



# How Does Education Play a Role in Patriotism?

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## Introduction

While it is a common assumption that higher education leads to less nationalistic views, I want to understand if that holds true with recent survey data. I am analyzing 2024 ANES data on whether Americans view the U.S. as "better" than other countries, in order to find out whether education genuinely predicts patriotic sentiment, or if other factors like ideology and age better explain it. This research is important in order to help understand the complex forces shaping American national identity.

## Literature Review

Research on American patriotism suggests it is shaped by multiple overlapping forces rather than any single demographic factor. Schatz, Staub & Lavine (1999) established an important distinction between "blind" patriotism uncritical attachment to one's country and "constructive" patriotism, which involves critical engagement.

This framework helps explain why Americans with different backgrounds may express patriotism in very different ways. Education has traditionally been linked to more outward-looking, cosmopolitan attitudes. Herrmann, Isernia & Segatti (2009) found that higher education was associated with less nationalist sentiment across several Western democracies, supporting the common assumption that less-educated Americans would be more likely to view the U.S. as superior to other nations.

However, more recent scholarship points to ideology as a far stronger predictor than education. Sides, Tesler & Vavreck (2018) argue that the 2016 election accelerated a dramatic sorting of national identity along ideological lines, with conservatives increasingly claiming ownership of patriotic sentiment. Mutz (2018) reinforces this, finding that status threat — the fear that America is losing its global standing — predicted political behavior far more powerfully than socioeconomic factors like education.

Huddy & Khatib (2007) further show that national identity and patriotism attach differently depending on partisan affiliation, with strong partisans expressing more intense national pride than weak identifiers or independents.

Finally, generational patterns consistently appear in this literature. Putnam (2000) documents that older Americans maintain stronger attachments to civic and national identity than younger generations. Parker & Barreto (2013) connect this to reactionary politics, finding that older, more conservative Americans are most likely to express beliefs in American exceptionalism.

Taken together, this literature suggests that while education may appear to predict patriotism on the surface, ideology and age are likely the more powerful underlying drivers.

## Hypothesis

In a comparison of American survey respondents, those having lower educational attainment are more likely to say the United States is "better" than other countries than will those having higher educational attainment.

## Methods

Data from the 2024 American National Election Study (ANES) dataset.

Data analysis software R and RStudio.

— Cleaned and recoded variables (education into 3 groups; patriotism into Better/Same/Worse)

— Generated weighted cross-tabulations to examine bivariate and multivariate relationships

— Created bar charts to visualize and display data

## Variables

This analysis uses data from the 2024 American National Election Study (ANES).

Dependent Variable: Patriotism. This was measured using a survey question asking respondents whether they believe the United States is "better," "the same as," or "worse than" other countries.

Independent Variable: Education. This variable was recoded from the original five categories into three broader groups to ensure stable analysis: (1) "HS or less," (2) "Some college / BA," and (3) "Postgraduate."

Control Variables:

Ideology: Respondents' self-placement on a seven-point scale from strong liberal to strong conservative, recoded into three groups: "Liberal," "Moderate," and "Conservative."

Age: Respondents' age in years, recoded into four standard generational groups: "18-29," "30-44," "45-64," and "65+."

