

Educational Polarization in American Politics: More than Just a Diploma Divide

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Abstract

The American electorate is divided along educational lines. The 2024 presidential election was marked by the largest-ever educational divide in vote choice. Typically, we frame this divide as a split between people with college degrees and those without. In this paper, I argue that there is significant polarization along the entire educational attainment spectrum. I show that the divide between BA and graduate degree holders is just as pronounced on many dimensions as the divide between BA holders and high school graduates. This point is especially critical because graduate degree holders are the fastest-growing educational category, moving from 9% of the population in 2000 to 14.5% today. I use ANES and US Census data to show that educational polarization encompasses political attitudes, engagement, and vote choice. As people become more educated, they become more liberal on social, cultural, and economic issues, become more likely to participate in politics, and support the Democrats. I also show that educational polarization combined with demographic changes has dramatically reshaped the party coalitions, with the Democratic Party's base becoming more educated while the Republican coalition is little changed. I also show that the proportion of the population with a graduate degree was one of the strongest demographic predictors of county-level vote share in the 2024 election. All told, the American electorate is polarized along the entire educational attainment spectrum.

Keywords

diploma divide, education, voting behavior, public opinion, American politics

Across the world, voters are divided along educational lines (Apfeld et al., 2024a, 2024b; Hooghe et al., 2025). The United States is no exception. Over the past decade, citizens with advanced educational credentials have become more likely to support Democrats at all levels of government, while those with less education have become more Republican (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024; Schaffner & Gaus, 2023; Zingher, 2022a). Initially, it was White Americans who were “divided by degrees,” but the 2024 election results suggest there is a diploma divide among minorities as well, as less educated Latinos and Asian Americans moved sharply in favor of the Republicans.¹ As a result, the parties are less polarized along racial lines than they were a decade ago but are more polarized along educational ones. The rise in educational polarization has reshaped both voting behavior at the individual level and the party system at the macro level.

Typically, when pollsters and academics examine educational differences in opinion, voting behavior, and the like, they focus on the difference between people with college degrees and those without. This approach has several merits; it is simple, easy to explain, and information about basic educational attainment is typically available in long running social science datasets like the ANES and GSS. Yet, in this

paper, I show that the focus on the differences between college graduates and non-graduates understates the degree of educational polarization in the contemporary American electorate. While there is a meaningful divide between people with a college degree and those without, there is considerable variation in political attitudes and behaviors across the entire educational attainment spectrum. Importantly, the biggest attitudinal divide is not just between those with bachelor's degrees and those without; there is a sharp divide between those who stopped their schooling after completing a bachelor's degree and those with a graduate degree. Graduate degree holders are considerably more liberal on economic, social, and racial issues than people with a BA but no graduate degree, let alone people without a college diploma. Perhaps even more important is that the percentage of the

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population with a graduate degree has boomed. Today, about 18% of American adults hold a graduate degree (13% with an MA, 3.5% with a professional degree such as a JD or MD, and 2% with a Ph.D.), which is up from 9% in 2000 (US Census). Moreover, this 18% is overrepresented in high-level positions in government, industry, education, and the arts. Equally importantly, people with graduate degrees hold a unique set of attitudes that differ from the rest of the population. All told, American politics is characterized by widespread educational polarization, rather than a singular diploma divide.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I outline the recent literature on educational polarization in the United States and abroad. I then establish the attitudinal divides between educational groups in the second section. Here, I use ANES data to show that economic, social, immigration, racial attitudes, and authoritarianism vary significantly across educational groups. Across all these attitudinal dimensions, graduate degree holders stand out as a notable outlier. I show they hold more progressive views than any other educational group. In section three, I examine the relationship between political participation and educational attainment. I demonstrate that turnout and campaign involvement increase as a function of education, though graduate degree holders are an outlier. Section four examines how increasing educational attainment has combined with changes in voter behavior to reshape the party coalitions. Here, I show that the Democratic Party has become more reliant on college graduates thanks to their increasing share of the electorate and growing Democratic loyalty. Conversely, Democratic support among people without degrees has collapsed. In the fifth section, I explain how the parties' changing coalitions have reshaped American political geography. I show that the proportion of a county's population with a graduate degree is a strong predictor of Democratic vote share in the 2024 election. In the concluding section, I discuss how the highly educated influence Democratic Party politics and how the increase in educational attainment is an underappreciated driving force of macro-level party realignment.

Education, Attitudes, and Political Engagement

Educational polarization in the United States is the product of two trends: more people seek higher education, and cultural and scientific issues are more central in American political competition (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024; Zingher, 2022b). It is difficult to overstate just how dramatically educational attainment has increased over a short period. For example, in 1980, 16% of Americans held a college degree. That number hit 25.6% in 2000 and eclipsed 38% in 2022 (US Census, 2022). The proportion of the population with a graduate degree has sharply risen as well. In 2022, 14.5% of the population held a graduate degree, which is up from 9% in 2000, a more than 50%

increase in just 22 years.² The proportion of the population with a graduate degree is increasing at an even faster rate than the proportion with a BA.

Rising educational attainment is reshaping the political landscape. Over the past 50 years, college graduates have gone from a niche community to a group that makes up nearly half the electorate. According to Democratic leaning data firm Catalyst, 41% of voters held a college degree in 2024, up from 38% in 2020 and 34% in 2012. The share of the electorate with a graduate degree has likely similarly increased, though this number is more difficult to gauge given pollsters' propensity to track educational attainment along BA/non-BA grounds. Thus, not only are college graduates a growing segment of the population, but they are also more likely to turn out to vote than people without a degree, which amplifies their influence.

