

INQUIRING MINDS TOPIC -- 2 JUNE 2017

John Moore, Moderator

Should Educational Background Matter for Members of Congress?

The topic paper focuses on the educational backgrounds of the elected members of the House of Representatives. It covers a variety of aspects of the composition of the House, but begins by noting that the educational attainment of the members is much higher than that of their constituents, and raises the question of whether the house is truly representative of the nation.

- Do you see this as a problem? What interests might be neglected as a result? Do you think that this disparity might have something to do with the "revolt" in the last election? Or the Tea Party movement of a few years back?
- Some people might say that some level of educational attainment be required for election to the house. Do you agree? If so, what should it be?
- How do you explain the shift in educational achievement between the Republican and Democratic party members in the last 40 years or so?
- The percentage of members with law degrees has steadily decreased in the last half century. What might reasons for this shift? What impact might this have on the legislative process? Is it positive or negative?
- More Democratic than Republican members graduate from private colleges. Does this surprise you? What difference does it make?
- How do you explain the changes in Ivy League degrees between the parties? How does this relate, if at all, to the changes in voting patterns seen in recent elections?

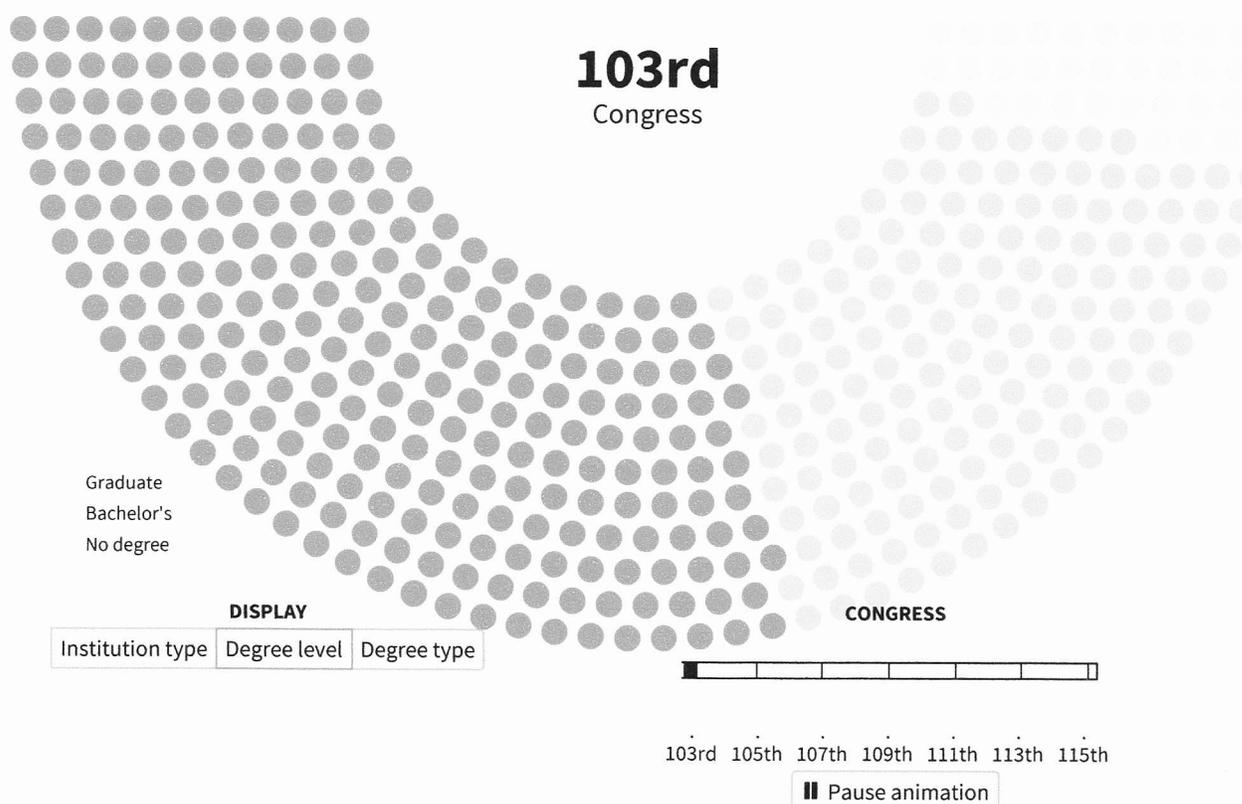
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

