differs from that of other parliaments in any significant way.

Data and Methodology

This study combines original elite survey data and interviews with legislators in order to explore the significance of higher education among members of the Swedish Parliament. Our main independent variable is *higher education*, which was constructed upon the basis of the survey question ‘Which of the following alternatives best describes your educational background: primary education, secondary education, vocational education, higher education, postgraduate education?’ The two last categories, higher education and postgraduate education, together compose the *higher education* variable. 73% ($n = 210$) of the survey respondents reported having a higher education, while 27% ($n = 77$) reported having a primary, secondary and/or vocational education. Among those with a higher education, only eight legislators (3%) had a postgraduate education.¹ MPs from the Social Democrats and the radical right party, the Sweden Democrats, were overrepresented among the group with lower levels of formal education—among the 77 MPs without a college education, 50% were Social Democrats, 25% were Sweden Democrats and 25% belonged to one of the other six parties in Parliament. In the Social Democratic party group, 44% had no higher education, with the corresponding number being 46% for the Sweden Democrats. In the other six parties, the proportion of MPs without a higher education varied between 6% and 17%.

In respect to our dependent variables, our data permitted us to approach the question of resources associated with education from the perspective of individual legislators. While the competence and influence of MPs can obviously be measured in terms of political output, we focussed on internal efficacy, influence and individual experiences within Parliament. Internal efficacy has been identified as an important resource for gaining an understanding of how formal education is significant for political engagement on the individual level, but it has not yet been explored within a parliamentary setting.

The survey that we utilised to gauge MPs’ internal efficacy and self-perceived influence included approximately 40 questions concerning the MPs’ own perceptions of their competence, influence, working conditions and personal networks. The data were collected at the end of January 2016, when the 2014–18 Swedish Parliament had served one and a half years of its four-year term. The majority of the surveys were filled out during the weekly party group meetings and collected immediately afterwards, with a response rate of over 82%—287 of the 349 legislators participated.²

Our first step was to establish whether MPs with a higher education possess greater internal efficacy and are more influential than their colleagues with lower levels of formal education. We measured internal efficacy by means of a survey item that asked MPs to rate their competence in relation to their colleagues. As for influence, we evaluated legislators’ self-perceived influence, as established by the survey data, in conjunction with the formal positions of power they in fact held in Parliament. It would have made sense within other contexts to take into consideration bill sponsorship or debate activity when

gauging the importance or influence of individual MPs, but such indicators do not cast much light upon individual power within the Swedish context because of the strong emphasis placed upon the role of political parties and committee work. Individual MPs may write private members motions, and they do so frequently (for instance, 3851 private members motions were administered during 2017), but such motions are primarily an instrument for backbenchers to display their preferences to voters. Less than 0.5% of these motions pass, and high profile legislators spend their time on other activities within their party or committee, mostly behind the scenes. Consequently, one of the few things we can do to assess the individual power of Swedish MPs' is to ask them to rate their influence in relation to their party colleagues and study the formal leadership positions they hold, such as committee chairs and important positions within their political party.

Second, we utilised interview data to analyse the meaning and value that MPs ascribe to education. This makes it possible for us to contextualise and provide plausible explanations for the quantitative results. The interview study, which was conducted in November and December 2016, included 33 legislators below the age of 40, both men and women, who represented all eight political parties in Parliament. This number included legislators both with and without a higher education—26 respondents held or had almost completed a college degree, while 7 had a secondary education or dropped out early from college. The interviews, which were between 40 and 90 minutes in length, were semi-structured following an interview guide. Most were conducted in person, with a few being by telephone.

The interview study was intended to deepen and contextualise the results of the survey, with questions centring upon the respondents' experiences of working in the Swedish Parliament in particular and in politics more generally. Some questions explicitly targeted the role of education in politics. While the data provide unique possibilities for evaluating the meaning MPs' ascribe to higher education, it was beyond the scope of this study to evaluate their actual behaviour and output.

Results

Internal Efficacy

In order to gauge MPs' internal efficacy, we asked the members of the 2014–18 Swedish Parliament to rate their own competence in relation to (a) other legislators in their parliamentary party group and (b) other legislators in their committee on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being much lower competence than one's colleagues and 10 much higher. In respect to competence in relation to party colleagues, MPs who had a higher education systematically rated their competence slightly higher than MPs who did not (6.83 vs. 6.36, $p < 0.05$). The results are similar when MPs rated their levels of competence in relation to colleagues in their committee. The average score for the group who did not have a higher education is 6.37, while the mean value is 6.77 for those who did ($p < 0.10$). MPs with a higher education thus appeared to be slightly, yet systematically, more self-confident.³

Multiple regression (see [Table 1](#)) of the two survey items related to self-perceived competence indicated that educational achievement had statistical significance (although only at the 90% level) solely for the first item—competence in relation to party colleagues—and not for the second—competence in relation to committee colleagues. It is noteworthy, yet

Table 1. OLS regression results: internal efficacy.