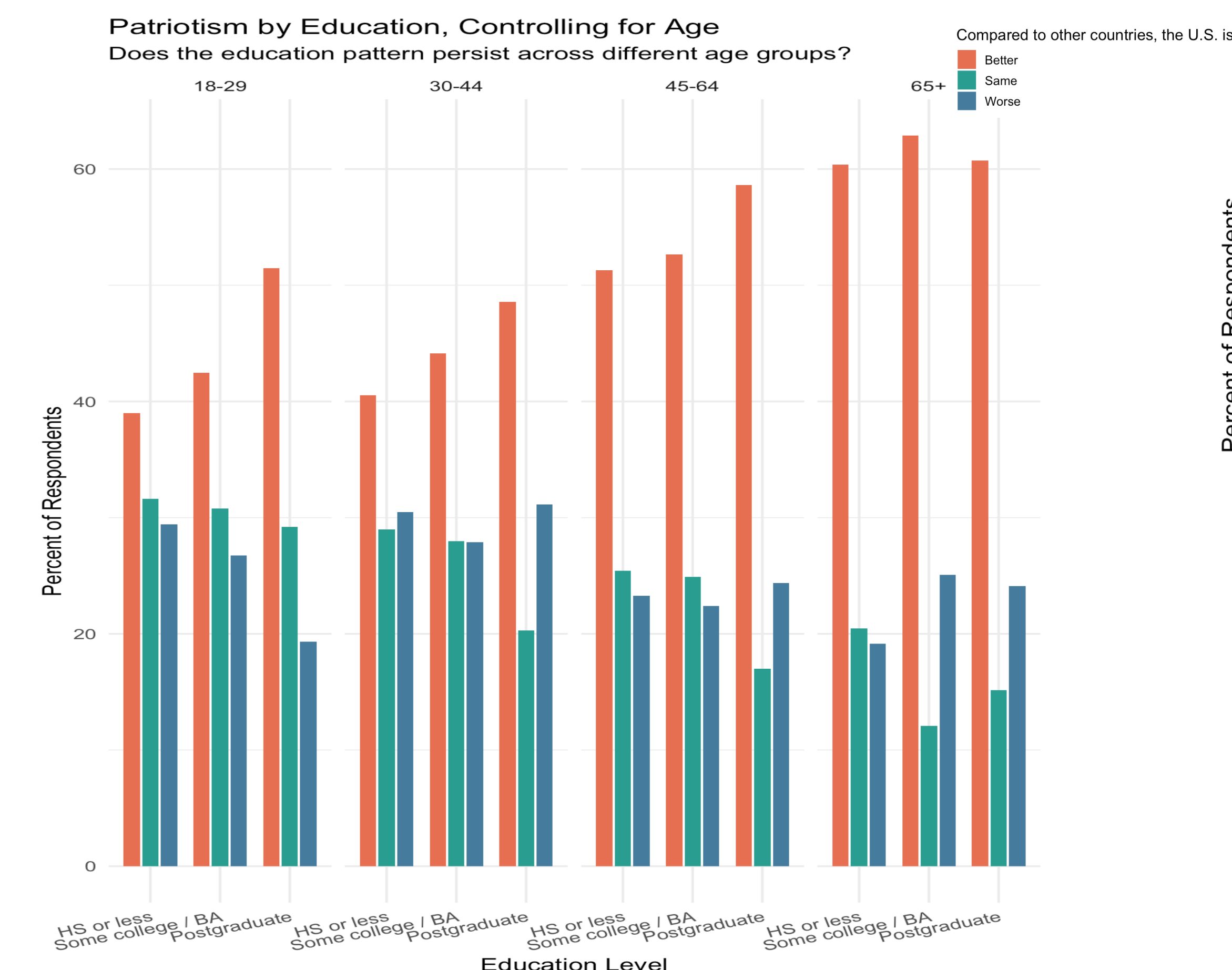


Figure 3. The relationship between education and patriotism, shown separately for four major age groups.