DATA

In Congress, Even Lawmakers' Degrees Are a Partisan Issue

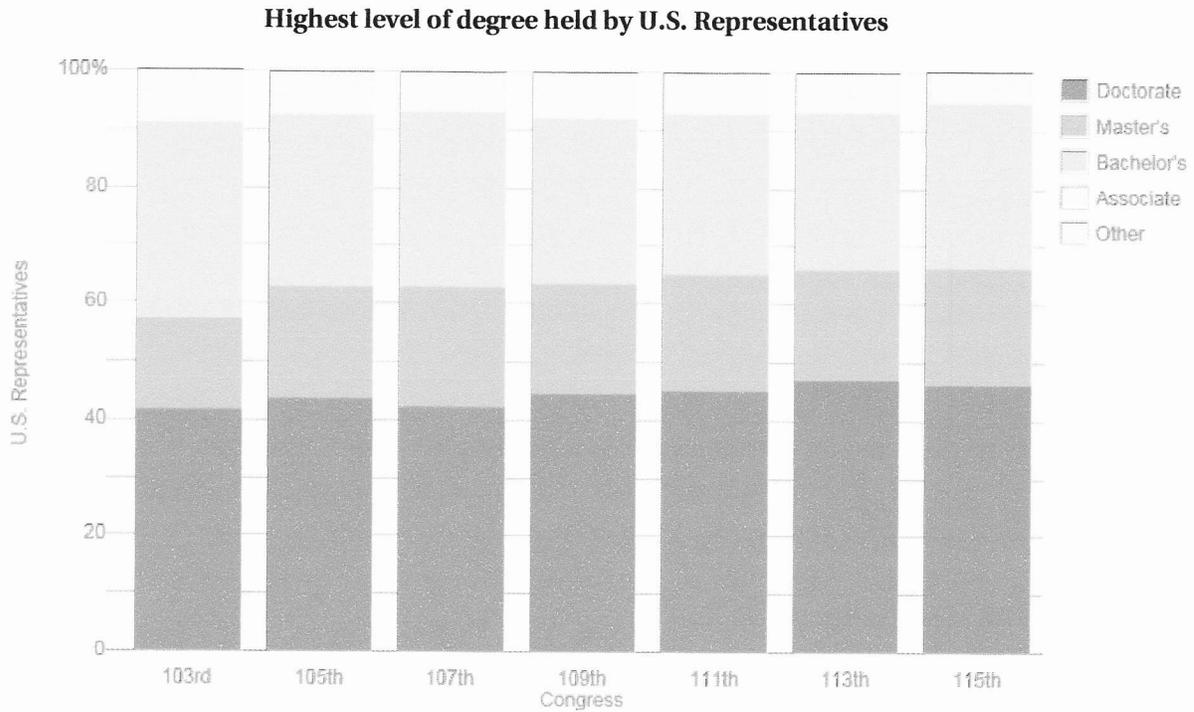
How higher education is shaping the House of Representatives

By Ben Myers and Peter Olsen-Phillips | MAY 5, 2017



Of the many ways that the U.S. House of Representatives fails to mirror the nation as a whole, here's an underrated one: The educational attainment of our representatives far surpasses that of the electorate.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 31 percent of adults over the age of 25 have earned at least a four-year degree. How does that compare with the House? A *Chronicle* analysis shows that 95 percent of its members hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Meanwhile, 66 percent have some type of graduate degree. Both of those figures are an increase from recent years.



Note: 'Doctorate' refers to research and professional degrees, including but not limited to Ph.D.'s, J.D.'s, and M.D.'s.

Like so much in politics, educational attainment is not immune to polarization. Our analysis shows deepening partisan differences between Democratic and Republican representatives when it comes to the types of education they pursue, the institutions they attend, and the degrees they seek.

That divide, and the broader trend toward a more elite political class, could have profound implications for Congress's agenda and its effectiveness.

Reversal of Trends

When Richard M. Nixon ran on the Republican ticket for president in 1960, he was the choice of 61 percent of voters with a college degree, according to Gallup polling. His Democratic opponent, John F. Kennedy, had a narrow edge among voters with only a high-school degree, winning 52 percent of that cohort.

By 2016, those trends had flipped. Hillary Clinton won voters with a college degree by a nine-point margin, while Donald Trump won voters without a degree, 52 percent to 44 percent.

As affluent and highly educated voters compose a growing portion of the Democratic Party, it stands to reason they would also form a larger segment of its congressional delegation, says Geoffrey Skelley, a political analyst at the University of Virginia Center for Politics. The scales have tipped the furthest with white voters.

Wealthy white people “are more likely to go to private institutions than less-affluent whites and nonwhites,” says Mr. Skelley.

