

EDUCATION AND POLITICAL INTEREST: WHAT DRIVES POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT?

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Introduction

- Political participation is an important part of democratic societies because it gives people a voice in government. Political interest helps explain whether people engage in politics.
- This study asks the question: **How does education influence political interest?**
- Because I want to find out how education shapes political engagement, this study focuses on differences in political interest across education levels.
- This question matters in order to help my reader understand why some individuals are more engaged in politics than others, and how factors like gender, party identification, and media consumption may also play a role.

Hypothesis

In a comparison of individuals with different levels of education, those with a college degree or higher are more likely to have higher levels of interest in political campaigns and government than those with a high school education or less.

Variables

Dependent Variable: Political interest (recoded into interested vs not interested)

Independent Variable: Education (recoded into college vs no college)

Control Variables:

- Gender (recoded into male and female)
- Media consumption (recoded into frequency of following news)
- Party identification (recoded democrat to republican scale)

Literature Review

- Research shows a strong relationship between education and political participation, although this link is not fully causal, as individuals already interested in politics may be more likely to pursue higher education (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011). However, college attendance can increase voting rates by about 12%, especially through social and experiential factors, with stronger effects among disadvantaged students (Ahearn, Brand, & Zhou, 2023).
- Beyond education, external influences also shape participation. Political interest appears to drive media use more than media creates interest, while media exposure has a stronger direct effect on participation (Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2017). Party contact increases participation by reducing barriers, sometimes having a stronger impact than education, and political parties play a key role in structuring participation by connecting citizens to the political process (Wielhouwer & Lockerbie, 1994; Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2020).
- Participation also varies across demographic groups, particularly by gender, with men more likely to engage in formal political activities and women more likely to participate in private forms such as petitions and boycotts (Coffè & Bolzendahl, 2010). Overall, political participation is shaped by education, institutional influences, and demographic factors.

- Ahearn, C. E., Brand, J. E., & Zhou, X. (2023). How, and for whom, does higher education increase voting? *Research in Higher Education*, 64, 574–597.
- Berinsky, A. J., & Lenz, G. S. (2011). Education and political participation: Exploring the causal link. *Political Behavior*, 33, 357–373.
- Coffè, H., & Bolzendahl, C. (2010). Same game, different rules? Gender differences in political participation. *Sex Roles*, 62, 318–333.

Methods

This study uses data from the 2024 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey. After removing missing values, the final sample included approximately 5,521 respondents.

- Data analysis was conducted using R and RStudio.
- Cross-tabulations and percentages were used to examine the relationship between education and political interest, both independently and while controlling for other variables.
- A chi-square test of independence was used to assess significance, and results were visualized using bar graphs

Data Analysis / Findings

Hypothesis Supported

Significant relationship: Education is strongly related to political interest ($\chi^2 = 88.31$, $p < .001$)

Higher education = more interest:

- College degree: 77.3% interested
- No college: 63.1% interested

Gender (Additive relationship):

- Pattern holds for both men and women
- Education increases interest regardless of gender

Media Consumption (**Interaction effect**):

- Larger gap among low media users
- Smaller gap among high media users
- Media use changes strength of education's effect

Party Identification:

