Education and the Curious Case of Conservative Compromise

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Abstract

“Education,” notes Philip Converse, “is everywhere the universal solvent.” Whatever the ill of the body politic, many believe that greater education improves the condition. Much scholarship explores the impact of education on political attitudes and behaviors but scholars have not examined the relationship of education to support for political compromise. This is especially topical, as compromise between parties seems harder than ever to achieve; yet compromise is necessary for democratic governance. We examine whether higher levels of education lead to support for compromise and find that education does matter, but the relationship is conditional. For liberals and moderates, more education promotes greater support for compromise. For conservatives, those with more education are not more likely to support compromise than those with less education. We argue that for conservatives, education matters for compromise support but it also leads to better understanding of bedrock ideological principles that inhibit approval of compromise.

Education and the Curious Case of Conservative Compromise

Over the decades, education has been found to be one of the most important explanations for many social and political attitudes and behaviors (Bartels 2006; Converse 1964; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Erikson and Tedin 2015; Prior 2005). Education is included in just about every model that attempts to explain political thinking. Even if it is not to be part of the story someone is telling, it is so routinely significant that it must be accounted for.

Why education should matter so much to democratic thinking and participation is not that hard to fathom. Formal education contributes to things that would have to have political consequences. Better educated people are more likely to have the knowledge that makes policy and politics more understandable (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). With that foundation and socialized into democratic norms, educated people are more likely to seek out additional information (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; American Press Institute 2014). So it is not surprising that better educated citizens vote and participate in other ways at higher rates than those with less education (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Prior 2005; Hillygus 2005).

It goes beyond just providing the ability to be an active citizen. Education also contributes to the type of citizen one can become. Political scientists have found that educated people are more likely to be politically efficacious, believing that their contributions to the political system will matter and that they themselves are obligated to participate (Semetko and Valkenburg 1998; Cassel and Hill 1981; Abramson 1983). Education gives people the confidence and ability to sort out complex political questions, to distinguish between political alternatives (Sniderman, Glaser, and Griffin 1990), and to engage others in political discussion, further stimulating interest or at least a sense of obligation to participate. Samuel Popkin argues
that education affects politics “by increasing the number of issues that citizens see as politically relevant, and by increasing the number of connections they make between their own lives and national and international events” (1991, 36). All of this is not to say that education is a panacea. Plenty of well educated people are apolitical and there are less educated people who are engaged in politics in meaningful ways. All else the same, however, education is a consistent and powerful contributor to meaningful citizenship.

In this project, we explore the effect of education on just one dimension of democratic thinking: acceptance of compromise. Democratic practice is necessarily messy. Different interests, beliefs, and priorities get articulated in the process of policymaking and get sorted out as representatives distribute resources, determine which values will be maximized, and set a course for the future. Democratic theory suggests that our presidential, first-past-the-post, bicameral and tripartite, pluralistic system works because our system is designed to generate political outcomes that satisfy majorities. The processes of American governance are imperfect – slow, tortuous, often conflict-ridden – but somehow, we have been able to get to the necessary compromises required for democratic self-governance.

In this paper, we will argue that attitudes about compromise should be related to education, with better educated people more likely to accept compromise as an essential feature of our politics. Education should increase the likelihood of viewing compromise as the cost of having a functioning government. The logic of this is straightforward: education should lead people to appreciate that compromise is how democracies maximize the preferences of the largest number of people, even if one’s own preferences are not always maximized in the process. As we will show in the upcoming pages, the relationship between education and attitudes toward political compromise is as expected, but with one caveat, and an important one
at that. We will show that this relationship is conditional, that it looks different for conservatives than it does for liberals and moderates. We probe into why conservatives are distinctive when it comes to compromise, and in the conclusion, we will discuss why it matters to our civic health and what it means to the prospect of dealing with our present political situation, which has become increasingly divided and where compromise has thus been harder to come by than in previous generations (Lee 2016; Abramowitz 2013; Theriault 2008, 2013). In the end, we add compromise to the list of political outcomes for which the role of education is more complicated than people often appreciate.

**The Nature of Compromise**

Our conventional understanding of compromise in politics is grounded in behavioral science. People negotiate from positions in which they assign values to their own preferences and weigh that assessment against what is being offered in exchange. The values assigned might not correspond with others’ judgments but negotiations are not dependent on such accuracy (Kahneman and Tversky 1984). Whatever the valuations, the path to successful outcomes is agreements that are “win-win”—both sides believe that they are gaining from the transaction.

For politicians, the valuations are abstractions—they do not gain a tangible good or service in exchange for agreeing to a compromise on legislation. But part of the win-win is the reward of crafting good legislation that moves us forward. Traditionally, a second reward is the appreciation of constituents who, to paraphrase David Mayhew (1974), give legislators the credit they claim.