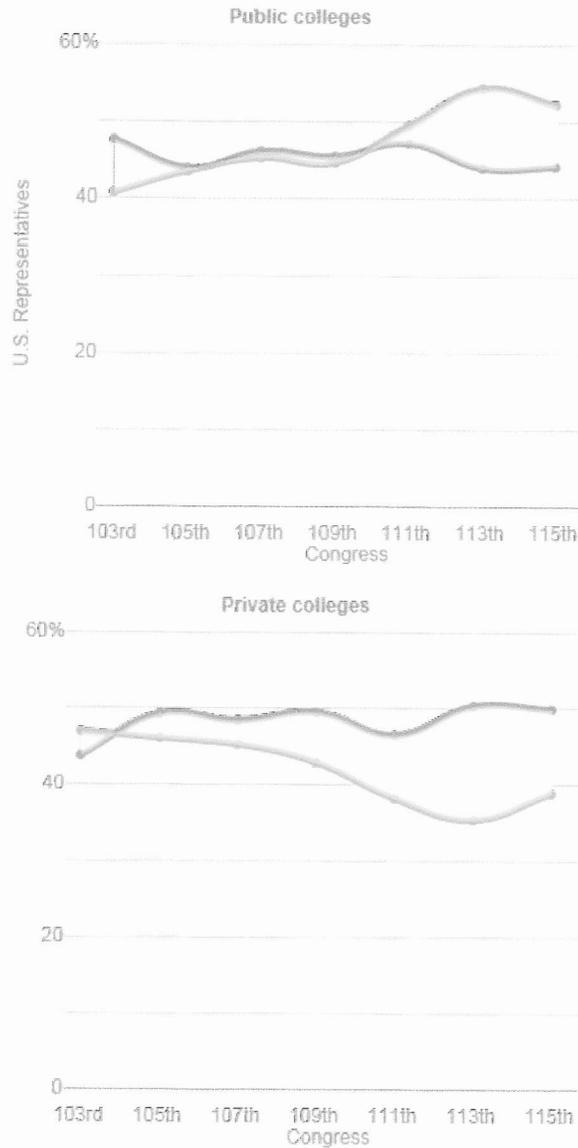
And that’s what the data show in the House. In the current Congress, 50 percent of Democratic House members hold undergraduate diplomas from private institutions compared with 39 percent of Republicans.

This was not the case 25 years ago in the 103rd Congress. Then, 47 percent of Republican lawmakers had undergraduate degrees from private institutions. Just 44 percent of Democrats did.

What about some of the most elite private institutions, the members of the Ivy League? As of 25 years ago, Republicans and Democrats were nearly dead even in their share of members with Ivy League bachelor’s degrees, at 6.8 and 7.4 percent, respectively. Now, 12.8 percent of Democratic Caucus members hold degrees from Ivy League institutions compared with 4.2 percent of the House GOP.

Percentage of members, by party, with degrees from public and private colleges

Republicans Democrats



The partisan differences extend to graduate degrees and fields of study, too. Consistently higher portions of Democrats hold law degrees and Ph.D.s, while more Republican members have medical degrees.

Affluent, highly educated voters have joined the Democratic ranks due to social concerns, says Stuart Rothenberg, a political analyst and founding editor of the Rothenberg & Gonzales Political Report. “Issues like abortion and gay rights,” for example, “have broad appeal to upscale voters,” he says. Meanwhile, as more voters without degrees join the GOP, the party is beginning to voice more populist policy

was chosen at random. Data are reported to the above sources by the representatives and, as such, errors can occur. For corrections to data, please send us an email.

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Mr. Smucker now sits on the Committee on Education and the Workforce's Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development. He says he hopes to work on containing the cost of college and expanding access to career and technical programs.

He doesn't believe that effective members of Congress must fit one mold.

"Everyone is representing a district that is a little different from every other district, and everyone has a different set of experiences," he says. "I think that really leads to the kind of policymaking that is great — when you can learn from and work with people who may see the world a little differently."

Find your representatives

FIND BY

Name **OR** State **OR**

University

METHODOLOGY

Data were compiled using VoteSmart, the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 115th Congress New Member Pictorial Directory, Official Congressional Directories, and legislators' websites. Data include the 103rd, 105th, 107th, 109th, 111th, 113th, and 115th Congresses only. For analysis, in the case of lawmakers with more than one degree of the same level, the most recently acquired degree was used. In the event of two degrees of the same level acquired in the same year, or without years reported, one degree

The Chronicle has collected data on House members' educational attainment in every other session of Congress since 1992 (the 103rd Congress). Over that time, the share of members without degrees declined from 9.1 percent to 5.3 percent, where it stands now.

That doesn't mean voters are leery of candidates who didn't complete college, says Mr. Rothenberg. Traditionally, he says, voters may have looked for a college education as a sign of intelligence or seriousness. But in more recent years, he argues, it's the "gatekeepers" — influential party members and donors who recruit candidates to run for office — who are sticklers for a degree.