	Competence in relation to party colleagues		Competence in relation to committee colleagues	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Higher education	0.47** (0.21)	0.39* (0.22)	0.40* (0.24)	0.20 (0.26)
Women		-0.30 (0.18)		-0.17 (0.21)
Age		-0.01 (0.01)		-0.00 (0.01)
Years in parliament		0.08*** (0.02)		0.10*** (0.02)
Party controls		√		√
Intercept	6.36*** (0.18)	5.99*** (0.47)	6.37*** (0.20)	5.69*** (0.54)
Observations	283	272	280	269
R ²	0.02	0.14	0.01	0.14

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

not surprising, that greater parliamentary experience was also associated with higher self-perceived competence.

The findings thus suggest that educational background was of rather limited importance for MPs' internal efficacy. What is evident is that MPs who had no higher education were not markedly less self-confident than their colleagues who did.

Influence

We next investigated how MPs' educational background was related to their level of influence in the Parliament. We first asked the members of the 2014–18 Swedish Parliament how they viewed the possibilities they had to influence their party's policy positions on (a) issues that lay within their own areas of expertise and (b) issues outside of the latter on a scale from 0 (very poor) and 10 (very good). We found that MPs, on average, perceived themselves as rather influential regardless of their educational background, with their responses ranging from just under 5 on issues outside of their personal area of expertise to almost 8 on issues that lay within it.⁴

It is noteworthy that we found no significant differences between those who did and did not have a higher education, which suggests that educational achievement has no absolute effect upon self-perceived influence in the Swedish Parliament. On the contrary, MPs with only a primary, secondary and/or vocational education rated their influence slightly higher, both in respect to issues they regarded as within their area of expertise (7.75 vs. 7.72), and concerning those they regarded as outside it (5.25 vs. 4.83).⁵

Multiple regression indicated no significant difference between MPs with only a primary, secondary and/or vocational education and MPs with a higher education in respect to their self-perceived influence (see Table 2). Legislators with more experience rated their influence as higher, while older MPs, somewhat surprisingly, tended to rate their own influence lower than younger legislators did.

In order to complement the findings concerning MPs' self-perceived influence, we also measured their formal power, that is, their positions of influence in Parliament. Our first category, leadership positions, included the speakers, committee chairs and vice chairs, party bench leaders and vice leaders, and party leaders. The descriptive statistics indicated

Table 2. OLS regression results: self-perceived influence.

	Influence in expert areas		Influence in non-expert areas	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Higher education	-0.03 (0.28)	-0.14 (0.29)	-0.42 (0.31)	-0.45 (0.31)
Women		0.08 (0.24)		0.08 (0.26)
Age		-0.03*** (0.01)		-0.03*** (0.01)
Years in Parliament		0.11*** (0.03)		0.14*** (0.03)
Party controls		√		√
Intercept	7.75*** (0.24)	8.02*** (0.61)	5.25*** (0.27)	5.07*** (0.66)
Observations	285	274	287	276
R ²	0.00	0.15	0.01	0.23

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

that a higher percentage of such positions in the 2014–18 Parliament were held by MPs with a higher education (16.3%) than by those with a primary, secondary and/or vocational education (11.7%). However, a χ^2 test revealed no systematic differences between these two groups (0.336). In contrast, a larger percentage of positions in the second category of power positions, namely, a full seat in one of the 16 parliamentary committees, were held by MPs who had no higher education (85.7%) than by those who did (72.3%) (χ^2 : 0.018).

Multiple regression indicated that MPs with a higher education were no more likely to hold a leadership position than those with a primary, secondary and/or vocational education. MPs with a lower level of education in fact appeared somewhat more likely to hold a full seat in one of the committees,⁶ although a more significant determining factor for holding an influential position was the number of years one had served in Parliament (Table 3).

The first part of our analysis thus establishes that on the basis of the issues addressed in the present discussion—legislators' internal efficacy and influence—there is no clear

Table 3. OLS regression results: influential positions.