The willingness of citizens to appreciate the value of compromise—and to reward legislators who work to find compromise—is critical to the functioning of a democracy. As Gutmann and Thomson note, “Compromise is difficult, but governing a democracy without
compromise is impossible” (2014, 1). Still, there is no guarantee that public opinion will value compromise and accept policy solutions that only qualify as half loaves rather than full ones. Nevertheless, as we will show, when asked by pollsters, Americans offer strong support for compromise and most say they prefer that their elected officials work toward compromise rather than stand on principle, never bending. Despite the increasing polarization of the American electorate (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Abramowitz 2015), a majority of Americans consistently prefers compromise to sticking to principle; support for compromise stands at 53 percent in a recent Gallup Poll (Newport 2016).¹ Perhaps because of polarization among politicians, the preference for compromisers among leaders is actually trending upward in Gallup’s time series (Newport 2016).

Although the public professes support for compromise in principle, whether compromise is the preferred route to policy making when the rubber hits the road is less clear. The messiness of the legislative process, the veritable sausage making, challenges the public’s patience and understanding (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 1996). In this era of omniscient media and a daily stream of behind-the-scenes reporting, dealmaking becomes very public. Opponents vilify dealmakers and use partisan cues to undercut support for bipartisan agreements while decrying their own party’s leaders when intraparty negotiations appear to be going in the wrong direction. It has been argued that our current era of so-called “insecure majorities,” where each election holds the possibility that the party in the majority will switch, has served to increase the incentives of the minority party to resist compromise at all costs (Lee 2016).

¹ See Abrams and Fiorina (2015) for a contrasting view on whether the American public is polarized.
Still, one might expect that those most likely to look past partisanship and soundbite politics are those who are most educated. They should have the appreciation of the challenges of democratic government and should be most likely to possess what Gutmann and Thompson term the “compromising mindset” (2014, 3). It turns out, however, that the relationship between education and compromise is not so straightforward.

A Note About Methods

Before we turn to that relationship, there is a little here about methodology that we should explain. We start by looking at simple crosstabulations that set up a puzzle, a curious, seemingly counterintuitive relationship that begs to be explained. We then proceed to multivariate analysis to test ideas, derived from theory, to solve the puzzle. The surveys we analyze here – the American National Election Studies (ANES), the Pew surveys, the Gallup Poll, the CBS/New York Times Poll — are publicly available, providing a great service to social scientists even though all but the ANES were designed for media consumption and general interest.

It is notable to us that the findings we will present in the coming pages derive from several different national surveys. This enabled us to look at attitudes toward the idea of compromise via questions asked by a multitude of survey firms at different points in time using varied question wordings and response categories. These questions emphasize different dimensions of the concept and offer different counterarguments to compromise. This variation gives us a prismatic approach to understanding public opinion toward compromise.

Furthermore, the surveys are gathered with samples and modes that vary across the polling outlets. For instance, some of the surveys were conducted via telephone, others over the internet. All were conducted between 2012 and 2016. Our findings are remarkably consistent: No matter how we measure the relationships here, no matter what survey we use, no matter what
dimension of compromise is emphasized in the question, we come to the same conclusions. It is not perfect, of course; there are small variations here and there. The overall consistency, however, gives us great confidence that we have identified a puzzle that is real and meaningful.

Our findings, our explanations for the puzzle, are also consistent, giving us multi-source reliability and allowing us to go beyond “mere” statistical significance.

We believe that there is a lesson here for social scientists who study social and political phenomena via public opinion surveys. The lesson is that having a variety of sources that provide similar results makes it less likely that findings are an artifact of question wording. We cannot capture cross-survey consistency statistically, but the diversity enhances the significance of our findings beyond the individual tests in each survey. Given the proliferation of surveys in recent years and given the replication concerns that have arisen in the social sciences lately (Vedantam and Penman 2016), we recommend that other scholars aim to reproduce their findings across multiple surveys to the extent that they are able.

**Education: The Universal Solvent?**

Political rhetoric is most often about principles, about values, about those things we should cherish and tenaciously support. This is how we think about politics, but not so much how we think about governance. Because parties, interest groups, and individuals hold different principles, ideologies, and values, there must be some way to balance them in the practice of governance. Principles generate votes, especially in primaries; compromise mostly does not. That values or interests other than one’s own should be served by an outcome is a cost associated with democratic processes. Political compromise allows us to resolve society’s challenges, and requires individuals to get beyond their own interests to value the interests of all.

What does it take to enable individuals to value, embrace, or at least tolerate political
compromise for its role in the political system? There are good reasons to believe that education is the key. Education is a key contributor to civic participation in general. As Delli Carpini and Keeter argue, political knowledge is “a critical and distinct facilitator of other aspects of good citizenship. A well-informed citizen is more likely to be attentive to politics, engaged in various forms of participation, committed to democratic principles, opinionated, and to feel efficacious” (1996, 6). Robert Putnam concludes that education “is an extremely powerful indicator of civic engagement” (2000, 667). Philip Converse is emphatic: “education is everywhere the universal solvent” (1972, 324).

