



## Education: a public good and a common good

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What are we to make of the educational divide that can be seen in the voting patterns in both the EU referendum and the American presidential election? Patrick Riordan SJ suggests that some serious questions need to be asked: 'both recent votes reinforce the urgency of reflecting on how our education system may be failing to secure a public space for genuine political debate'.

President-elect Donald Trump was right about one thing: that the outcome of the presidential race would be as surprising and as unanticipated as the result of the Brexit referendum in the UK. He forecast that the pollsters would be misled in the USA as they had been in the UK, and on this point he was certainly proved right.

Analysis of the breakdown of both votes uncovers some apparent parallels in the voting patterns on either side of the Atlantic. In both cases there seems to be a generational divide, as well as an educational gap. (These two are linked, no doubt, as the peoples of both jurisdictions have had increased access to educational resources in recent decades, benefitting the younger generation above all.) Those with lower levels of educational attainment had tended to vote for Brexit in the UK, and for Donald Trump in the USA. University graduates in the UK were more inclined to see the advantages for themselves in the European context and so were more likely to vote to remain in the EU. In the USA, while the support of young graduates was originally for Bernie Sanders, they followed him to transfer their support to Hillary Clinton or one of the Independents.

The differences are significant but should not be exaggerated. According to the [BBC's analysis](#) of the results of the EU referendum, over two thirds of voters under 35 voted to remain, although the turnout of this age group was low in comparison to older age groups.



According to *The Telegraph's* report, of voters in the 30-39 age bracket, 51% supported Clinton and 40% supported Trump. *The Guardian's* analysis of the referendum result highlighted the significance of educational attainment. 'The results indicate that the greater the proportion of residents with a higher education, the more likely a local authority was to vote remain. Wandsworth, Richmond upon Thames, and Cambridge, where around

half of the population has a higher education qualification, all gave over two-thirds of their votes to remain. Just 14.2% have an equivalent qualification in the Norfolk seaside town of Great Yarmouth, which delivered one of the biggest leave votes of 71.5%'. In the US Presidential election, as reported in *The Telegraph*, 58% of voters with a postgraduate qualification supported Clinton, while 37% supported Trump. The spread was not so great at the level of college graduates: 49% supported the Democratic candidate, and 45% supported the Republican.

How should we interpret this discrepancy, and what implications does it have for educational policy? Evidently, different stories could be constructed to account for the split. One spin says that the more educated voters had the intellectual resources and knowledge to identify and dismiss hype and bluster, and to assess policy and character instead. The conclusion of this account is the regrettable one that in both elections, ignorance, prejudice and fear won the day.

The alternative spin is to discount the claims of the educated as somehow self-authenticating and to see a graduate or postgraduate qualification as giving access to an elite group in society which has long been able to manipulate the levers of influence to gain advantage for themselves. The conclusion from this version is that the excluded, ignored and discounted class of blue collar and service workers, as well as the unemployed, have finally had enough; they have rebelled against the self-serving elite of society, and demanded that their concerns be taken seriously by government for a change.

It doesn't have to be either-or: it can be both-and. But whichever story you wish to accept, there remains a serious question to be addressed about the role played by our educational systems in the construction of the political culture. Those of us engaged in education especially must wonder if our institutions and our efforts are contributing to a division in society or helping to foster unity. Does education contribute to the common good? Does educational attainment lead to a privileged elite and so divide the successful from the failures? In the presence of so many centrifugal forces pulling society apart, shouldn't education be a counter-influence, and not another source of division?

In order to consider these questions, it is helpful to distinguish the ways in which education can be a private good, a public good, a club good and a common good.

The key policy innovation in third level education in the UK is the marketisation of education. Other inherited communal assets are also being marketised: what formerly were deemed public goods in the UK are now being treated as private goods, in the cases of public transport, water supply and, to some extent, medical care, social welfare and even the prison service. Just as the UK government has privatised these, so it is attempting to privatise third level education. The key question, then, is whether it is better for the common good that education be regarded primarily as a private good, or primarily as a public good?

'Public good' is a technical term in economics, and is not identical with common good. Market failure is the usual context for the introduction of the notion of public goods. Market failure refers to those goods or services which cannot be supplied via the market,

because no entrepreneur can undertake the cost of supplying the good when there is no assurance that beneficiaries will pay. Who will provide street lighting by way of the market when citizens can enjoy the benefit of the lighting once it is in place without having to pay? The market will not deliver this good, so we rely on public authority to provide it. It recovers payment for this and other services (defence, justice, etc.) via taxation, and not by means of *quid pro quo* payments in exchange for each usage. Public goods are non-excludable (once they are in place it is not possible to exclude some categories of people – everybody sees the traffic lights, even those driving untaxed cars) and non-rivalrous (adding more people to the enjoyment does not diminish the benefits of those already included). By contrast, private goods are both excludable and rivalrous. In between there is a spectrum, including the categories of commons and club goods.

In several ways, of course, education is a private good. The certificate obtained at the end of the course is definitely private, with the graduate's name printed on it; the school or college place is private, especially where there is scarcity or quotas. These are excludable and rivalrous goods. This is the aspect which attracts the attention of state administration: efficiency can be achieved by encouraging the market in the goods, namely places on courses and qualifications at the end. And a market requires competition, so the state has encouraged private enterprises to enter the market in the expectation that the newcomers, by offering students attractive alternatives, will oblige the existing universities to up their game.