However, if education were unrelated to political preferences, the increase in educational attainment would be of little consequence. Yet there are well-established relationships between educational attainment and social, cultural, and racial attitudes, meaning increases in educational attainment have downstream political consequences. Literature going back to Lipset (1959) and Adorno (1950) demonstrates that support for civil liberties, religious tolerance, and democracy increases and support for authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism decreases as a function of education (also see Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024, p. 110). While scholars have debated the methodological aspects of these works, the conclusions still largely hold. Recent research provides evidence that education is positively associated with support for multiculturalism, gay rights, and more expansive civil liberties (Marshall, 2019, p. 70; Castle, 2019). Bekhuis et al. (2014) found that people with higher educational attainment hold more favorable views toward free trade and globalization than those with less. Cavaille and Marshall (2019) used a natural experiment to demonstrate that increases in compulsory schooling were associated with more positive attitudes towards immigrants later in life. Grossmann and Hopkins (2024, p. 109) show that American college graduates are more liberal than non-graduates across a range of social issues, including abortion, gun control, gay rights, and immigration (also see Apfeld et al., 2024a; Apfeld et al., 2024b; Hooghe et al., 2025; Sobolewska & Ford, 2020).

While conservatives often point to college graduates' social liberalism as evidence of indoctrination, there is considerable debate regarding the specific mechanism(s) through which education shapes attitudes. Some argue there is a self-selection effect at work—high school students with more liberal cultural attitudes are more prone to seek out higher education (McNeil & Simon, 2025; Simon, 2022). Simon and colleagues (2025) show that college students in the UK drift subtly to the left during their studies, but this effect is most pronounced among students who leave home to attend university, especially among those who attend universities in “college towns” or

“cosmopolitan London,” which suggests education’s liberalizing effects are the product of socialization and exposure to diverse viewpoints rather than education in and of itself. Still others argue it is the type of education that explains the relationship between educational attainment and cultural liberalism. A recent paper in the *American Political Science Review* by Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, and Jonne Kamphorst argues that the effect of education on attitudes is conditional upon educational field (also see Scott, 2022; Simon et al., 2025; Surridge, 2016). They provide evidence that people who get an education in cultural or communicative fields are more progressive than those in economic or technical fields. They also find that education exerts a direct effect on attitudes, but post-college field-specific socialization does as well.

Interestingly, the relationship between education and liberalism is not linear, especially when it comes to economic matters. Marshall (2019; also see Marshall, 2016) used a regression discontinuity design that leveraged variation in state dropout laws and found that completing high school is associated with more conservative economic attitudes and higher income later in life, both of which decrease the probability of voting Democratic. People who complete high school experience greater returns from the labor market than those who do not. This finding highlights a seeming contradiction—from a pure material point of view, the relationship between educational attainment and liberal values seems odd, given we often expect those with the most resources to oppose redistribution (Marshall, 2019; Meltzer & Richard, 1981). Affluent people do not like taxes, and highly educated people are much more affluent than average. Yet, people with the most education, a group that is very socially liberal cross nationally, are not the most economically conservative group (as I will show in the next section). Instead, there is a non-linear and often noisy relationship between educational attainment and economic views. Apfeld et al.’s (2024b, p. 25) comprehensive review of the comparative politics literature found little evidence of a consistent relationship between educational attainment and economic conservatism across national contexts.

While it is clear there are connections between educational attainment and political attitudes, the relationship is less straightforward than a “more education, more liberalism” model can account for. The most up-to-date evidence suggests there are multiple mechanisms that connect education and attitudes. Marshall’s studies highlight that educational attainment is not uniformly associated with more liberal attitudes, likely because of how education influences the economic returns from labor. On balance, there is more evidence that educational attainment is linearly associated with liberal cultural attitudes and support for expansive civil liberties relative to economics, where the relationship is more complicated. College graduates tend to come from more affluent families and earn more money than non-graduates,

which may increase economic conservatism. There is some evidence that at least some types of education, particularly paths that focus on economic and technical fields, may be positively related to economic conservatism (Hooghe et al., 2025; Marshall, 2019; Scott, 2022). In this paper, I am agnostic about the specific mechanism(s) that drive the relationship between educational attainment and cultural liberalism, but there is a clear relationship and multiple theoretical explanations that connect education with cultural liberalism.

That said, when we conceptualize the relationship between educational attainment and cultural liberalism, we typically focus on the gap between degree and non-degree holders. However, I will provide evidence of an attitudinal and engagement divide between BA and graduate degree holders that is just as important as the divide between BA and non-BA holders. In short, there are multiple “diploma divides,” and only looking at the gap between people with degrees and those without papers over a lot of variation. In the next section, I establish a baseline of how much public opinion and political engagement vary as a function of education. Here, I focus not just on the difference between college graduates and non-graduates, but on how these metrics vary across the entire spectrum. We typically frame the diploma divide as the difference between degree holders and those without. In the next section, I show that this logic is too simplistic.

Diploma Divides? Opinion Profiles Across Educational Groups

So, how much do political attitudes and dispositions vary as a function of education? Is the main divide between the college-educated and everyone else? Or is there considerable variation across the educational categories? I use the ANES cumulative file to assess these possibilities (ANES, 2025). The ANES cumulative file breaks down a respondent’s highest level of education into seven categories: eighth grade education or less, ninth to 12th grade education, but no degree, high school diploma, technical degree (non-academic associates degrees), some college (includes academic associates degrees), bachelor’s degree, and graduate/professional degrees (M.A.s, Ph.D.s, J.D.s, etc.). These categories are mutually exclusive, meaning if someone has a B.A., they are not counted in the high school diploma category, too. In the ANES cumulative file from 2012 onward, .62% of the sample has less than an 8th grade education,³ 7.27% has between a 9th and 12th grade education but no high school diploma or equivalent, 27.47% has a high school diploma, 6.16% has a technical degree, 24.12% has some college but no degree, 21.49% has a BA, and 12.87% has an advanced degree.⁴

In Table 1, I present the mean ANES respondent scores for each of the seven educational categories across five

Table 1. Mean Scores Across Five Attitudinal Variables, Broken Down by Highest Level of Education, 2012–2024 (Source: ANES Cumulative File)