	Leadership position		Full committee member	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Higher education	0.05 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.13** (0.06)	-0.11* (0.06)
Women		-0.01 (0.04)		-0.07 (0.05)
Age		-0.00* (0.00)		-0.00 (0.00)
Years in Parliament		0.03*** (0.01)		0.03*** (0.01)
Full committee member		-0.09* (0.05)		-
Leadership position		-		-0.12* (0.07)
Party controls		√		√
Intercept	0.12*** (0.04)	0.15 (0.11)	0.86*** (0.05)	0.75*** (0.13)
Observations	286	276	286	276
R-squared	0.00	0.14	0.02	0.14

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

support for the theory that educational background functions as a resource for legislators. Higher education indeed appears to be of little relevance for MPs' political self-confidence and influence. We can therefore conclude that legislators with and without a higher education appear to be surprisingly similar in respect to the issues we have examined. The fact that individuals with a higher education are overrepresented in the Swedish Parliament does not necessarily imply that they enjoy greater confidence and influence.

Contextualising the Findings with In-depth Interviews

We know from previous research that individuals with a higher level of formal education are overrepresented in politics. Against this background, and on the basis of theories which suggest that higher education provides individuals with skills, knowledge and political efficacy that function as resources useful for political engagement and influence, we explored whether legislators with a higher education possessed an advantage within politics in terms of their internal efficacy and influence. The quantitative data provided weak or no evidence for this expectation. On the contrary, legislators with differing levels of educational achievement appeared to be remarkably similar in terms of their internal efficacy and influence. We thus found little support for the view that a high level of formal education constitutes an advantage in respect to meeting one's legislative responsibilities. We claim that this result can be explained in either of two ways: (a) educational background does not provide legislators with skills or resources useful for parliamentary work, and the fact that highly educated individuals are overrepresented in politics is rather a consequence of other socio-economic factors that correlate with one's level of education; (b) legislators with lower levels of formal education possess the same or equivalent skills and resources as those with a college education, in spite of their educational background. In other words, the latter implies that although education is indeed a resource for individual legislators, there is in reality no significant difference between the two groups in question because both possess similar types of skills, knowledge and political efficacy. We may then conclude that those with less formal education have acquired these qualities through alternative channels.

Support for the first explanation would turn upon finding evidence which indicates, for instance, that higher education as such provides MPs with no skills useful for legislative work. This would imply that legislators, regardless of their level of education, view other types of knowledge and skills as more important than those associated with a college education. Support for the second would reside upon two findings: (a) legislators with a higher education value the skills acquired through education as important for meeting their parliamentary responsibilities and (b) legislators with lower levels of education possess the same skills and characteristics, but have obtained them in other ways.

We further explored these two possibilities through in-depth interviews with MPs with different educational backgrounds.

Is Education a Political Resource?

We asked the group of legislators who had a higher education whether they regarded a college education as an important resource for an MP. Most possessed a college degree, but we also included four legislators who were close to completing their programmes of

study. It is striking that nearly all responded that higher education is an important resource, regardless of our findings in the survey. Although many of them recognised the diverse composition of the Swedish Parliament and stated that people of differing backgrounds should be represented, they also emphasised that their own education was an important resource for them personally (interviews 37, 2, 16, 29, 11, 5, 24, 14, 10, 7, 22, 8, 39, 1, 27, 17, 36, 34, 40, 13). Many remarked that the ability to read, understand and manage large amounts of text and information was a particularly important skill that they had acquired through their academic studies (2, 31, 5, 24, 22, 39, 37, 10, 7). One female respondent stated in this regard that

If you have a basic college education with the ability to process, analyze, and critically review large amounts of information, you benefit from that even in other areas of expertise (5).

In respect to the content of education, it appeared that although certain specialisations provide knowledge that is relevant for MPs, many regarded academic training as more important than the actual content itself. Legislators with a degree in economics or law often found their specialisation to be useful for understanding statistics, budgets or legal details (16, 11, 39, 1, 24, 22, 31, 29), but political scientists less frequently found a particular use for the issue competence they had obtained through their studies (18, 37, 24, 21, 7). It should be noted, however, that the respondents emphasised that other political experiences are as important for politicians as academic education (38, 18).

I would manage fine without [my bachelor's degree in political science]. What is needed are political experience and the abilities I talked about earlier—a desire to learn and to be receptive to arguments, to be grounded in one's values and work for them (18).