How might this translate to a relationship between education and approval of compromise? We know that better educated people are more likely to be exposed to a larger and more sophisticated variety of news sources (Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010). The version of politics they are more likely to encounter is more detailed and more nuanced. Political sophistication also means understanding and acknowledging the values of others, a recognition that there are other ways of thinking and being. And perhaps it encourages the notion that the political system benefits from heterogeneity and diversity.

The education solvent is also thought to reduce the friction of political differences by teaching tolerance, civility, and an appreciation of those norms necessary for government to function. One of the most essential norms is that of compromise. It is easier to achieve compromise when citizens regard those on the other side of political issues or ideologies to be people of good faith, a loyal opposition rather than the embodiment of evil. Willingness to compromise is necessary at both the elite and mass levels as elites are sensitive to signals from the rank-and-file as to their receptivity to dealmaking. In this vein, the chances of compromise increase when there is a disposition toward flexibility rather than principle. For those who are
actually negotiating, there is an ample literature that guides behavior to maximize the likelihood of positive results (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991; Mansbridge and Martin 2015). However, there is no reliable set of tactics to convince the general public that compromise is a virtue, nothing analogous to the tactics used in face-to-face negotiations. Optimally, the compromising mindset should be ingrained in our consciousness as we are educated from a young age as to how government works (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

If there are reasons to believe that education will contribute to a compromising attitude, there are also reasons to question why it should matter. Some Americans see compromise as abandoning principle. If opponents hold different values than we do, why trust them? Education may make the operations of government easier to comprehend, but even those who are educated can find it satisfying to stereotype adversaries and believe their motives are suspect. Being highly educated may even make us more confident that we know more than ideological adversaries.

Today, rising polarization is a narcotic that eases us away from a belief that compromise is a virtue. Ample evidence indicates that Americans not only believe in the righteousness of their party but believe that the other side is despicable (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). The reasons for rising polarization are many but one is surely that education has not proved to be a universal solvent. In his study of knowledge and opinion, Russell Neuman found that “There is no correlation between political tolerance and education” (1986, 163). In their exhaustive study of education and participation, Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry determine that while education levels are positively correlated with some measures of citizenship, for other attributes “the absolute education model applied to data predicts change in the dependent variable in the wrong direction” (1996, 98). Rolfe is also
dismissive, concluding that there is a “tendency among social scientists to ballyhoo the benefits of education” (2012, 149).

Others have likewise found that education is not always the universal solvent that eases the path toward democratic governance, tolerance of difference, and guidance by reason. Federico, for example, has found that education enhances the link between values and racial policy preferences, leading to more racially liberal preferences among racial liberals but more racially conservative preferences among racial conservatives (Federico 2006). Federico and colleagues also find that “political expertise” enhances the link between an authoritarian disposition and ideological conservatism (Federico, Fisher, and Deason 2011). Greater levels of political sophistication also can make people less willing to be swayed by factually correct information if that information contradicts their predispositions (Berinsky 2017). It is therefore possible that the compromising mindset may be an additional area that defies a direct and positive relationship between education and ideal democratic behavior. As we shall see, other factors intrude.

**Surveys Say**

We explore the relationship of education to acceptance of compromise via several different public opinion polls, all conducted in recent years. While pollsters do not ask questions about political compromise with great frequency, the trend toward greater polarization has led them to raise the question. We have identified several national surveys where such questions have been asked, and use these questions to test our ideas. These questions, which take different tacks to the concept, include:

Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right? I like
elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with [OR] I like elected officials who stick to their positions (Pew Research Center 2014).

Would you prefer a U.S. president who compromises to get things done or, sticks to his or her principles no matter what (American National Election Studies 2012)?

Turning back to Congress, earlier you said you disapprove of the job Congress is doing. Can you tell me some of the reasons why you disapprove of the job Congress is doing? [In this open-ended question, respondents mentioning “party gridlock/not compromising” are coded as pro-compromise] (Gallup Poll 2013)

Would you prefer a government official who compromises to get things done, or who sticks to his or her principles no matter what (American National Election Studies 2016)?

The Pew and Gallup surveys were conducted by phone; the 2012 ANES module we use was conducted via the Internet; and the 2016 ANES uses both face-to-face and Internet interviewing. Three of the questions we use here are closed-ended and one is open-ended. One asks about elected officials and one asks about government officials while the other two ask about the president and Congress.

To look at the relationship of education to approval of compromise, we divide respondents into three education categories, setting thresholds at high school graduation, and college degree and comparing these three groups on their responses to the four compromise questions above. In each case, as we show in Figure 1, the relationship is strong and monotonic. We find clear and compelling evidence of the relationship we anticipated. Each advance in
education leads to stronger approval of compromise, however it is framed in the closed-ended survey questions. Majorities approve of compromise, but among the most educated, support approaches the three-quarters mark.