	Economic policy	Social policy	Racial resentment	Authoritarianism	Immigration
8th grade or less	−0.34	0.68	−0.00	0.38	2.24
9th–12th grades	−0.14	0.47	0.01	0.32	2.22
HS graduate	−0.01	0.29	0.06	0.24	2.30
Technical degree	0.16	0.15	0.12	0.16	2.30
Some college	0.02	0.08	0.02	0.05	2.23
Bachelor's	0.05	−0.28	−0.09	−0.30	2.03
Advanced degrees	−0.13	−0.37	−0.20	−0.50	1.90
Total	−0.01	0.04	−0.02	−0.02	2.16

variables: an index of economic policy attitudes (taxes, spending, aid to the poor, etc.), an index of social policy attitudes (abortion, gay rights, gender roles, etc., see [Zingher, 2022b](#)), racial resentment, authoritarianism (child rearing scale), and immigration attitudes. The four composite indices (everything but immigration) are normalized so that the mean is zero, and negative scores indicate views that are more liberal than the mean, and positive scores indicate the opposite. The immigration measure is a three-category ordinal variable, where respondents report whether they support increasing the number of immigrants entering the country (1), keeping immigration levels the same (2), or decreasing the number of immigrants (3). I report the full question wordings in the supplemental appendix.

So, what do the attitudinal divides between educational categories look like? Attitudes become more liberal as educational attainment increases. The only item where this is not universally true is on my economic policy index, where people without a high school diploma hold the most liberal attitudes and people with a bachelor's degree (but not a graduate degree) hold the most conservative attitudes ([Ganzach, 2020](#); [Marshall, 2019](#)). Interestingly, people with a graduate degree are significantly more economically liberal than their counterparts with a bachelor's. The gap between a graduate degree and a bachelor's degree is larger than the gap between holding a high school diploma and a college degree. This attitudinal gap among people with higher educational credentials may strike some as particularly confusing, given that people with graduate degrees outearn people with bachelor's degrees by a substantial margin ([Ganzach, 2020](#)). There is no clear “earn more money, become more economically conservative” story at work here among those with graduate degrees. The pattern departs sharply from what we would expect if that were the case. This fact helps to explain, at least in part, how the Democratic Party can forge a coalition of highly educated, affluent professionals and working-class ethnic and racial minorities.

Along these same lines, racial resentment scores follow a similar pattern, where those without a high school

diploma hold fairly liberal attitudes, while those with a high school diploma or some college education but no degree are the most conservative.⁵ College graduates are somewhat more liberal than high school graduates, but those with graduate degrees are the biggest outlier of any category—they are by far the most liberal. Interestingly, while we see differences across the educational attainment spectrum, there is no clear evidence of a single “diploma divide” across these five domains. Rather, attitudes vary across the spectrum. There is a non-linear relationship between educational attainment and both economic policy attitudes and racial resentment, where the most and least educated look more like each other than those in the middle of the distribution. Oftentimes, the attitudinal divide between people with bachelor's degrees and those with graduate degrees is just as large as the divide between people with bachelor's degrees and high school graduates and those with some college. Pooling everyone with at least a bachelor's degree together masks a lot of within-group heterogeneity.

There is considerable educational polarization on the final three items: social policy orientations, authoritarianism, and immigration attitudes. Opinions on all three of these items become starkly more liberal as educational attainment increases. The mean scores for the highest and lowest educational categories are more than a full standard deviation apart on both authoritarianism and social policy orientations. The culture war is fought along educational lines. The rise in the diploma divide in mass behavior has coincided with the Republican Party becoming more authoritarian and the Democratic Party more cosmopolitan. Immigration, social and cultural policy, and authoritarianism are all central to our current politics. As Lipset and many others since have noted ([Hetherington & Weiler, 2009](#)), there is a link between low levels of educational attainment and support for authoritarian political and religious movements. As Lipset remarked in his 1959 book, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*:

The social situation of the lower strata, particularly in poorer countries with low levels of education, predisposes them to view politics as black and white, good and evil.

Consequently, other things being equal, they should be more likely than other strata to prefer extremist movements which suggest easy and quick solutions to social problems and have a rigid outlook.”

Trump’s increasingly authoritarian second term has seen a crackdown on universities, immigrants, scientists, law firms, and the media. Thus, it should come as no surprise that we see educational divides in voting behavior in a time where political competition is organized along authoritarian/non-authoritarian lines. Like other authoritarian political movements, Trump views science, universities, and democracy with distrust and suspicion. Trump’s voters increasingly reflect these viewpoints as well (Miller et al., 2024). The 2024 ANES data highlight these divides.

Table 2 contains the mean scores for educational groups on five questions about science and democracy from the 2024 ANES.⁶ Again, we see significant educational divides. People with less education are less trusting of scientists, more likely to believe vaccines cause autism, less likely to believe climate change affects weather patterns, and view democracy as less important. The less educated are also more likely to endorse the view that the bible is the literal word of God. As educational attainment increases, so does trust in scientists and agreement with the mainstream scientific consensus when it comes to things like vaccines and global warming. Likewise, those with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to view democracy as important and to disfavor religious fundamentalism. Support for and belief in science and democracy are polarized along educational lines (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024). The sorting of people with higher education into the Democratic Party has worked to politicize views on key scientific and educational institutions, and the political fallout of this shift has been consequential.

Political Engagement Across Educational Levels

The prior section made clear that political attitudes vary as a function of educational attainment. Equally important is the fact that the likelihood that someone engages in the political process greatly depends on their level of educational attainment. In Table 3, I present the likelihood that individuals in the seven educational attainment categories will engage in five different types of political acts: turnout in presidential elections, attempting to influence how others vote, attending a political rally, working for a campaign or candidate, displaying a campaign button or sticker, and donating money to a political campaign or candidate.

