



Education expansion and its effects on gender gaps in educational attainment and political knowledge in Taiwan from 1992 to 2012



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether increasing the availability of education for women would minimize gender gaps in educational attainment and political knowledge in Taiwan. Seven waves of nationally representative survey data were analyzed to assess the effects of the national education expansion on gender equity in educational attainment and political knowledge. The empirical analysis in this study indicated that the extension of compulsory education and expansion of higher education in Taiwan offered more educational opportunities for women, especially those in the older cohorts, and substantially corrected the educational inequality between genders in the younger cohorts. Furthermore, the improvement in educational equality between genders diminished the gap in political knowledge among younger people in Taiwan.

1. Introduction

Given the long term impact of Confucianism on Taiwanese culture, men have traditionally been viewed as superior to women in various aspects. Historically, men were more likely to pursue secondary and higher education than women were, particularly given the limited educational opportunities that were available prior to Taiwan's rapid economic development in the 1970s. Because education is a critical factor that correlates positively with political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Jennings, 1996; Finkel and Ernst, 2005) and is related to political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell, 2009; Dee, 2004; Gallego, 2015; Galston, 2001; Milligan et al., 2004; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), extending formal education is expected to yield higher levels of political knowledge. When men and women receive equal levels of formal education, both genders are expected to exhibit relatively equal levels of political knowledge (or women's level of political knowledge should at least improve with their level of educational attainment). The rise of political knowledge in women would enable them to participate more equally in political affairs and gain more political power, and it is a key step in promoting political equity between genders in a democratic society. The effect of education expansion on gender equality and educational opportunities and attainment in Taiwan has been documented (Chen, 2001; Chen, 2006; Hsieh, 1992; Huang, 1990; Peng et al., 2011; Tsai, 2004). However, how Taiwan's education expansion has affected the existing gender gap in political knowledge obtained through promoting

the educational attainment of Taiwanese women has not been studied. If gender equity in political power is the goal of Taiwanese society and if gender difference in political knowledge may hinder the pursuit of gender equity in political power, then this critical issue should be studied and clarified to help Taiwan achieve this ultimate goal. Thus, this paper focuses on the influence of education expansion in Taiwan, particularly its effects on men and women's educational attainment and political knowledge, and it examines whether the gender difference in level of political knowledge that previously existed in Taiwan has been alleviated as a result of the education expansion.

2. Education expansion in Taiwan

Over the last four decades, Taiwan has experienced two waves of education expansion. The first wave of education expansion occurred in the late 1960s, when the length of compulsory education was extended from 6 to 9 years. This policy greatly increased the average length of education among Taiwanese citizens. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the average level of education completed by most Taiwanese citizens older than 15 years was elementary school or below in 1972 (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2012). At that time, only 10% of Taiwanese citizens obtained higher education degrees. By contrast, in 2010, only 14% of Taiwanese citizens cited an elementary school diploma as their highest level of education, and the percentage of Taiwanese citizens with a college or university degree was approximately 42%.

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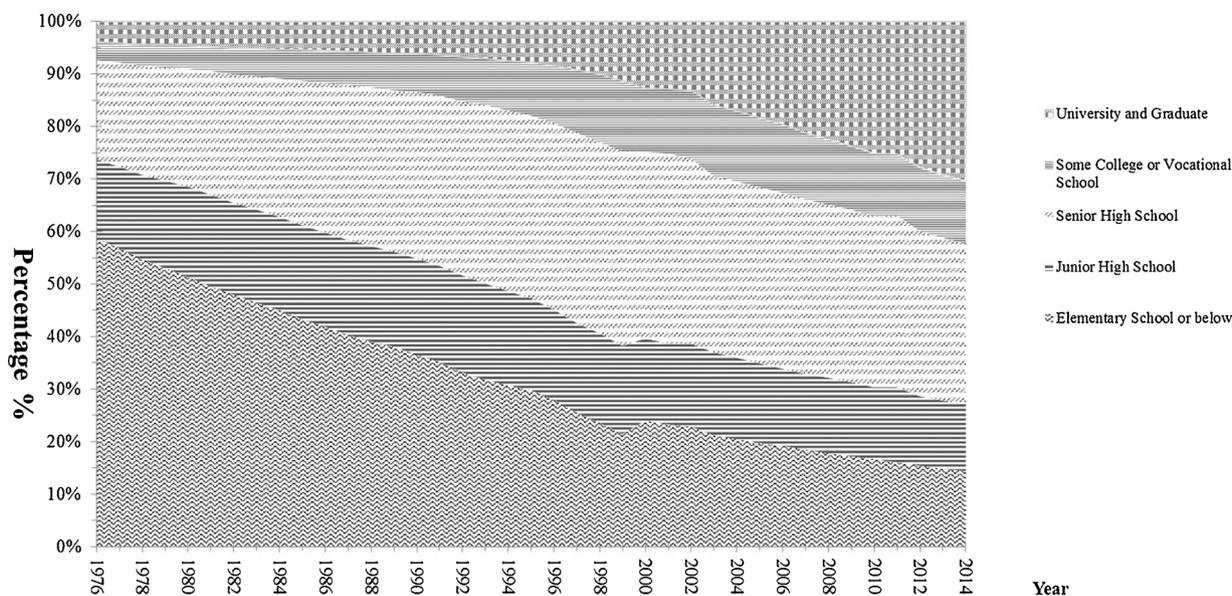