We also asked all MPs whether higher education grants legitimacy and status, and many confirmed that this is in fact the case (interviews 34, 2, 14, 13, 20, 11, 39, 37, 1, 27, 40, 22, 8, 36). A young female legislator stated in this regard that 'If I namedrop economics and Handels [a prestigious economics college], people say, like, OK, you're smart, too' (11). But the general picture that emerged is that one's educational background was of less relevance within the Parliament than outside of it, such as in contacts with the surrounding society or in international contexts, where it is a source of legitimacy and credibility. For example, a young male legislator related that 'I'm often asked what I've studied And it matters. Maybe not inside the Parliament, but outside, when I'm in public debates, and so forth' (37). A young male legislator who dropped out of college observed that having no higher education is viewed as negative particularly in international contexts, remarking that 'In Sweden you can kind of be accepted anyway, but abroad they always ask what type of education you have' (20).

Consequently, the first important finding from the interviews is that one's educational background appears to function as a resource for politicians on an individual level, although it is associated with general academic experience rather than any substantial content in terms of issue expertise. Higher education is also associated with legitimacy and status, but this is more the case in the surrounding society and in international contexts than within the Swedish Parliament.

The group of legislators without a higher education generally agreed that education was an important resource. However, when we asked them whether they personally regarded it as a disadvantage to not have a college-level education, their answers suggested that they

seldom or never felt this to be the case (15, 35, 30, 23, 6, 12, 20). A male legislator who dropped out of college claimed that

I don't think that it's more difficult for me to carry out my responsibilities or that my work has a lower quality because I didn't finish my education. I'm asked about it simply because it's expected that politicians have a higher education and a degree (30).

A female respondent expressed a similar view:

I have a secondary education, that's all. After that I worked for the union, and of course that's also a kind of education. That's how I became engaged in politics. It's also an education to constantly go deeper into new issues (12).

Most respondents from this group emphasised that, in general, they do not lack any specific qualities associated with education, only the formal degree and the associated legitimacy (12, 30, 20, 23). Nevertheless, a number of respondents also stated that they valued education and felt that it was a personal failure to not have a higher education (6, 20, 30, 15). One respondent even remarked that 'On a personal level, I experience 'inadequacy anxiety' because I did not finish a degree' (15). Several of the MPs in this group stated that they would like to have a formal higher education in order to obtain greater legitimacy and authority.

The findings thus indicate that although a higher education is important for MPs, it is not indispensable for being able to meet their legislative responsibilities. MPs without a higher education maintain that they lack no essential skills or knowledge needed for legislative work. Our analysis thus indicates that they appear to possess the needed skills in spite of their lower level of formal education.

We also found further support in the interviews for the view that a higher education is not the only way in which to acquire skills typically associated with a higher education. For instance, there were substantial similarities between both groups of legislators when they described their own qualities as politicians. As noted above, legislators with a higher education emphasised that their academic experience had provided them with analytical skills and the ability to handle large amounts of text, which they viewed as important for the legislative work. However, a number of legislators without a higher education mentioned these same skills as their main qualities as politicians (15, 35, 20, 30). One male respondent without a higher education observed that 'I have the capacity to rather easily take in things, read documents and understand them' (35). Another MP who dropped out of college early stated that one of his main qualities is 'a good analytical capacity' (20). Social competence and speaking ability were also very frequently mentioned by respondents from both groups as important for politicians.

The findings from the interviews suggest that a higher education does function as a political resource for legislators in terms of the ability to handle large amounts of information and text, which is closely associated with academic studies. This skill is indeed of outmost importance for meeting political responsibilities since MPs must be able read through a large amount of material not only in parliamentary committees and party groups but also in monitoring the media. Furthermore, legislators are expected to adopt positions or formulate policy on the basis of such information, and since they are often their party's only member responsible for a given issue area, and because administrative support is rather limited in the Swedish Parliament, processing information is an essential

skill. However, an interesting finding is that although this skill is associated with having a higher education, it is not exclusive to academics insofar as it is possible to acquire the same ability in other ways. Legislators with lower levels of education in fact stated that they have done so, with trade union activity and party politics being typically mentioned as alternative ways in which to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for parliamentary work.

Another way in which to describe the findings is that legislators without a higher education are likely not representative of the general group of citizens who do not have a college education. Dal Bó et al. (2017) utilise several measures of ability in showing how Swedish politicians are very positively selected from the general population, and that this pattern is even stronger among the lower social classes, identified in respect to one's father's income and occupational class. Although Dal Bó et al. (2017) do not examine MPs' educational background, legislators without a higher education would also be very positively selected if the same pattern holds. It would thus not be surprising that they resemble MPs with a higher education in respect to such skills as being able to handle large amounts of text and information.

