

What We Know about Public Opinion on Educational Reforms

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Educational reforms are politically feasible only if voters accept them. Public opinion is thus a key factor for whether educational reforms are enacted. The available evidence provides a colorful picture of the public's opinion on education policies in European countries. In general, citizens place high priority on education as a leading policy focus, show surprisingly large willingness to reform, and are responsive to information and adequate reform designs.

In education policy, as in many other policy fields, well-designed policy reforms may fail to get enacted because policymakers are confronted with a public backlash against their reform agenda. Thus, understanding the dynamics of public opinion is important in order to be able to assess the chances of successful reform. A recent and growing scholarly literature has started to study the dynamics of public opinion on education policy, based on a series of original and new survey data about the public's attitudes towards topics of education policy.

NEW SURVEY EVIDENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

A recent survey of public opinion on education policy in eight Western European countries indicates that education – together with health care – ranks at the top regarding public support for more investments among European citizens (see Figure overleaf). Disconfirming common preconceptions, there is only mixed evidence for a split across generations or income groups in support for more education spending, indicating a strong across-the-board support for more educational investments. However, political ideology is still relevant as there are significant differences between left- and right-leaning supporters.

There is also a significant degree of variation in support across countries depending on the particular institutional contexts, and there is a significant decline

in support for education spending once citizens are reminded that additional investments may require tax increases, higher public debt or cutbacks in other parts of the welfare state. Furthermore, in general there is strong support for public investments in vocational education and training (VET) and for promoting VET as an alternative to academic higher education, which is somewhat surprising given the strong attention paid to the latter in public debates. The survey also reveals strong support for various reforms in the governance of education, in particular school choice and the decentralization of governance structures, but also in promoting the comprehensive model of school education.

OPINION ON SPECIFIC EDUCATION TOPICS

Turning to public opinion on specific education topics, recent opinion surveys in Germany highlight several areas in the education system in which the majority of the German population supports fundamental reforms. These include the provision of tuition-free pre-school, the introduction of a whole-day school system, national comparative tests in school, national exit exams, and income-contingent tuition fees in higher education. In Switzerland, public majorities support proposals such as increasing school expenditure, implementing free school choice, offering all-day care to all school children, introducing standardized tests, and

determining admission to upper-track secondary schools by entrance exams. The evidence from Switzerland is interesting because of the Swiss system of direct democracy in which referenda are frequently used to decide upon the implementation of education policies.

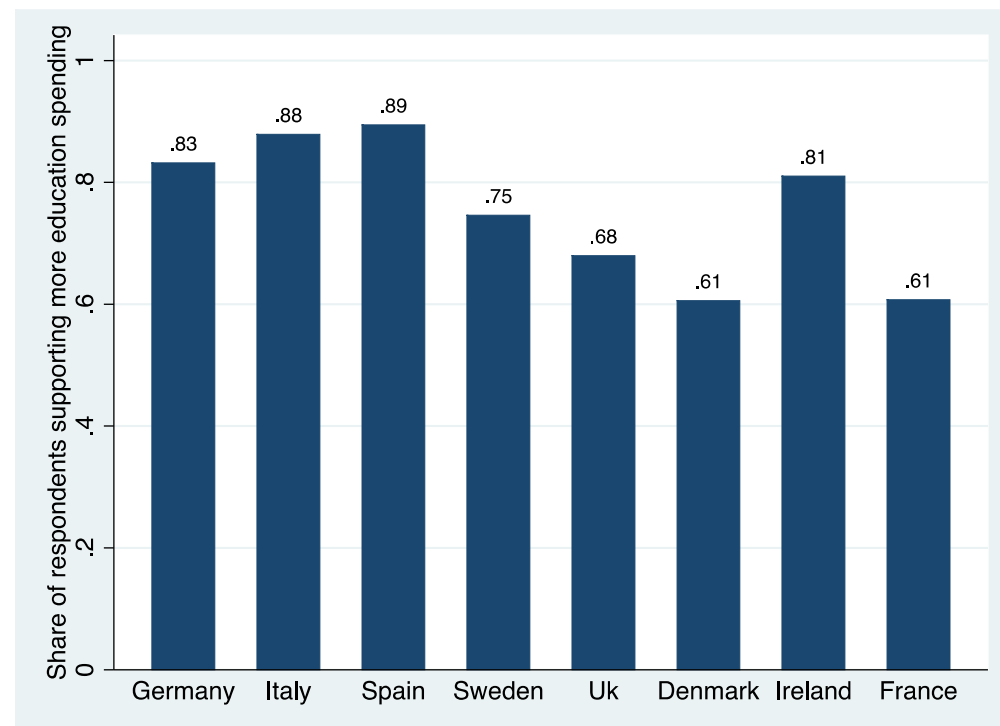
In U.S. opinion surveys, different accountability measures in the education system are highly popular among the public. A comparison of public opinion between Germany and the United States shows that public opinion diverges across countries in some policy fields (e.g., teacher salary increases or certain forms of differential pay), but overlaps markedly in others (e.g., school spending increases or government-funded pre-school programs).

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF INFORMATION

Public acceptance of educational reforms critically depends on the extent to which the public is informed about relevant facts regarding the respective reform proposal. The German survey provides four examples of survey experiments which show that randomized information provision can have substantial effects on public preferences.

First, providing information on current levels of education spending or teacher salaries and reminders of tax financing requirements significantly reduce the share of respondents who support increases in education spending or teacher salary. Second, public

Support for higher spending on education in eight European countries



Share of respondents who prefer “more” or “much more” government spending on education. Source: own calculations based on INVEDUC dataset; see reference.

support for education spending across different education sectors – from pre-school to tertiary education – is affected by the provision of information on current spending levels and information on research results on the importance of investments in early education stages. Third, providing information on the relative earnings of university graduates turns a relative majority against university tuition fees in Germany into a relative majority favoring them. The experiment also reveals that a clear majority favors income-contingent tuition fees. Fourth, information on the stance that different political parties take can shift citizens’ opinion on specific education policies. While these experimental results on information effects may not generalize one-to-one towards real-world settings, they provide important indications about areas in which informing the public may be vital for its opinion formation.

For more details see: Marius R. Busemeyer, Philipp Lergetporer, Ludger Woessmann, *Public opinion and the acceptance and feasibility of educational reforms*. EENEE Analytical Report 28, January 2017, http://www.eenee.de/dms/EENEE/Analytical_Reports/EENEE_AR28.pdf.