The relationship between political engagement and educational attainment is more straightforward than the relationship between attitudes and education. Here, there is a linear relationship between educational attainment and all five measures of political engagement. Across all five metrics, graduate degree holders are the most engaged, followed by people with a bachelor’s degree. Advanced degree holders are especially likely to donate money to campaigns. They are 50% more likely to donate than BA holders and roughly five times more likely than people with a high school diploma. These engagement metrics suggest graduate degree holders are more politically influential than their numbers alone would suggest. They are the most likely to vote, work for candidates, and cut checks to campaigns. To paraphrase democratic theorist EE Schattschneider, “democracy is a heavenly chorus, but it sings with a highly educated accent.”

The concentration of highly educated voters in the Democratic coalition has greatly affected electoral dynamics. Voting is the cornerstone act in the democratic process. More educated citizens turn out to vote at higher rates than their less educated peers. The more that educational attainment becomes linked to partisan preferences, the more that turnout

Table 2. Mean Scores on Five 2024 ANES Items About Science, Democracy, and Religious Fundamentalism Broken Down by Highest Level of Education (Source: 2024 ANES)

	Trust scientists	Vaccines cause autism	How much is climate change affecting the weather	How important is the following issue: US democracy	Is the bible the word of god or men
8th grade or less	2.52	1.76	3.02	3.43	1.73
9th–12th grades	2.77	1.73	2.92	4.19	1.67
HS graduate	2.94	1.71	3.18	4.13	1.83
Technical degree	2.95	1.75	3.12	4.35	1.85
Some college	3.04	1.79	3.33	4.28	1.98
Bachelor’s	3.36	1.92	3.72	4.47	2.25
Advanced degrees	3.48	1.92	3.92	4.48	2.21
Total	3.12	1.81	3.42	4.30	2.00

Table 3. Mean Scores Across Five Measures of Political Engagement, Broken Down by Highest Level of Education, 2012–2024 (Source: ANES Cumulative File)

	Turnout	Influence others	Attend political rallies	Work for candidate	Display button or sticker	Donate money
8th grade or less	0.47	0.37	0.04	0.02	0.09	0.04
9th–12th grades	0.52	0.37	0.05	0.03	0.16	0.10
HS graduate	0.66	0.37	0.04	0.02	0.14	0.09
Technical degree	0.75	0.40	0.06	0.02	0.17	0.15
Some college	0.74	0.44	0.06	0.03	0.16	0.14
Bachelor's	0.84	0.46	0.06	0.04	0.14	0.21
Advanced degrees	0.86	0.50	0.08	0.06	0.16	0.29
Total	0.74	0.43	0.06	0.03	0.15	0.16

disparities between educational groups become significant. It was once folk wisdom in American politics that “Republicans pray for rain on Election Day.” The logic of this statement was rooted in the belief that Republican voters would turn out to vote no matter what, while Democratic voters were fickle. However, the movement of the highly educated into the Democratic coalition has turned this logic on its head.

Democrats have dominated low-turnout special and midterm elections of late because Democratic voters show up at the polls more consistently than Republicans (Goidel et al., 2024). While Trump has been remarkably successful at turning out less educated, low-propensity voters when he is on the ballot, the Republican Party has struggled to mobilize these same voters in off-year elections. The Democrats won many Senate races in states Trump carried in the 2024 election because a significant minority of people cast votes for Trump and then left the rest of their ballots blank (Kondik, 2024). The result of this process is an electoral system where Republicans do quite well in presidential elections but struggle in off years, which is the inverse of the pattern we saw in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Democrats have dominated recent special and other low-turnout elections, which is the exact opposite of the late 20th and early 21st century pattern, when the party typically struggled in non-presidential years. University educated citizens show up at the ballot box at a higher rate and more consistently than any other demographic. Whichever party enjoys support from the highly educated enjoys a built-in turnout advantage.

While the fact that college graduates are more likely to vote makes them disproportionately influential, there are other reasons why we should expect the highly educated to exert an oversized influence on the political process. As Table 3 demonstrated, highly educated people are more likely to volunteer for campaigns, display campaign merchandise, and donate money. Thus, the people elected officials come into direct contact with are from a higher educational stratum than the population at large. Additionally, almost every member of Congress holds a college degree (Carnes, 2018). Members of Congress (and state legislatures) are drawn from the pool of highly educated individuals in their district, meaning there is a real chance that highly educated citizens

have a direct, personal connection with their legislators. Members of the working class rarely benefit from these same kinds of social connections. A considerable body of research demonstrates elected officials misperceive public opinion because the people they interact with are disproportionately from the upper classes (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; also see Furnas & LaPira, 2024).

All told, both the increase in educational attainment and the growing salience of cultural and scientific issues have reshaped the American electoral landscape. In the next section, I assess the combined effect of both forces. Here, I present estimates of the educational composition of each party's coalition in each presidential election since 2012. These estimates account for changes in group size, party loyalty, and turnout. The measure combines these three inputs to create a single estimate of each group's contribution as a share of each party's votes. I also present estimates of each educational group's size, party loyalty, and turnout in the last four presidential elections. These estimates reveal there have been major changes in both group size and electoral behavior.

Educational Group Coalition Dynamics

The combination of increasing educational attainment and rapidly shifting partisan preferences has led to major changes in where the parties get their votes from. Tables 4 and 5 display the proportion of each party's votes that come from the following five educational groups: people with less than a high school diploma, a high school diploma, some college, a

Table 4. Educational Group Contributions as a Proportion of the Republican Party's Total Votes

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	BA	Grad
2004	0.06	0.27	0.34	0.25	0.11
2008	0.05	0.25	0.35	0.29	0.15
2012	0.05	0.25	0.30	0.28	0.14
2016	0.06	0.25	0.30	0.26	0.10
2020	0.07	0.26	0.29	0.22	0.11
2024	0.06	0.24	0.32	0.24	0.11

bachelor's degree, and a graduate degree.⁷ I calculated these measures using a combination of demographic data about educational group size from the US Census and turnout and vote choice data from the ANES.⁸ This method was initially developed by Axelrod (1972) and has been subsequently used to examine changes in the party coalitions by scholars in various contexts (e.g., Best, 2011; Farrer & Zingher, 2023; Grimmer et al., 2025; Zingher, 2014; Zingher, 2019). Axelrod's method uses observed national turnout and loyalty statistics to adjust for individual-level overreporting of both turnout and having voted for the election winner. Tables 4 and 5 reveal some dramatic changes in party coalitions. Previous studies, such as Zingher (2019) and Grimmer et al. (2025), have shown the Democratic Party is more reliant on college graduates in recent elections than it was in the past, but these analyses have focused on the college/non-college dichotomy rather than the broader educational spectrum. These tables contain estimates for each presidential election between 2004 and 2024.