**Figure 1: Percent who prefer compromise by educational attainment**

![Bar chart showing percent who prefer compromise by educational attainment.](image)

The Gallup question is open-ended and, thus, offers a different view. How much does compromise, or the absence of it, come to mind when a respondent is asked why he or she disapproves of Congress? As such a large proportion of the public disapproves of Congress (83 percent in the Gallup survey), an overwhelming proportion of respondents are asked the question. Roughly a quarter of respondents, a plurality, offer gridlock or the failure to compromise as their reason. But, as before, the more educated one is, the greater the likelihood of concern about congressional gridlock and the failure to compromise. Only 14 percent of the

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2 The coding combines these two answers, so it is not possible to disentangle them, and they are two different things in our minds. Nonetheless, as gridlock is a natural by-product of the failure to compromise, we consider this to be a reasonable expression of support for compromise.
less educated mention gridlock, while more than twice that percentage, 31 percent of the well educated, raise it as a problem.

It is worth noting that the effect of education on compromise is not a function of the fact that educated people hold their values and policy preferences less dear or are less vigorous in their advocacy of their point of view than people with less education. Indeed, the opposite is true. As political scientists have shown, better educated people are *more principled*. They understand political principles better, can better articulate them, and better understand how various ideas coalesce into belief systems (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Federico 2006; Federico, Fisher, and Deason 2011). The point is that the relationship we observe in Figure 1 is not because the well educated have a looser attachment to principles. It is, we argue, something else, the ability to have greater appreciation for the mechanisms of democratic government that are required for it to function effectively and to produce policy.

**A Conditional Relationship**

The consistency of this relationship between education and approval of compromise is striking, and we lay another relationship over it as we develop our puzzle. The control we introduce is ideology. We demonstrate below that public opinion surveys show, over and again, that conservatives are more hostile to compromise than liberals, sometimes markedly so (also see Hibbing, Theiss-Morse, and Whitaker 2009). We show elsewhere (forthcoming) that partisans (and by extension, ideologues) react to and engage in compromise differently, a function of the fact that progressives, more frequently than not, seek change, while conservatives want to conserve or preserve the status quo. Given these premises, we argue that Kahneman and Tversky’s (1984) prospect theory, which postulates that loss weighs so much more heavily than gain on individual calculations about the future, should apply. If this is so, shouldn’t those
seeking to resist change be more recalcitrant when it comes to compromise? We offer evidence to suggest that this is the case, and it is an explanation for the partisan (and thus ideological) difference that we find many times over. What does this difference mean to the education-compromise relationship we find so consistently in our review of the surveys analyzed here? If conservatives are naturally more opposed to compromise than others, does education work the same way with them?

Across all four of our surveys, when we break the relationship of education to acceptance of compromise down by ideology, it looks quite different for liberals and moderates than it does for conservatives. It is a stunning conditional relationship, one that merits further investigation. The results are displayed in Figures 2a – 2d. The impact of education on compromise for liberals and moderates is huge. Analyzing the Pew survey, for instance, 52 percent of less educated liberals desire representatives who can compromise across political lines. That percentage climbs to 82 percent for well educated liberals, a difference of 30 percentage points. The difference is not quite so large for moderates, though the relationship is still impressive, a 20 percentage point difference. The difference between less and well educated conservatives, however, is but nine percentage points. In two of the four cases – those in the American National Election Studies – the relationship is non-existent for conservatives, though it is quite meaningful for liberals and moderates. There appears to be something quite distinctive about conservatives.

To develop this point further, we analyze the relationships in Figure 2 in a multivariate setting, again employing all four surveys. In our equations, we include our 3-category measure of education. We also include dummy variables for liberals and conservatives, with moderates serving as our omitted category. We then interact education and our liberal and conservative dummy variables, which means that the coefficient on education should be interpreted as the
effect of education on moderates. The coefficients on the interaction terms tell us whether the

**Figure 2a: Compromise preference by ideology and educational attainment (Pew 2014)**

![Figure 2a](image)

Question wording: Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right? I like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with [OR] I like elected officials who stick to their positions?

**Figure 2b: Compromise preference by ideology and educational attainment (ANES/EGSS 2012)**

![Figure 2b](image)

Question wording: Would you prefer a U.S. president who compromises to get things done or, sticks to his or her principles no matter what?
Figure 2c: Compromise preference by ideology and educational attainment (Gallup 2013)

Question wording: Turning back to Congress, earlier you said you disapprove of the job Congress is doing. Can you tell me some of the reasons why you disapprove of the job Congress is doing? [Gridlock/not compromising coded as support for compromise]

Figure 2d: Compromise preference by ideology and educational attainment (ANES 2016)

Question wording: Would you prefer a government official who compromises to get things done, or who sticks to his or her principles no matter what?
effect of education on liberals or conservatives is different from the effect of education on moderates.