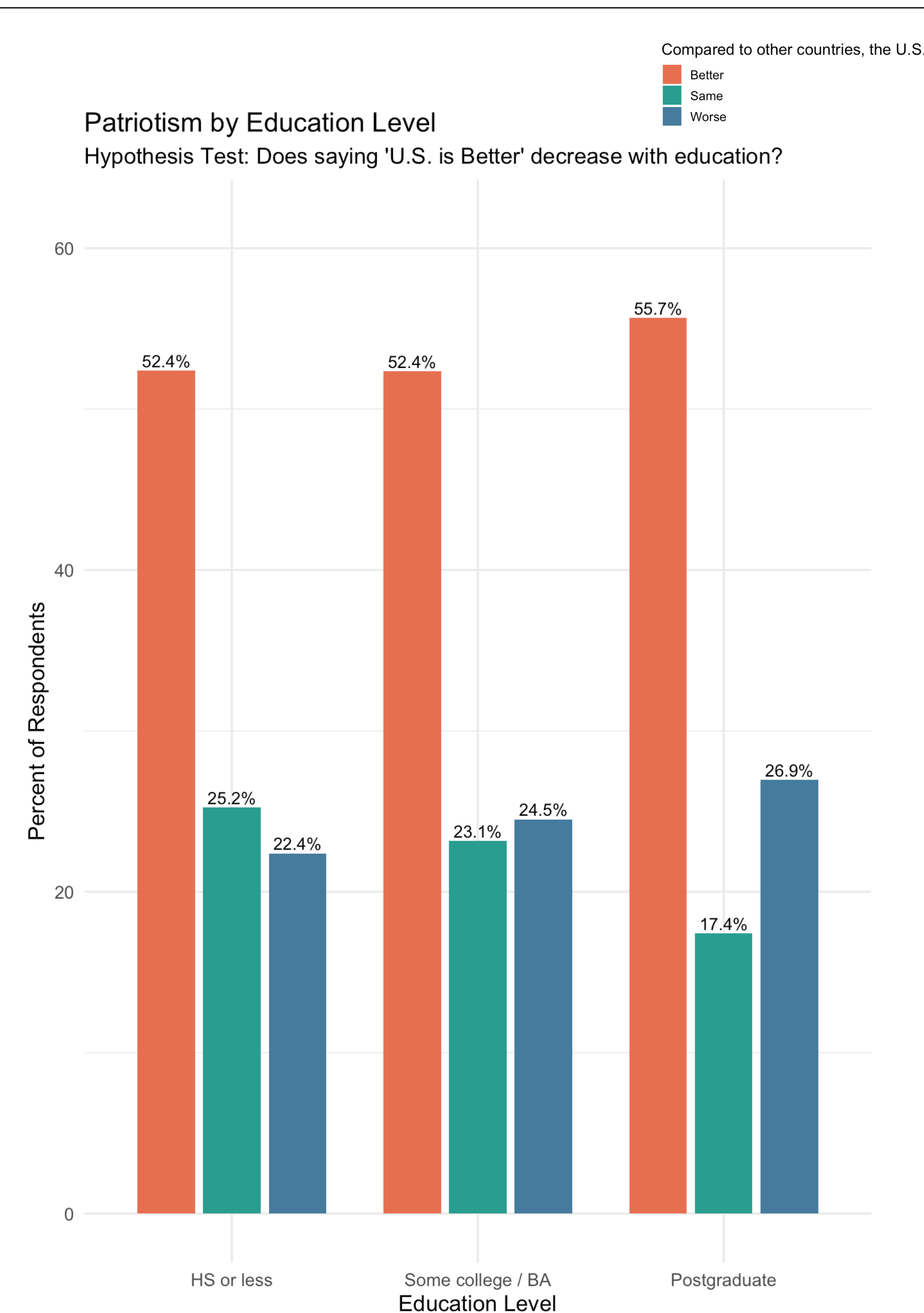


Figure 1. Weighted percentages showing respondents' comparison of the U.S. to other countries, broken down by education level.