Starting with Table 4, on the surface, the educational bases of the Republican coalition do not look that different in 2024 compared to 2004, which is surprising given how much demographic and political change occurred during this two-decade span. College graduates and people with advanced degrees make up a nearly identical share of Republican voters (25% with a BA in 2004 compared to 24% in 2024, while the percentage with an advanced degree held steady at 11%).

The Democratic Party's coalition, on the other hand, has undergone a dramatic change. The proportion of Democratic voters with a graduate degree doubled from 2008, Obama's initial election, to 2024, moving from 13 to 26%. Likewise, the share of Democratic voters with a BA (and no graduate degree) has also increased nearly 40% during this same timeframe. Yet, while there has been a lot of focus on the Democrats' newfound success among the university-educated, these proportions mask an equally striking countervailing trend. The Democrats' success in attracting the highly educated has coincided with a decline in support from every other educational group. The collapse has been most pronounced among those with a high school diploma. These voters supplied almost 30% of Barack Obama's votes in his successful 2008 campaign. In 2024, only 14% of Kamala Harris's votes came from voters with high school diplomas.

Table 5. Educational Group Contributions as a Proportion of the Democratic Party's Total Votes

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	BA	Grad
2004	0.12	0.26	0.31	0.19	0.16
2008	0.12	0.28	0.31	0.21	0.13
2012	0.1	0.25	0.29	0.2	0.18
2016	0.09	0.19	0.25	0.25	0.22
2020	0.05	0.18	0.24	0.27	0.21
2024	0.03	0.14	0.23	0.29	0.26

Table 6. Educational Groups as a Percentage of the Adult Population

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	BA	Grad
2004	15.3	31.5	25.6	18.1	9.51
2008	14.2	30.3	26.1	18.9	10.5
2012	13.1	29.1	26.6	19.7	11.6
2016	12.0	27.9	27.1	20.4	12.6
2020	10.9	26.7	27.6	21.2	13.6
2024	9.7	25.5	28.2	22.0	14.6

Support from people who did not finish high school has collapsed, too. This group provided 12% of Obama's votes in 2008 but only 3% of Harris's in 2024. Educational polarization is not just a product of Democrats winning a larger share of college-educated voters; it is also about the Republicans dominating among voters without degrees.

Yet, looking at group contributions as a share of each party's votes has some important limitations. There are multiple reasons why a group's contribution could change. The group could become more likely to support the opposing party or become less (or more) likely to vote, or the group could be consistent behaviorally but be shrinking (or growing) as a share of the population. Moreover, these possibilities are not mutually exclusive, meaning they could exert joint influence. This realignment is rooted in changes in both demographics and behavior. Table 6 displays each educational group's percentage of the adult population. Tables 7 and 8 display each group's loyalty to the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. Table 9 presents turnout as the share of the group that showed up to vote (regardless of eligibility).

As Table 6 makes clear, some of the Democratic Party's increase in support among the college-educated stems from the fact that university graduates, graduate degree holders in particular, are a growing share of the population. Advanced degree holders have increased from 9.51% in 2004 to 14.61% in 2024, while the share of the population with a BA but no graduate degree has moved from 18.1 to 22%. The share of the population with some college education but no degree has also ticked up slightly, moving from 25.6 to 28.16%. The proportion of the population without a high school diploma has experienced the sharpest decline, dropping more than

Table 7. Educational Group Loyalty to the Republican Party

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	BA	Grad
2004	0.33	0.52	0.53	0.58	0.41
2008	0.26	0.43	0.49	0.53	0.51
2012	0.32	0.47	0.48	0.55	0.41
2016	0.38	0.52	0.51	0.47	0.28
2020	0.53	0.56	0.52	0.42	0.32
2024	0.63	0.63	0.58	0.46	0.31

Table 8. Educational Group Loyalty to the Democratic Party

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	BA	Grad
2004	0.66	0.47	0.46	0.42	0.59
2008	0.73	0.57	0.50	0.47	0.49
2012	0.66	0.52	0.51	0.44	0.58
2016	0.59	0.45	0.46	0.5	0.69
2020	0.46	0.44	0.47	0.57	0.67
2024	0.35	0.36	0.41	0.54	0.69

35% from 15.3% to 9.74%. The share of the population with a high school diploma has dropped as well, falling from 31.5% in 2004 to 25.5% in 2024.

Given these demographic changes, it may seem odd that the Republican Party has managed to swim against the tide. The Republican Party obtained a consistent share of its vote from groups shrinking as a share of the population. This trend is the product of changing preferences. Tables 7 and 8 show there has been a considerable upswing in Republican loyalty among those without a degree, while support among the university-educated has declined. Donald Trump has been able to convert citizens without a degree to the Republican Party at an unprecedented rate. Romney won 47% of voters with a high school diploma but no additional education in 2012 (a group that made up nearly 30% of the adult population). Trump won 63% of this same group in 2024—a 16-point increase. The party that once represented country club and Chamber of Commerce members has a distinctly working-class base of support, at least if we think about class in educational terms.