Finally, we include controls for sex, race (white/non-white), and age. It has been argued that women have a more collective and collaborative leadership style than men, suggesting that perhaps women are more open to compromise than men (Rosener 1990; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003). Older people are often more engaged in politics than younger people and have more experience with the political process, which might make them more likely to recognize the value of compromise (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). On race, blacks and other racial minorities are less likely than whites to trust others. In some studies (Alesina and LaFerrera 2000; Demaris and Yang 1994), the difference is very large. Other studies show that nonwhites have lower levels of trust in a range of institutions, including law enforcement, health providers, and government (Musa et al. 2009; Mangum 2016). With less trust of other people, and with greater skepticism of institutions, negotiation can be harder to engage in and compromise more difficult to accept.

In these multivariate logit analyses, the results are again consistent across the four surveys, at least for the relationships we are seeking to understand. The effect of education on support for compromise for moderates is positive, statistically significant, and substantively similar across all four analyses. The additional impact of education for liberals is inconsistent, in some cases positive, in others negative. The takeaway is that there is no special impact of education for liberals beyond what it is for moderates. Conservatives, however, are another matter. The coefficients associated with the conservative interaction terms are negative in all four cases, and these coefficients achieve powerful statistical significance in three of them (see Table 1). Even in the Gallup analysis, where the dependent variable is quite different and based
on an open-ended response, the negative coefficient approaches significance (with a p-value of 0.12). For conservatives, this suggests that there may be a countervailing force at work, something limiting the effect of education on a compromising attitude. These findings confirm that we have a conditional relationship at work here, one that looks different for one group – conservatives -- than it does for others.

The other coefficients in the equation act much as expected, though not as consistently.

The dummy variable for conservatives (which shows the effect of being conservative vs. moderate among those with low levels of education) is negative and significant in two of the four equations, negative in a third, and negligible in the fourth. Although this coefficient is just

| Table 1: Effect of education and ideology on support for compromise |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                            | B   | s.e. | B   | s.e. | B   | s.e. | B   | s.e. | B   | s.e. |
| Education                  | 0.41*** | 0.07 | 0.53*** | 0.15 | 0.51*** | 0.12 | 0.53*** | 0.10 |
| Education*liberal          | 0.36*** | 0.13 | 0.20   | 0.22 | 0.18   | 0.22 | -0.01  | 0.14 |
| Education*conservative     | -0.25** | 0.11 | -0.52*** | 0.18 | -0.27  | 0.17 | -0.35*** | 0.12 |
| Liberal dummy              | -0.10  | 0.47 | 0.02   | 0.24 | -0.57* | 0.32 | 0.60*** | 0.17 |
| Conservative dummy         | -0.59*** | 0.12 | 0.01   | 0.2  | -0.13  | 0.23 | -0.51*** | 0.015 |
| Female dummy               | -0.16** | 0.08 | -0.12  | 0.12 | -0.06  | 0.13 | 0.21** | 0.08 |
| Age                        | -0.003* | 0.002 | 0.02*** | 0.004 | 0.01*** | 0.004 | 0.01*** | 0.002 |
| Nonwhite dummy             | -0.43*** | 0.08 | -0.29** | 0.14 | -0.45*** | 0.16 | -0.03  | 0.09 |
| Constant                   | 0.29   | 0.18 | -0.36  | 0.23 | -2.03*** | 0.26 | -0.24  | 0.17 |

N 3,177 1,235 1,481 3,152

*p<0.10; **p<0.50; ***p<0.01; Analysis uses weights provided by data source.

Pew: Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right? I like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with [OR] I like elected officials who stick to their positions?

ANES-EGSS: Would you prefer a U.S. president who compromises to get things done or, sticks to his or her principles no matter what?

Gallup: Turning back to Congress, earlier you said you disapprove of the job Congress is doing. Can you tell me some of the reasons why you disapprove of the job Congress is doing? [Gridlock/not compromising coded as support for compromise]

ANES: Would you prefer a government official who compromises to get things done, or who sticks to his or her principles no matter what?
capturing the effect among less educated individuals, it aligns with our previous work about the
effect of a conservative belief system on the acceptance of compromise. There is no regularity to
the coefficient capturing the difference between less educated liberals and less educated
moderates. The only other variable that acts consistently across the four equations is race, with
nonwhites less compromising than whites, all else equal. The coefficients associated with sex
and age are not consistent.

**Figure 3: Compromise preference by ideology and educational attainment (Exercising Citizenship in
Democracy Survey 2006)**

![Compromise preference by ideology and educational attainment](image)

Question wording: Would you prefer that members of Congress stand up for their principles come what
may, or compromise with their opponents in order to get something done?

It is tempting to think that our results are somehow a function of the political
environment that these surveys were taken in. After all, each of the four surveys we have
analyzed was conducted during the Obama presidency, when conservatives, in a defensive
stance, might perhaps be less inclined to compromise. To see if our findings generalize to
another political environment, we study the same relationships using a Bush-era survey, one
conducted in 2006 when Republicans controlled the White House, the Senate, and the House. The data in Figure 3 come from a study by Hibbing, Theiss-Morse, and Whitaker (2009). Here, again, we see that for liberals and moderates, those with a college degree are more likely to support compromise than those with a high school degree or less. For conservatives, however, education appears to have no effect – even at a moment when the Republican Party controlled the government.