Even though our interview study is limited and the results need to be tested further, it presents a preliminary interpretation of our quantitative findings that educational background appears to be of little or no relevance for Swedish MPs' internal efficacy or parliamentary influence. The similarities we find between MPs who do and do not have a higher education can be explained by the fact that those with lower levels of formal education have acquired the skills and qualities necessary for meeting their parliamentary responsibilities in other ways. This explanation thus suggests that education has an absolute effect in terms of skills that are beneficial in politics, although higher education is not the only means for acquiring them. But the picture is complex insofar as our findings also indicate that education provides legislators with social status and legitimacy—what Bourdieu refers to as 'cultural capital'—at least in the surrounding society. This corresponds well with the fact that highly educated individuals are overrepresented in politics.

Conclusion

Individuals with a higher education are overrepresented in legislative bodies worldwide. But even though there have been numerous studies of the relationship between education and political engagement, we still know relatively little about 'the link between politicians' educational attainment and their performance in office' (Carnes & Lupu, 2016, p. 36). In this article, we have utilised a combination of quantitative and qualitative data concerning the Swedish Parliament to investigate whether formal education functions as a resource for political leaders on the individual level by examining whether MPs' educational backgrounds are significant for their internal efficacy and parliamentary influence. We also explored whether MPs regard skills associated with formal education to be useful in their parliamentary work. The results show no clear relationship between higher education and the internal efficacy and parliamentary influence of legislators. Our interview study indicates that the reason for the similarities in this regard between legislators with differing educational backgrounds is that those who do not have a higher education have acquired skills equivalent to 'academic' skills in alternative ways.

The labour movement and an egalitarian tradition are important features of Swedish politics that have contributed to a more diversified social representation in Parliament

(Broady, 1990; Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2017). As noted above, Sweden has a fairly large percentage of legislators without a college degree in comparison to other countries, around half of whom are members of the Social Democratic Party. Sweden thus differs from other countries in respect to political recruitment, most likely because of the existence of such alternative pathways to power as trade unions and popular education, which enable individuals without formal education to become politicians. But while the relatively diversified educational backgrounds of legislators makes Sweden an interesting case for methodological reasons, there is nevertheless no reason to believe that education matters less or plays a different role within the Swedish Parliament than it does in other countries. Not only is the Swedish Parliament similar to other Western democracies in its utilisation of a PR electoral system, legislators have limited administrative support even though their parliamentary work is highly specialised. For such reasons, we propose that our study has implications beyond the Swedish case.

Our findings provide new insights regarding the importance of educational attainment for MPs. In one of the few studies that empirically test the relation between the competence of political leaders and their performance, Carnes and Lupu (2016) find that highly educated individuals are not better politicians—they do not govern over more prosperous nations, they do not pass more bills and they are no less likely to be corrupt. While our study supports their main finding, we provide new knowledge regarding the parliamentary efficacy and influence of legislators on the individual level. We explored MPs' self-perceived competence as well as their actual and perceived influence, and have found no significant disadvantages that are related to their educational backgrounds. In other words, formal education does not provide individual legislators with exclusive resources.

In addition, our interview data makes it possible to provide an initial answer concerning the particular qualitative resources (skills, knowledge and efficacy) that are associated with formal education in politics. The most important 'academic' skill for parliamentary work appears to be the ability to handle large amounts of information, with the particular orientation, specialisation and content of education being less significant. However, legislators without a college education appear to be as competent as their colleagues in respect to the same positive skills. This finding should obviously be interpreted in respect to the positive selection of individuals without a higher education who are very competent in comparison with others in the general population with a similar educational background. Nonetheless, the finding that skills often associated with formal education can be acquired in alternative ways is also valuable for future research. An important topic in this regard concerns how alternative routes to politics serve to provide individuals with political skills and resources.

Future research should also continue to investigate the relations between educational background, self-perceptions and performance.

Notes

1. Concerning MPs' level of education, 2.8% of the survey respondents indicated 'primary school', 12.9% 'secondary school', 11.1% 'vocational education', 70.4% 'higher education' and 2.8% 'postgraduate education'.
2. The respondents were largely representative of all legislators in terms of sex and party affiliation. 81% were female and 83% male, with response rates ranging from 78% to 96% within the eight political parties in Parliament.

3. This pattern appears to be similar in all political parties.
4. It should be noted that the responses concerning both items varied from 0 to 10.
5. Only small differences in this regard emerged between the various political parties in Parliament, including the Social Democrats.
6. Logistic regressions provided similar results.

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