We see the opposite story for the Democrats. The Democrats have lost support among the less educated segments of the electorate, but the college-educated have become more likely to vote for Democratic candidates. Obama won 44% of those with a BA and 58% of those with a graduate degree in 2012. Harris won 54% and 69% of these voters, respectively, despite winning only 48% of the popular vote compared to Obama's 51%. For all the talk of a "diploma divide," Americans with a BA but no advanced degree were a swing constituency in 2024. What drives the diploma divide is the fact that graduate degree holders are very Democratic and that Democratic Party support among the less educated has collapsed. Obama won 51% of people with some college

Table 9. Presidential Election Turnout by Educational Group

	Less than HS	High school	Some college	BA	Grad
2004	0.33	0.47	0.57	0.68	0.78
2008	0.34	0.50	0.62	0.76	0.76
2012	0.32	0.46	0.55	0.66	0.73
2016	0.36	0.44	0.54	0.69	0.71
2020	0.37	0.54	0.65	0.76	0.8
2024	0.37	0.48	0.62	0.78	0.83

education and 52% of high school graduates. Harris only won 41% and 36% among these groups. These two groups combined are more than half the American population.

When it comes to turnout, a higher proportion of all educational groups have voted in the past two presidential elections compared to 2012 or 2016, though the biggest increases in turnout were among the highly educated. People with graduate degrees vote at nearly twice the rate of their high school-educated peers, which dramatically increases their political influence beyond their group size. High turnout, combined with high loyalty, is how the Democrats obtain a quarter of their votes from a group that is less than 15% of the adult population. I can tell a similar, though less extreme, story about BA holders. They provide nearly 30% of the Democratic Party's votes despite being only 22% of the population. More than half of the Democratic coalition is made up of people with *at least* a college degree.

The fact that the Democratic Party obtains such a large proportion of its votes from people with a university education is likely a double-edged sword. Yes, these voters show up in every election, but the Democrats' technocratic, educated style might be off-putting to people without a degree, who make up most of the population. For the Democrats, educational polarization has given the party a base of engaged voters who not only consistently show up on election day but also donate money and actively participate in campaigns. On the other hand, graduate degree holders are outliers in terms of their views, so their influence within the party may lead the party to adopt positions that do not appeal to the median citizen. All told, educational polarization presents some clear electoral drawbacks for the Democrats.

With such big shifts in the parties' bases of electoral support, it stands to reason that these changes at the individual and mass levels would correspond with significant changes in political geography. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the Democratic Party has newfound success in affluent suburbs and metro areas, while the Republican Party is dominant in exurban and rural areas, which were once Democratic bastions. This realignment has been especially pronounced in the Rim South (places like Kentucky and West Virginia), the Great Plains, and the Rust Belt. Given what we have observed, both in terms of the changes in the Electoral College map and educational groups, we should expect that aggregate-level educational attainment is an important determinant of vote outcomes at the county and state level (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024; Zingher, 2022b). The basic expectation here is straightforward: places with more education are more Democratic, while places with less education are more Republican.

There are several reasons to expect that educational attainment is an important determinant of aggregate-level voting patterns. For one, Zingher (2022b) finds that college graduates are more Democratic leaning in counties where a higher proportion of the population holds a college degree, likely due to socialization and education working as a salient

political identity in certain contexts (Simon & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2025). Additionally, places with universities, high-tech industries, and government facilities all attract large populations of highly educated people, which has worked to concentrate people with higher educational credentials, especially people with graduate degrees, in a limited number of major metro areas (Rodden, 2019). These facts suggest that places like university towns, tech hubs, and cities that house large government installations would be even more Democratic in their voting behavior than we would expect based on demographics alone. In the next section, I examine county-level results from the 2024 presidential election. I show that the percentage of a county's population with a graduate degree is the strongest predictor of Democratic vote share relative to other educational group demographics.

The Effect of County-Level Educational Attainment on Vote Outcomes in the 2024 Presidential Election

The concentration of college graduates into major metropolitan areas has been one of the most profound yet underappreciated changes in 21st-century America's political and cultural geography. College graduates were once evenly dispersed across the country. Today, they are heavily concentrated in large metro areas (Rodden, 2019). In 2000, 24.35% of the average county's population held a BA (or higher). The standard deviation around this mean was 9.46. In 2024, the 35.22% of the mean county's population had a college degree. The standard deviation was 11.72. So, not only has the mean risen considerably, but the dispersion has increased as well. This is evidence that college graduates, especially those with a graduate degree have become increasingly clustered in highly educated metro areas. This fact helps to explain some recent changes in county level vote outcomes. In the 2024 presidential election, Kamala Harris only carried 427 of the country's nearly 3100 counties (for comparison, Obama won 884 counties in 2008, Muro & Methkupally, 2024). Yet, Harris only lost the popular vote by less than two points nationally. The 427 counties Harris did win are densely populated. In fact, according to the Brookings Foundation, these 427 counties represent 62% of the nation's gross domestic product (Muro & Methkupally, 2024). I argue that the Democratic Party's domination of major metro areas and struggles everywhere else are a downstream consequence of educational polarization.

In Table 10, I show that on the county level, educational attainment is closely related to the Democratic Party's vote share. However, the relationship is more nuanced than a simple "diploma divide" view of educational polarization conveys. In Table 10, I present the results of an OLS regression model that regresses Democratic vote share at the county level on the county's educational and racial demographics. I also include controls for the county's median

income and the US Census 10-point urban-rural continuum, as well as state-level fixed effects. In terms of educational demographics, I include four variables for the percentage of each county's population that falls into the following categories: less than high school, high school diploma only, bachelor's degree only, and graduate degree. Here, the percentage with some college education serves as the base category. For racial demographics, I include the percentage of the county's population that is Black, Latino, and Asian American. The median income control variable is measured in thousands of dollars. All these data are from the Census.