**Why are Educated Conservatives Distinctive?**

Whether it is due to greater sophistication, holding more information, more ability to deal with abstractions, contact with others who are more sophisticated and informed, or some other by-product of formal schooling, education is an all-purpose contributor to political attitudes. And as we discuss above, there is reason to believe that education would lead people to be more sympathetic to political compromise, to see it is as necessary to a healthy democracy even if it means that one’s own preferences are not fully met.

If this is the case, then the conditional relationship we have identified here is intriguing. Why does education not operate for conservatives the way that it does for everybody else? We are not arguing that education does not matter for conservatives, but our intuition leads us to believe that it matters *differently* for conservatives than for others, at least in understanding attitudes toward compromise. As we will argue in in the remainder of this article, for conservatives, if additional education leads to greater acceptance of compromise, it *also* introduces forces that blunt the acceptance of compromise. In other words, education matters, but it matters in two, competing directions.

In Tables 2 and 3, we test a pair of hypotheses derived from this idea. The first (Table 2) has to do with media consumption. We know that being educated leads people to have and seek

Knowing and understanding how politics works allows one to participate in more active and sophisticated ways. This should work for all people, no matter what their ideology. But if education leads to a greater likelihood to seek and absorb political material, does it also matter to where they seek their political information and what type of information they will be exposed to?

Table 2: Effect of education, ideology, and media consumption on support for compromise

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<td></td>
<td>0.08***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.15***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-0.41*</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

N: 1,235 1,235 3,152 3,152

*p<0.10; **p<0.50; ***p<0.01; Analysis uses weights provided by data source.

ANES-EGSS: Would you prefer a U.S. president who compromises to get things done or, sticks to his or her principles no matter what?
ANES: Would you prefer a government official who compromises to get things done, or who sticks to his or her principles no matter what?

What is especially intriguing -- and relevant to our hypothesis -- is that conservatives show a distinct pattern of news consumption. In comparison to liberals or moderates, they are not only much more likely to watch and listen to ideological media but they are considerably more likely to rely on these media as their main source of news. For example, 40 percent of those who
voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election cited Fox News as their “main source” of news during the campaign while just 9 percent of Hillary Clinton voters cited MSNBC (Pew Research Center 2017). Not only do conservatives (and Republicans) show a partiality for ideological news but they also have a considerably higher mistrust of conventional news (Ladd 2012; Pew Research Center n.d.).

Of particular interest is that the content of conservative media portrays politics as a battle of good versus evil, of right versus wrong. In what Berry and Sobieraj (2014) dub “the outrage industry,” there are no grays in terms of policy choices and the story lines emphasize a moral and emotional dimension where politicians must decide between principle and craven opportunism. Conservative hosts denounce compromise as unprincipled and attack Republicans who cross the aisle if they work with Democrats. To accept compromise, to value bipartisanship, runs against the *raison d’etre* of conservative media.

The argument is thus: Conservatives are more likely to pursue and trust conservative media sources. Educated people are more likely to pursue political news than less educated people and that is just as true for conservatives as others. The presentation of public affairs and ideas through Fox News and other conservative media is distinctive, not just in the depiction and interpretation of various policies and political figures, but also in their interpretation of process. Ergo, education contributes to attitudes toward compromise for conservatives as it does for others, but layered upon this effect is also greater exposure to and understanding of a vivid argument against moderation.3

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3 Despite this logic, a cautionary note is the self-selection bias that comes from choosing to watch or listen to these media. No one is forced to watch Fox or listen to Rush Limbaugh. Are
Our strategy to test this idea is to take the multivariate regressions previously discussed and use them as a baseline. We introduce additional controls into the equations and then compare the coefficients associated with the education-for-conservatives interaction terms, which are negative and significant in our original test. If our hypothesis holds water – that for conservatives, their ideology blunts the salutary effect of education on compromise because conservative messaging is so dismissive of it – then these coefficients should diminish and lose their significance when controls are applied.

The new measures we introduce in our explicit test of the impact of conservative media include variables capturing reported exposure to three different media sources – conservative, liberal, and mainstream. Only the ANES surveys have adequate media exposure questions, so this analysis is necessarily limited to those surveys. We thus proceed here with two independent

these hosts merely preaching to the choir or are they intensifying attitudes, hardening beliefs that compromise is a sellout of principles? Recent research on the question of whether exposure to media has a discrete impact on attitudes related to polarization has reached contrary results (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013).

Starting with the 2012 EGSS surveys, the ANES introduced a long battery of questions about media consumption (though the specific programming involved differs in 2012 and 2016). We utilize their questions about television and radio. Respondents were asked to indicate if they watched or listened to the program in question at least once per month. They could answer yes or no. We then created count variables to indicate the number of mainstream, liberal, and conservative programs that respondents said they consume per month. The list of shows for both years is available from the authors.
tests of our hypothesis, one from 2012 and one from 2016.