The candidate-recruitment process tends to screen out individuals who didn't attend college, says Mr. Carnes. "Congress today is a group of people that almost totally excludes working-class and less-educated Americans," he says.

That screening process, however, is not necessarily reflective of the electorate's desires. "What voters really care about is party and policy," says Mr. Carnes.

Mr. Carnes argues that the shrinking number of degreeless lawmakers has skewed policy to favor educated professionals. "If you're making a decision about the minimum wage and the only people at the table are business owners," he says, "you're going to get a different outcome than if you make a decision about the minimum wage and everyone at the table is a line worker."

A Diversity of Backgrounds

One of the few representatives in the 115th Congress without a bachelor's degree is Lloyd Smucker. Mr. Smucker never expected to run for Congress, but he says his experience serving in local government and running a small business ultimately prepared him for a national role.

A Republican representing Pennsylvania's 16th district, Mr. Smucker grew up in an Amish household. He is the first member of his family to graduate from high school. He took some college courses at Franklin & Marshall College while running a drywall business, but he never completed a degree.

The authors found that representatives who had graduated from one of 29 “elite” undergraduate institutions, or 45 graduate programs, were more likely to introduce or advance substantive pieces of legislation. Those lawmakers also exhibited consistently more liberal voting patterns than their colleagues.

The results held true for lawmakers from both sides of the aisle, even after the researchers had controlled for members' seniority and parties' control of the House.

 Jump below to find your representatives by state and alma mater

Mr. Volden says he's not sure exactly what accounts for the relationships the authors found among elite education, legislative effectiveness, and liberal voting.

“We don't know what the exact causal arrow is,” he says. “It could be the selection, it could be networks, it could be what they learn or experience during their time in these elite institutions.”

Nicholas Carnes, an assistant professor of public policy and political science at Duke University, notes, however, that we shouldn't overstate the extent to which education alone affects policy makers' decisions. It's important to also consider factors, he says, like the regions of the country elite-educated members represent and the ideologies of their constituents. His own research focuses on the effects of lawmakers' class backgrounds on their policy making.

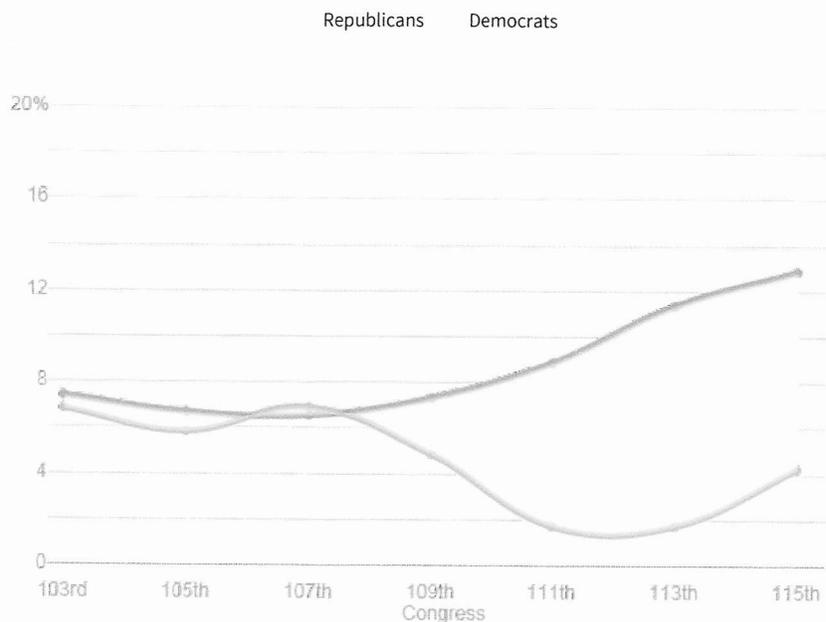
Nonetheless, Mr. Volden sees the two parties' educational divergence as one of several possible factors contributing to the House's recent years of legislative gridlock.

Fewer Lawmakers Without Degrees

lines. On the campaign trail, President Trump promised to stanch the flow of manufacturing jobs overseas and recently said he would renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Though other factors might also be at work, the broad demographic shifts that have moved college-educated voters toward the Democratic Party also help explain the widening gap between Democratic and Republican members with undergraduate educations at private and Ivy League institutions.

Percentage of members, by party, with Ivy League undergraduate degree



Elite Education and Legislative Action

Does going to an elite college make for a more effective legislator? That's what Craig Volden, a professor of public policy and associate dean at the University of Virginia's Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, argues along with his co-authors, Jonathan Wai and Alan E. Wiseman, in a forthcoming paper.