The regression model contains several interesting findings. As expected, there is a positive relationship between the percentage of a county's population with a BA and Democratic vote share. Yet, the percentage of the population with a graduate degree is more than twice as strong a predictor of Democratic vote share as the percentage of the population with a BA but no advanced degree. The Democratic share of the vote increases by 1.5 points for every one percentage point increase in the share of the population with a graduate degree, versus .72 points for every one percentage point increase in the percentage of the population with a BA but no advanced degree. This finding mirrors what we saw at the individual level, where BA holders were more Democratic than Republican, but relatively evenly split, while advanced degree holders were heavily Democratic. I find that same pattern at

Table 10. Democratic Share of the County-Level Vote in the 2024 Presidential Election Regressed on County-Level Educational Attainment and Racial Demographics

Variables	Dem%
Grad%	1.50* (0.06)
BA only%	0.72* (0.06)
HS only%	0.18* (0.06)
Less than HS%	0.24* (0.07)
Black%	0.68* (0.01)
Latino%	0.20* (0.01)
Asian%	0.16* (0.03)
Median income	-0.22* (0.01)
Urban-rural continuum	-0.91* (0.09)
Constant	-7.88 (4.25)
State fixed effects	Yes
Observations	3,106
R-squared	0.89

* = $p < .05$.

the county level, where the percentage of a county's population with a graduate degree predicts Democratic vote share much more strongly than the percentage with a BA. Conversely, the Democrats struggle in counties with the least education. The coefficient for the less than high school variable is .24, meaning for every one unit increase in the county's population without a high school diploma, Democratic vote share only goes up .24 points. The control variables all work as expected. Democratic vote share increases as a function of the non-White population. Here, the Black, Latino, and Asian American percentage variables are all positive and significant. Likewise, the coefficients on median income and urban-rural continuum are negative and significant, meaning Democratic vote share decreases as the median income increases and the county becomes more rural.

These findings are another piece of evidence that suggests high levels of educational polarization and educational polarization that is not solely along degree/non-degree lines. In fact, the strongest predictor of county-level vote share is the percentage of the population with a graduate degree. To wit, Kamala Harris carried 85 of 100 counties with the highest proportion of graduate degree holders. These top 100 counties are a mix of major metro areas (NYC, DC, Bay Area, etc.) and college towns (Boulder, Champaign, Ithaca, Charlottesville, etc.). Given the aggregate vote outcome data, it is impossible to deduce individual motivations from these regression results. That said, these results are consistent with claims that educational polarization is strongest in places where a large proportion of the population holds a college (if not graduate) degree (Zingher, 2022a), whether as a result of social identity, self-selection, the nature of the educational process itself, or some other mechanism.

Discussion

Americans are polarized along educational lines. Education attainment influences attitudes on a wide variety of issues, the likelihood someone will engage in the political process, and where we live. The interplay of these factors results in a society that is politically, geographically, and educationally polarized. The implications of these trends are dangerous. As partisanship and educational attainment have become more deeply intertwined, attitudes towards science, education, universities, and government become polarized along educational *and* partisan lines. We saw the consequences of this decline in trust laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic, when people were quick to endorse conspiracy theories and quack cures (Young, 2023). Multiple studies have shown that educational attainment both amplified trust in scientists and reduced conspiracy theory beliefs across multiple national contexts (Jabkowski et al., 2023). The results of this relationship between educational attainment and distrust in science were that the less educated, who were at higher risk of severe illness for many other reasons, bore the brunt of the pandemic (Case & Deaton, 2022; Feldman & Bassett, 2021).

While the COVID-19 pandemic helped expose the country's growing level of educational polarization, the second Trump presidency laid it bare. The Trump Administration is openly dismissive and distrustful of scientific expertise and has looked to defund scientific research with surgical precision. Highly educated experts are leaving the government in droves due to firings, layoffs, retirement buyouts, or of their own volition. As Grossmann and Hopkins (2024) note in the conclusion of their recent book (pg. 285).

The assault from the right on knowledge-producing institutions and professionals rarely attempts to engage with their substantive output on its own terms – employing the tools of scientific inquiry to contradict research on climate change, for example, or shaming the *New York Times* by building a more accurate and serious conservative journalistic operation. It more often takes a populist form that stresses emotional and identity-based aversions, repeatedly arguing to conservative audiences that the elitists who run these institutions are liberals who look down on people like you, so there is no reason to believe what they say.

As a result, trust in universities, science, and government have collapsed over the past 10 years, mainly due to a decline in trust among Republicans (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024). The bipartisan consensus that universities, science, and many government offices are socially beneficial has eroded. To wit, the Republican Party under Trump has aggressively targeted the scientific, educational, and environmental organizations and institutions, with little pushback from Republican elected officials or voters. As educational polarization has accelerated, many of these institutions have become targets for the right, due to the dominance of liberal values within the institutions and the partisanship of most people who are employed by them.

Many of the current administration's efforts to bring ideologically liberal institutions to heel can be directly traced to the concentration of college graduates into the Democratic Party as well as the sharp movement of non-degree holders into the Republican coalition. These changes have paved the way for the second Trump Administration to attack American scientific institutions like the NIH, NSF, and NOAA, as well as universities. Scientific and educational institutions are overwhelmingly staffed by Democratic voters, which was not always the case. Thus, educational polarization has helped contribute to the partisan polarization of views on scientific and educational institutions, which the Trump Administration views as hostile to its agenda (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2024). Likewise, the Trump Administration's attacks on checks and balances, judicial and Congressional independence, and the like, are facilitated by the fact that the voters who view democracy as extremely important, who typically hold high levels of education, have become less likely to identify as and vote for Republicans over the past decade (Bartels, 2020).

Ultimately, everyone in society will pay the costs for this institutional distrust and loss of institutional knowledge. While many people look at the current political moment and the gutting of state capacity with astonishment, this moment has deep roots. The growing importance of education for life outcomes, including everything from earnings, family structure, to life expectancy, combined with education's newfound political salience, has created a system where education and educated people have come into the political crosshairs. Trump's reelection might have made this attack on American scientific and educational institutions possible, but educational polarization in the population provided fertile soil for an authoritarian populist movement.