The results of this exercise confirm only part of our hypothesis, that exposure to conservative media, controlling for everything else, leads people to be more hostile to compromise. In both the 2012 EGSS and 2016 ANES analyses, the conservative media exposure coefficient is negative, sizable, and statistically significant. Contact with the mainstream media, as we would expect, works the opposite way, again with significance. That is, people who consume mainstream news are more likely to believe that political compromise is a good thing. Exposure to MSNBC or liberal comedy shows also contributes to greater sympathy to the concept of compromise, though the coefficient is only significant in 2016.

The question we are interested in asking here, however, is whether greater exposure to conservative media is the explanation for the hostility we see toward compromise among educated conservatives. If so, then the interaction coefficients should diminish and lose their significance once we control for conservative media exposure, but alas, we do not see this. The coefficients are ever slightly smaller, but not nearly enough to confirm our hypothesis. The bottom line is that exposure to Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity does lead to rejection of compromise, but it does not work much more for better educated conservatives than less educated ones. We also find that well-educated conservatives are not consistently more likely than less educated conservatives to consume conservative news, a pattern that holds across both surveys.⁵

We have one more hypothesis in our quiver to explain our puzzle, and our logic runs along the same lines as in the media exposure analysis. This time, we ask whether exposure to

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⁵ Results not shown here.
and acceptance of core conservative ideas, which is more likely among the better educated, countervails the acceptance of political compromise. The two ideas we have in mind are individualism and disdain for government. Both are key elements of conservative ideology and might matter to an assessment of compromise. Regarding individualism, it is likely that individualists are less likely to value outcomes that aggregate competing preferences or interests, and might therefore be more likely to believe that one (and by extension, one’s representatives) should stick to one’s own principles. As to disdain for government, the notion of a smaller, less intrusive, less powerful government permeates conservative thought. Compromise, a necessary ingredient for governance that balances preferences and settles questions, may be less valued when government itself is less valued.

Our proposition here is that education should contribute to greater understanding of and adherence to these important conservative ideas. If so, then those ideas should themselves affect support for compromise and alter the interaction between education and ideology. Again, our explanation for our initial finding about compromise is not that education does not matter to conservatives but that it does, perhaps by enabling a greater linkage between conservative principles and their implications for democratic governance.

As before, we start with our initial equation and then add variables to capture conservative ideas. If our hypothesis is correct, the inclusion of these controls will lead the coefficients associated with the conservative-education interaction term to shrink and lose significance. For this portion of the analysis, we use the 2014 survey from the Pew Research Center. Unfortunately, we cannot include these variables in the same equations that include controls for media consumption as there is no survey that has all the requisite questions. But the advantage of having several surveys at our disposal is that we can test more ideas, even if not all
at the same time.

The Pew Survey includes questions capturing different dimensions of both individualism and skepticism of government and we have constructed two scales of three variables each to use as controls in the equation displayed in Table 3. The individualism scale adds variables that capture different dimensions of the concept, so that higher values represent stronger attachment to individualistic ideas.6 Likewise, the dislike of government scale is comprised of three questions measuring hostility to government and government functions. Here, too, higher values on the scale capture greater skepticism, mistrust, and concern about government.7 Among the conservative respondents, more years of education is associated with higher scores on both

The inclusion of these two scales in the equation, unlike in the previous test, do matter

6 Respondents were asked: whether success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control or whether everyone has it in their own power to succeed; whether most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard or whether hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people; and which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor – lack of effort on his or her own part, or circumstances beyond his or her control.

7 Respondents were asked: whether government is almost always wasteful and inefficient or government often does a better job than people give it credit for; whether government should do more to solve problems or whether government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals; and whether government aid to the poor does more harm than good, by making people too dependent on government assistance or whether government aid to the poor does more good than harm, because people can’t get out of poverty until their basic needs are met.
and exactly in the way that we anticipate. Individualists and government skeptics are unambiguously less amenable to compromise. Given that both variables are scored as seven-point scales, the coefficients are directly comparable. Individualism is the more powerful of the two, but both are comfortably significant with p-values below 0.01. What is even more important is how these two variables affect the other variables in the equation. Confirming our hypotheses, these additions to the equation drive the conservative-education interaction coefficient down to a major degree, just about halving it and putting it out of the range of significance (p value at 0.13). Notably, almost all of the other coefficients in the equation remain close to their “before” state.

**Table 3: Effect of education, ideology, and conservative principles compromise support (Pew 2014)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>B</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.41***</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education*liberal</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education*conservative</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal dummy</td>
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<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative dummy</td>
<td>-0.59***</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.62***</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female dummy</td>
<td>-0.16**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.002</td>
<td>-0.004*</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite dummy</td>
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<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.50***</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism scale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.10***</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike government scale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1.24***</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 3,177 / 2,963

*p<0.10; **p<0.50; ***p<0.01; Analysis uses weights provided by data source.