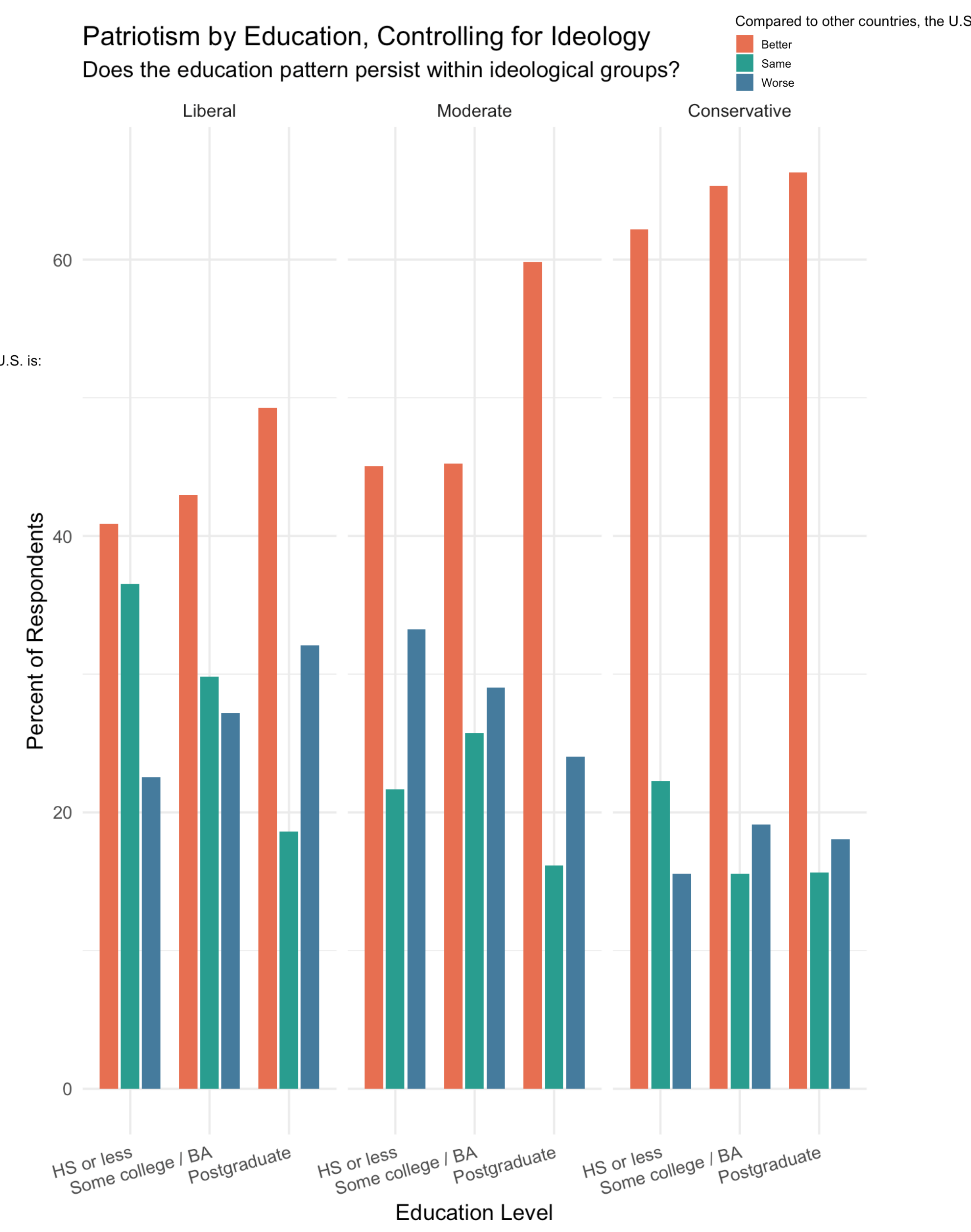


Figure 2. The relationship between education and patriotism, shown separately for liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

## Findings

The analysis reveals that the initial hypothesis is not supported by the data, and the relationship between education and patriotism is more complex than assumed.

The bivariate analysis (Figure 1) shows almost no relationship between education level and the likelihood of saying the U.S. is "better." The percentage remains the same across the first two education groups and even increases slightly for postgraduates, directly contradicting the hypothesis.

The multivariate analysis provides a clear explanation for this null finding. When controlling for political ideology (Figure 2), it becomes clear that ideology is a far more powerful predictor of patriotism than education. Conservatives in every education group are overwhelmingly likely to say the U.S. is "better," while liberals are far less so. The weak education pattern nearly disappears showing that the differences initially attributed to education are better explained by ideology.

Similarly, when controlling for age (Figure 3), a strong generational pattern emerges. Within every education level, older Americans are significantly more likely than younger Americans to express this form of patriotism. The effect of education within each age group is minimal. This confirms that both ideology and age are powerful confounding variables that are more influential than education in shaping these attitudes.

## Conclusions

This research demonstrates that the common assumption linking lower education to higher levels of patriotism is an oversimplification. While education plays a role in many political attitudes, its independent effect on whether Americans view their country as "better" is minimal in the 2024 ANES data. Instead, this sentiment is profoundly structured by deeper political and generational identities. Ideology and age are not just "other factors"; they are the primary drivers.

This finding is important for anyone seeking to understand the landscape of American public opinion, as it cautions against relying on simple demographic shortcuts. The next steps for this research would be to explore other potential control variables, such as media consumption habits or religious attendance, to further disentangle the complex web of factors that contribute to American patriotism.

## Work cited

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