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Notes

1. See Catalyst's recent report about voting trends in the 2024 election for more on this claim. <https://catalist.us/whathappened2024/>.
2. The share of the *adult* population over 25 with a graduate degree is even higher—18%.
3. It might strike some as odd that the ANES includes a “less than eighth grade education” as a category, given these respondents make up less than 1% of the sample in recent surveys. However, it is important to keep in mind that the country's educational landscape has shifted dramatically over the past 50 years.
4. I use the ANES survey weights to calculate these estimates. I use survey weights for all the analyses in this paper.
5. This pattern holds if we limit the analysis to just White respondents, though the pattern is somewhat weaker. This finding likely stems from the fact that non-Whites are overrepresented in the two lowest educational attainment categories.
6. Trust Scientists is a four-category ordinal scale, with high scores equaling more trust. The vaccines cause autism is a binary yes/no, where one is “most evidence shows that vaccines cause autism” and two is “most evidence shows that vaccines do not cause autism.” The climate change question is a five-category ordinal scale, where a score of five indicates climate change greatly affects weather patterns, and one indicates no effect. The importance of US democracy is another five-point ordinal scale, with one being “not at all important” and five being “extremely important.” Finally, the bible question is a three-category ordinal

scale, where scores of one indicate the bible is the literal word of God and scores of three indicate the belief that the bible was a book written by men.

7. I use these five educational attainment categories because these are the categories that US Census Bureau tracks. To match these categories, I fold together the two lowest ANES attainment categories into a broader “less than HS” and the various associate degree categories into the “some college” category.
8. Robert Axelrod (1972) developed a measure that combines group size, turnout, and party loyalty to create one combined measure of group's contribution as a proportion of a coalition. The formula is depicted below:

$$\text{Group Contribution} = \frac{\text{Group Size} * \text{Group TO} * \text{Group Loyalty}}{\text{National TO} * \text{National Loyalty}}$$
 If one works through the math, this formula simplifies to the following form (Axelrod, 1972, p. 12):

$$\text{Group Contribution} = \frac{\text{Voters in Group for Party}}{\text{Voters for Party}}$$
 The final product of the equation is a measure of total group contribution as measured by the proportion of a party's votes that are cast by the group. The measures of group size, national turnout, and national loyalty (measured as party share of the vote) are all obtained from the US Census. The group turnout and loyalty measures are derived from the ANES survey but corrected to reflect national turnout and loyalty measures. It is typical that more individuals report having voted on surveys than did in reality, likewise, more individuals typically report having voted for the election winner than actually did. To correct for the over reporting of voting, the group turnout and loyalty rates derived from the raw ANES data are adjusted to make them congruent with the known national totals. According to Axelrod (1972, p. 13), “The adjustment procedure is an iterative process by which a contingency table with given marginal distributions while preserving the nature and strength of the association, as measured by appropriate criteria.”

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Appendix

Table A1. ANES Items Used to Build Economic Policy Orientations Measure

Variable	Question	Scores	Coding
VCF0806	Favor or oppose government-supplied health insurance	1–7	1 = Government should provide universal coverage 7 = Totally private
VCF0809	Should the government ensure everyone has a job and a certain standard of living	1–7	1 = Government should see to a job, and good standard of living 7 = Government should let each person get ahead on his own
VCF9037	Should the government ensure fair jobs for blacks	1, 5	1 = Yes, the government should 5 = No, it is not the government's job
VCF9050	Should we increase spending on programs that aid blacks	1–3	1 = Increased 2 = Same 3 = Decreased
VCF9047	Should the federal government spend more money to protect the environment	1–3	1 = Increased 2 = Same 3 = Decreased
VCF9049	Should the government spend more money on social security programs	1–3	1 = Increased 2 = Same 3 = Decreased
VCF0890	Should the government spend more money on public schools	1–3	1 = Increased 2 = Same 3 = Decreased
VCF9131	Is it better for the government to do less or for the government to do more	1,2	1 = Less is better 2 = The government should do more
VCF0894	Should the government spend more money on welfare programs	1–3	1 = Increased 2 = Same 3 = Decreased
VCF0886	Should the government spend more money on aid to the poor	1–3	1 = Increased 2 = Same 3 = Decreased

Table A2. ANES Items Used to Build Social Policy Orientations Measure

VCF0838	When should abortion be allowed	1–4	1 = Never permitted 4 = Never prohibited
VCF0845	Authority of the bible	1–4	1 = The bible is God's literal word 4 = The bible was written by men and is of little worth today
VCF0853	Should we place more emphasis on traditional values	1–5	1 = Agree strongly 5 = Disagree strongly
VCF0876	Do you favor or oppose laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination	1,5	1 = Favor 5 = Oppose
VCF0851	Newer lifestyles contribute to societal breakdown	1–5	1 = Agree strongly 5 = Disagree strongly
VCF0878	Should gays and lesbians be able to adopt children	1,5	1 = Yes 5 = No

Table A3. Authoritarianism Scale Question Wording

Question	Wording	Scale (1 through 3)
VI62239	Child trait more important: Independence or respect	1 = independence, 2 = both, 3 = Respect for elders
VI62240	Child trait more important: curiosity or good manners	1 = Curiosity, 2 = both, 3 = Good manners
VI62241	Child trait more important: obedience or self-reliance	1 = Obedience, 2 = both, 3 = Self Reliance
VI62242	Child trait more important: considerate or well behaved?	1 = Considerate, 2 = both, 3 = Well behaved

Table A4. Racial Resentment Question Wording

Question	Wording	Scale (1 through 5)
VI62211	Agree/disagree: blacks should work their way up without special favors	1 = Agree strongly - 5 = Disagree strongly
VI62212	Agree/disagree: Past slavery makes it more difficult for blacks	1 = Agree strongly, 5 = Disagree strongly
VI62213	Agree/disagree: blacks have gotten less than they deserve	1 = Agree strongly, 5 = Disagree strongly
VI62214	Agree/disagree: blacks must try harder to get ahead	1 = Agree strongly, 5 = Disagree strongly