Question wording: Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right? I like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with [OR] I like elected officials who stick to their positions?

Among conservatives, being more highly educated means having a solid ideas-based foundation for one’s ideological position, and these ideas have an impact on how one views compromise. For all respondents, education contributes to appreciation for the value of
compromise to a political order, just as proponents of the view that education is the universal solvent of governance would expect. But for conservatives, it also pushes back. Now it is worth noting that even after we account for the interaction between education and ideology, the coefficient associated with conservative ideology is still strong and significant. Conservatives are more hostile to compromise than others, a phenomenon we explore and explain elsewhere (forthcoming). The relationship of education to compromise is our focus here, however, and we identify a mechanism by which it operates via specific conservative ideas in Table 3. Education matters to accepting compromise, and for conservatives, it also contributes to a fuller absorption of some conservative principles – individualism and distrust/dislike of government – which are more likely to make compromise anathema.

**Conclusion**

Support for compromise is especially important now, in an era when the lines that define our politics seem particularly hardened given the heightened partisanship in Congress in recent years and the frequent *lack* of compromise in Washington. The travails of the Obama administration after it lost its Democratic majorities in the Congress, and the limited success of the early Trump administration with its narrow GOP majority in the Senate, affirm the need for a compromising mindset among the public. This analysis is an attempt to understand what might contribute to that mindset, and, perhaps, what might be done to cultivate it.

Our conclusions are not just about compromise, however. We also wish to make a statement about education. In this study, education matters and matters a lot. It contributes strongly to the acceptance of compromise, and the relationship of education to approval of compromise is vivid in all four of the surveys of our study. We show, however, that education has other effects that blunt the acceptance of compromise among conservatives, that for them,
education matters in countervailing directions.

Why education matters so much to acceptance of compromise is a question to be probed further. Educated people are more likely to have knowledge and to pursue new knowledge about politics. They are more likely to be around others who are educated and reinforce the initial effects of education. They tend to have a more nuanced and complex understanding of how politics work. They are more likely to hold a more intricate set of principles that apply to particular situations. Whatever the reason, and it need not be the same for everyone, being better educated means a greater likelihood of accepting compromise.

Does this mean that education is the “universal solvent?” Our analysis is limited to one set of dependent variables, so this is just a single demonstration of the power of formal education, not a demonstration of its universality. But it is worth spending a moment over the word solvent. Someone as brilliant as Phillip Converse must have chosen this word very deliberately to make his point. A solvent is a liquid that dilutes another substance, but the definition, according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, extends to “something that eliminates or attenuates something especially unwanted.” In this case, the word is particularly apropos. We contend that education counters the inclination of individuals to cling inflexibly to their own principles. It is not that educated individuals have weakly held opinions; indeed, their views on many issues are better informed than less educated individuals, and more dear to them as well. However, the inclination to cling to principle and to disdain compromise is “diluted” by another desire, one we speculate is an essential feature of democratic governance.

But in practice, the solvent works better for some than for others. The failure of greater education to lead conservatives to greater acceptance of compromise seems all too indicative of modern American politics. Whatever the mysteries still shrouded behind the regressions, our
results make a lot of sense in terms of everyday, real-world politics. Although polarization has accelerated on both sides of the ideological aisle, it is naïve to believe that it has emerged with equal force on each. This tribalism on the right is reflected in the much denser, much more popular outrage media landscape. We show this association in our statistical work, though it does not provide a full resolution to the puzzle we present. Still, we think it consequential as outrage media provide a key source of cue giving, identifying in straightforward terms why otherwise complicated compromises are threats to the well-being of the body politic.

When we look at highly educated conservatives, what we see that many are full-octane voters who participate disproportionately in Republican primaries. They are high level media consumers who self-select a good deal of outrage media, pay a lot of attention to politics, and hold a world view that pushes resentment front and center. Still, their perspective is rooted in classic conservative values, which is forcefully reflected in Table 3. A belief in individualism and in small government has traditionally served as the very foundation of conservative philosophy. For educated conservatives, we believe that this philosophical predisposition incorporates hardened beliefs in the irresponsible character of those in the other side. Our own conclusion is that educated conservatives are more likely to believe that compromise unduly threatens their belief system.

In his study of the link between education and implicit racial stereotypes, Christopher Federico writes, “researchers may want to be more cautious in touting the enlightening effects of education” (2006, 608). To this measured assessment, we add a caution that higher levels of education will not uniformly increase support for core elements of democratic governance, such as the importance of compromise. We have identified that the proliferation of conservative media helps to fuel resistance to compromise, but its effect is not more profound as education levels
increase. Rather, it is the ability of education to provide the cognitive capacity that links ideological identification with ideological principles that drives this phenomenon. We are thus left not only with a more nuanced view of how education affects democratic governance, but also of how core elements of conservative ideology do so as well.
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