Fig. 1. Annual distribution of highest completed education level among citizens above 15 years old (%).

Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Taiwan

The second wave of education expansion began in the late 1980s, when the government increased the number of public higher education institutions in Taiwan and permitted the establishment of private higher education institutions (Peng et al., 2011). In 1985, only 105 higher education institutions were operating in Taiwan, and that number increased to 139 by 1997 (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2012). The number of higher education institutions peaked at 207 in 2007 and began to decline gradually thereafter. The policy of higher education expansion greatly increased the number of college enrollments and provided many students with opportunities to receive higher education, which was once relatively inaccessible.

Both waves of education expansion contributed substantially to improving the overall educational attainment of Taiwanese citizens.¹ However, it is unclear whether men and women benefited equally from the implementation of these policies.

3. Education expansion and gender

The two waves of education expansion generally generated positive effects for both men and women in Taiwan. Male students born after the expansion of compulsory education were relieved from the pressure of taking a competitive examination to gain acceptance into junior high school, which were limited in capacity. These students had higher chances of getting into colleges and universities, and eventually obtained degrees. Female students received similar benefits; however, it is suspected that the education expansion had a more positive influence on female students than their male counterparts.

The expansion in education affected women in two ways. First, the extension of compulsory education from 6 to 9 years increased the accessibility of junior high school to girls and extended the length of their formal education. Prior to the expansion, boys were privileged in having more chances to be well educated, particularly in families with

¹ The Ministry of Education in Taiwan has been carrying out another wave of educational expansion since 2011, which is called the 12-year compulsory education policy. This policy aims not only to increase the enrollment ratio of senior high schools but also improve the quality of senior high school education. It is expected that the enrollment ratio of senior high schools will be raised to 99% and students will have more diverse opportunities when studying in senior high schools. In the year of 2014, the net enrollment ratio of senior high schools is 93.66% and the gross enrollment ratio of senior high schools is 100.58%. It is therefore expected that the overall educational attainment in Taiwan will be further increased in the near future.

limited financial resources (Hsieh, 1992; Huang, 1990). Girls frequently had to forego their chance of receiving secondary education, and were instead required to work to support their families. Following the expansion, girls could receive at least 9 years of formal education. Thus, many girls began attending senior high school and even university.

Additionally, the expansion of higher education opened up more college and university enrollment slots and substantially improved the likelihood of women being admitted into higher education institutions (Huang, 1990; Tsai, 2004). The number of female college and university students increased from 10.9% in the 1950s to 50% in the 1990s (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2012). Since 1997, the male-to-female enrollment ratio in higher education institutions has persisted at approximately 1:1. For the younger cohort of female students who attended college during the second wave of higher education, obtaining a college degree became less privileged than it used to be. Therefore, the influences of the education expansion on Taiwanese women appear to have had a cohort effect, with the older cohort who experienced the first wave of compulsory education extension gaining the most benefits. However, women in the younger cohort have reported fewer positive effects resulting from the two waves of education expansion (Chen, 2001; Chen, 2006).

In conclusion, both Taiwanese men and women benefitted from the two waves of expansion in education. However, men and women seem to benefit differently from the education expansion according to their birth cohorts. Furthermore, since Taiwanese men and women have a relatively equal college and university enrollment rate since 1997, it is therefore reasonable to surmise that the education expansion in Taiwan achieved gender equity in higher education. If years of education is highly related to the level of one's political knowledge (Delli Carpini, and Keeter, 1996; Nie et al., 1996), then it is reasonable to assume that Taiwanese men and women should have equivalent level of political knowledge when they have similar level of educational attainment, and this is the main research assumption to be tested in the study.

4. Educational attainment and political knowledge

Through the process of political socialization, the new members of a society learn and internalize the key values and beliefs of that society, develop support for and identification with its political institutions, and eventually maintain the stability of the political system (Easton and Dennis, 1969). In-school education serves as the essential socializing

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