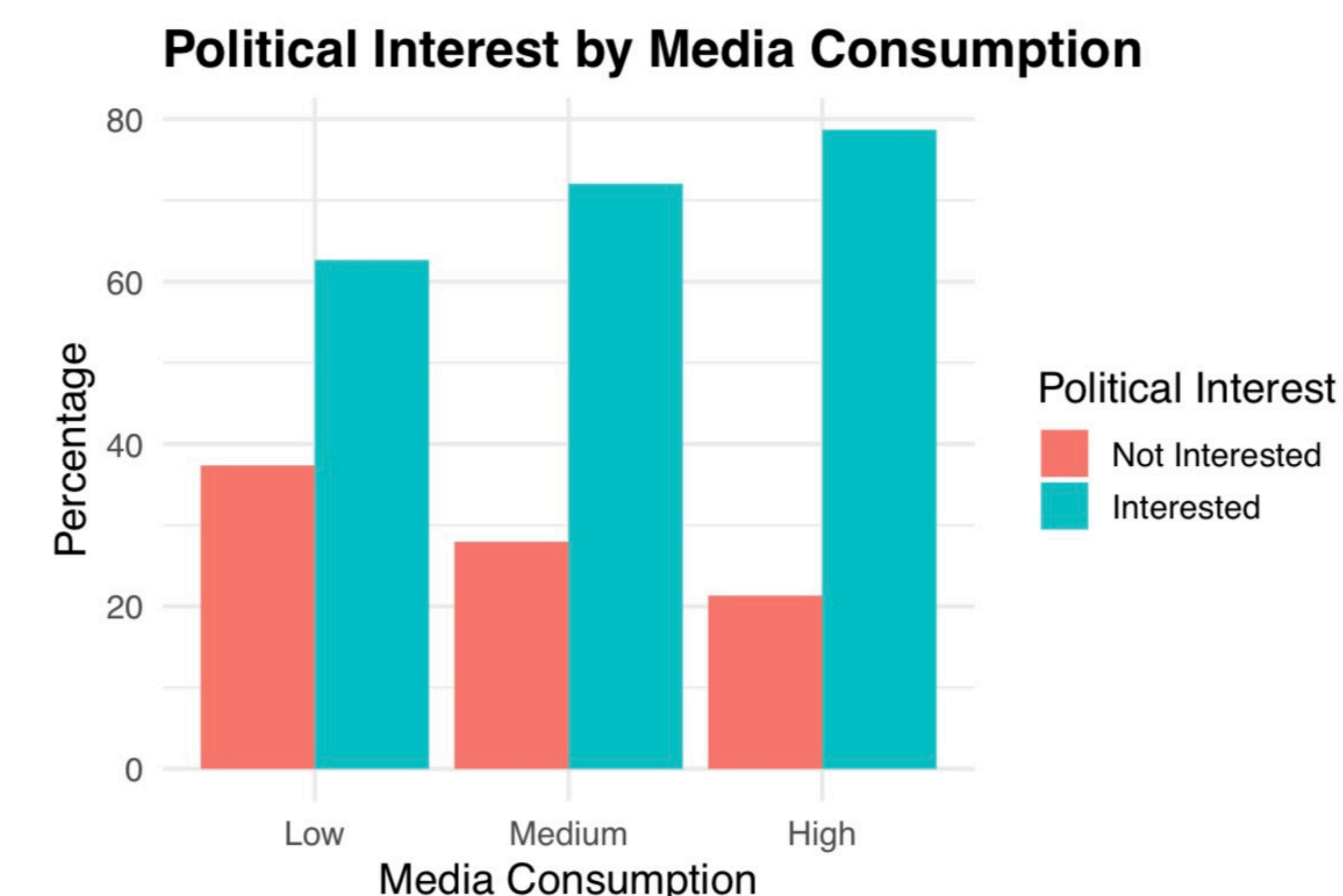
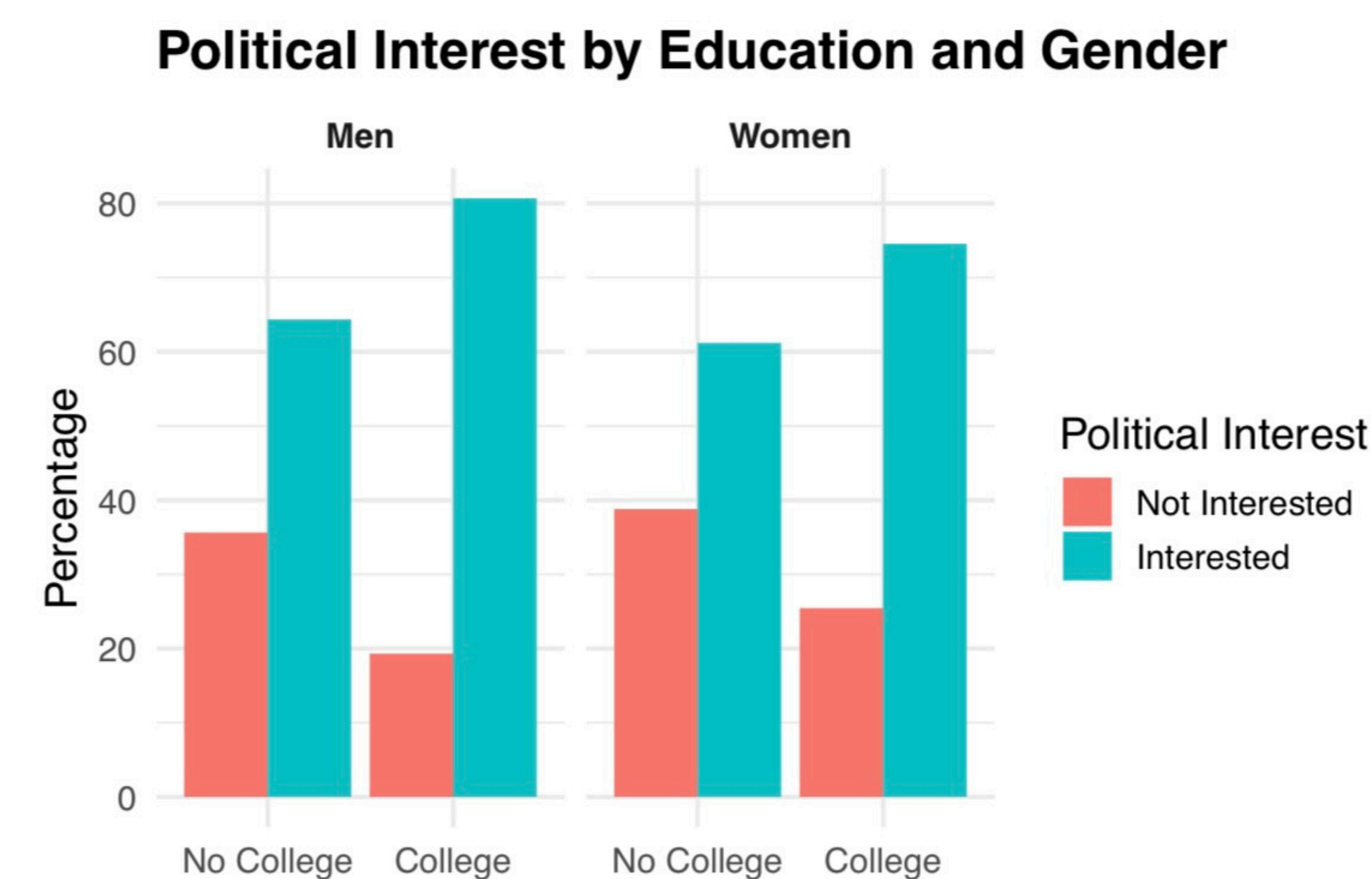
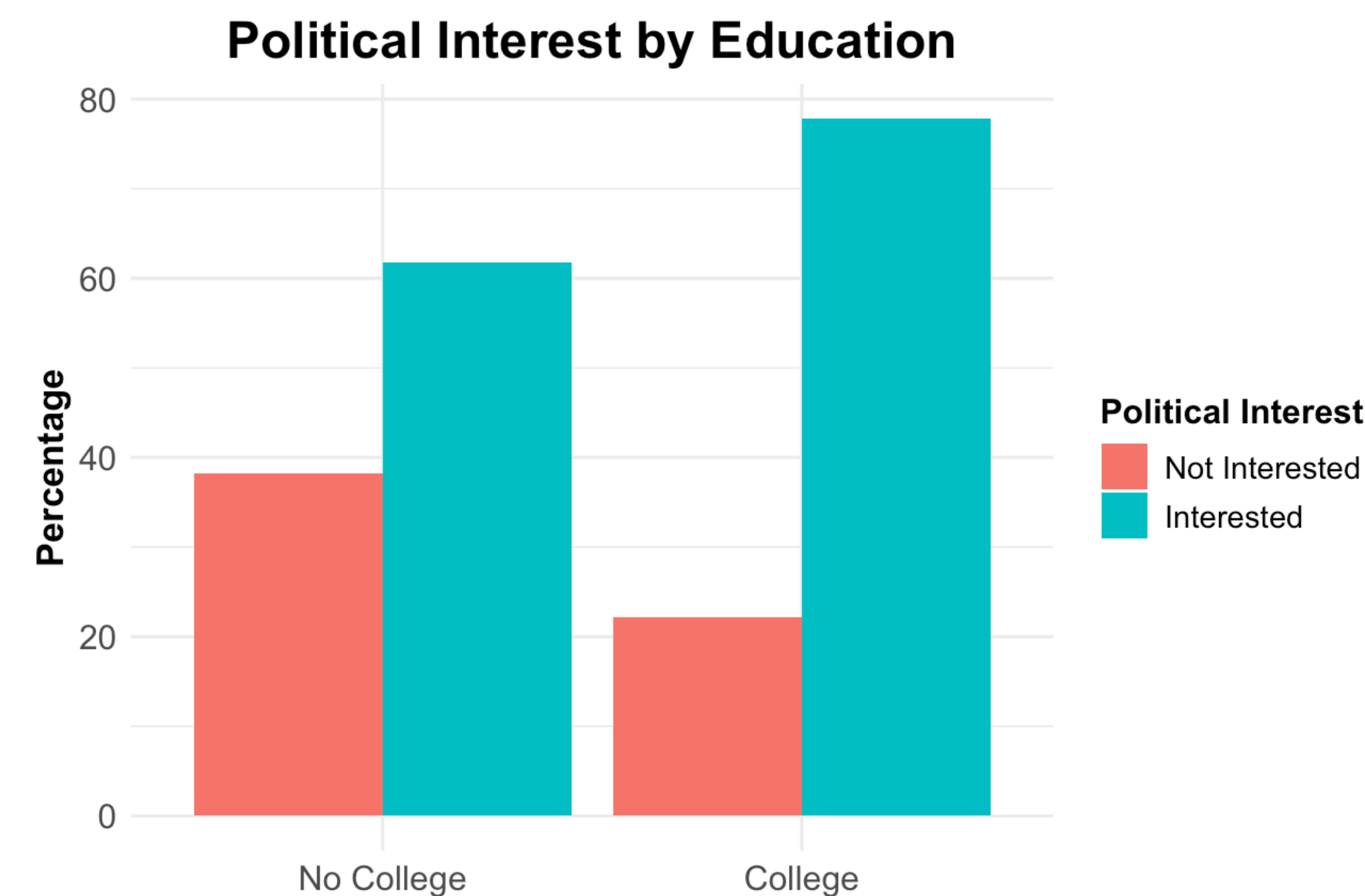
- Education increases interest for both parties
- Effect slightly stronger among Democrats
- Republicans show slightly higher overall interest

Overall:

- Education is a strong predictor of political interest
- Other factors influence how strong the relationship is

Conclusion

- In conclusion, this study supports the idea that education is a substantial predictor of political interest, although other characteristics such as media consumption, gender, and party identification are also important. This is significant because it explains why some individuals are more involved than others.
- This could especially help researchers studying political behavior, policymakers who want higher participation, and educators since education plays such a big role in participation.
- The larger picture is that social and structural variables help determine political engagement, which is not random. Future research should look at other variables and study changes over time, looking deeper into why education has this effect. Overall, the main point from this study is that education matters for political participation, but it is not the only factor.



Bibliography

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- Muirhead, R., & Rosenblum, N. L. (2020). The political theory of parties and partisanship: Catching up. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23, 95–110.
- Wielhouwer, P. W., & Lockerbie, B. (1994). Party contacting and political participation, 1952–90. *American Journal of Political Science*, 38(1), 211–229.