As well as being a private good, in other respects education is also a club good: the English expression of the 'Old School Tie' acknowledges this. Once graduated from a school one can rely on the support and patronage of fellow alumni. A club good is excludable, but non-rivalrous: others not from the same school can be excluded from the preferential treatment, but the inclusion of others from the same school is non-rivalrous and hence tolerable, since no individual is disadvantaged. One of the ongoing concerns of educators and the challenge of the recent experience of voting patterns is the extent to which we are creating club goods. Are we reinforcing the elite as a distinctive section of society?

Is education a public good? When levels of literacy, numeracy and oracy (the ability to express oneself eloquently in speech) in a society are high – when the electorate in a democracy is capable of discerning issues of policy and exercising critical judgement about candidates and their programmes, when print and broadcast media carry a quality of debate about relevant issues that goes beyond sloganeering and name-calling – then we see the benefit of education as a public good. Once it is in place, all people benefit, and no one is disadvantaged by the addition of further participants to the enjoyment of this quality of public life – although it must be said that this enjoyment is dependent on the condition that the new additions bring a comparable capacity and are prepared to engage in public life on the terms on which they are admitted.

Another way in which education can and ought to be a public good is related to the achievements of the rule of law. The rule of law itself is also a public good in being non-excludable and non-rivalrous: once in place it is there for everyone and no one can be disadvantaged just because others are treated according to the law. A relatively high level of education in a populace is a fundamental precondition for the rule of law. Public officials in their various roles and capacities will not do justice unless they are sufficiently skilled and competent, and sensitive to the obligations arising from the human rights of the people with whom they have to deal. Without the capacity to imagine themselves in the position of the other, to think their way into the mind-set of peoples from other cultures and traditions, citizens in our world will be unable to deal with the challenges posed by the presence of a great variety of cultures and religions. In this sense education is a public good.

Can this dimension of education be achieved by privatised educational systems? Our societies are being subjected to a vast social experiment in which students, and indeed our universities, are being conditioned into the attitudes of the marketplace. It is not the skills of citizenship, of neighbourliness, of dialogue partners, which are valued above all by our students and their parents and patrons, but the marketable skills, transferable skills which make one a valued commodity in the labour market. The values of service, the sense of obligation to benefit those less well off, the duty to put one's privileged assets to use

for the good of others, are undermined by the officially reinforced attitude that the education has been paid for. It is property, a possession, to be used or exercised at the whim of the owner. Students will exaggeratedly claim to have earned their degree through their own hard work, not attending to the many social contributions to their advancement for which no payment has been made. Here too an economic term can highlight the dimensions which are not taken into account. In the maintenance of any education system there are 'externalities', costs borne by some of the stakeholders which are not compensated in the market. It is irrelevant to the economic consideration that those costs are willingly borne by educators, including many who are religiously motivated. The point is that the concentration on the marketing of education as a private good privileges the economic attitude to understanding education, and in that mind-set certain elements such as externalities do not appear, and hence are likely to be overlooked and forgotten. A culture of education provision is being fostered which will be unable to sustain our inherited institutions of education which have relied on very different values.

These are the ways in which we can speak of education as a public good. In what way is it a common good? There are two cases, practical and ontic. The *practical* sense is that wherever people cooperate for some good, they have a good in common, a common good. That good in common might be a private good (college places for our children), a club good (networks for alumni) or a public good (high levels of educational attainment conditioning political discourse and widespread respect for the rule of law). Perhaps the more important way in which education is a common good is the *ontic* sense of good. As a perfection, completion or fulfilment of individuals and communities education enables them to *be* more and to realise to a greater extent their human potential. What fulfils people is for their good, enabling them to flourish. Education is not narrowly limited to academic achievement of course, but also includes personal formation and empowerment for relationship of all kinds, including the political friendship of citizenship, and so as contributing to human flourishing in the fullest sense it deserves to be part of the *practical* common good, that which we deliberately name as the point of our cooperation.

If people are to be capable of acting as responsible citizens in a very complex world, they must have learned to live alongside differences of many kinds. They must have learned to understand themselves and their traditions as situated in a plural and interdependent world. This means that they must be capable of operating at two levels: they must be comfortable in their own tradition and be at home with their distinctive identity; on the other hand, they must be capable of meeting others from differing backgrounds in the public forum on a basis of understanding, respect and tolerance. There is a tendency to regard the public forum only as a market place or bargaining table, where different interest groups meet in order to compete for power. Of course the competitive nature of interest-group politics cannot be denied and must be allowed its place. But this form of politics alone will not serve the common good. For that a form of encounter must be possible in which, despite their differences, people can engage with one another as fellow citizens, or simply as fellow humans.

Debate and dialogue is contrasted with bargaining and deal-making; it presupposes a commitment to fostering an alternative space for political engagement to the competition for power in which the stronger (more passionate, more numerous, more manipulative, more resourced financially and otherwise, better organised and mobilised) is sure to win.

Education is a public good when relatively high levels of literacy and numeracy and competence for engagement in political discourse are widespread in society, supporting vibrant public debate while sustaining tolerance and respect. However, the similarity in voting patterns in the recent UK and USA elections suggests that education may be functioning, not as a public good and therefore a real asset to common life, but as a club good hardening division and reinforcing the advantages of an elite. And so the question about the potential divisiveness of educational attainment in our political communities is provoked. The nature and quality of the debates in the cases of both recent votes reinforces the urgency of reflecting on how our education system may be failing to secure a public space for genuine political debate, and so failing to support the important public goods of shared meaning and shared values. Such an educational system cannot be for the common good.

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