Academia's Class Problem: First-Generation Scholars in Political Science

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Abstract

Political scientists devote a massive amount of attention to socio-economic background of political actors and descriptive representation in political institutions. In contrast to this research focus, political science as a discipline has not been very successful in terms of inclusion of scholars from less privileged backgrounds. Only 28% and 37% of participants at the Annual Conferences of the American and European Political Science Associations (APSA 2024 and EPSA 2023) self-identified as first-generation scholars, which sharply contrasts with the distribution in the general population. We identify several challenges that first-generation scholars face that may explain their underrepresentation. These challenges are often conflated with material resources, but non-material factors are equally, and perhaps even more important. These other factors range from information asymmetries, including the hidden curriculum, to self-perceptions and aspirations, and the expectations of families and communities of first-generation researchers. We discuss the implications for diversity in the political science discipline and potential avenues how to address the challenges that first-generation scholars face.

Acknowledgements

This paper emerged from the discussions among the authors about their experiences as first-gens in political science and their activities with first-gen students and peers. The authors also have co-led first-generations activities at the European Political Science Association (EPSA) and are now continuing their activities within the newly founded European Political Science Society (EPSS). We thank EPSA for welcoming this initiative, and the EPSA Diversity Committee, especially Anita Gohdes, for organizing a roundtable on first-generation scholars at the EPSA 2024 conference. We thank our co-participants Despina Alexiadou, Denis Cohen, Mathias Poertner and the attendees for an engaging discussion at this roundtable. The second part of this paper draws on the discussion at this roundtable, in addition to our own experiences beyond EPSA. We also thank EPSA, and especially Ray Duch, for making the data from the conference participant survey publicly available, and Ana Diaz and Allison Macdonald for sharing the APSA data. Finally, we thank Liam Beiser-McGrath, Denis Cohen, Evelyne Hübscher, Alex Moise, and Mathias Poertner for comments, Nathalie Giger for advice on the literature, Jonas Pontusson for advice on data, and Stefan Wolter for information on educational family background of Swiss students.

1. Introduction

Political science has a very long history studying the impact of educational background, working-class membership and other, related socio-economic characteristics on politics. Early work highlighted the link between education and democracy (De Tocqueville 1838), and identified educational family background as key factor for political socialization (Lasswell 1936), grounding a tradition of focus on socio-economic factors in political science research (Almond and Verba 1963; Lipset 1983; Huckfeldt 1984; Kam and Palmer 2008; Persson 2015; Evans and Tilley 2017). A large number of papers and panels at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the European Political Science Association (EPSA) refer to education and other socio-economic factors.[1] Some associations exclusively focus on these factors, e.g. the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE).[2]

Compared to the weight that socio-economic factors receive in political research, there is astonishingly little information on how these factors shape political science as a discipline. By analyzing the case of first-generation scholars ("first-gens"), our paper discusses how political science fares in terms of inclusion of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with a focus on the educational family background of political scientists. While we do not know much,[3] the few studies that exist do not warrant much optimism (Montoya 2023). Our descriptive analysis of representation of first-generation scholars in professional associations confirms this. Only 28% and 37% of participants at the Annual Conferences of the American and European Political Science Associations (APSA 2024 and EPSA 2023) self-identified as first-generation scholars. The distribution in the population is the reverse: 69% of Americans and 81% of Western Europeans have parents without a college/university degree. This points to a representation gap of up to 40 percentage points.

[1] Our own keyword search of the EPSA 2024 conference program suggests that around 10% of the paper and panel titles in the program refer to socio-economic factors or circumstances. One full panel is devoted to "Education and Political Behavior." Two full panels are about class, three about the urban-rural divide, and six about redistribution.

[2] We focus on APSA and EPSA because they were the main individual membership associations in political science in the U.S. and in Europe at the time when we conducted our research.

[3] Although there is a growing literature on the experience of first-generation college students, less research analyzes the case of academics. For a review see Pascarella et al. (2004).

The representation gap that we identify is troubling for multiple reasons. Political science has a long tradition of studying both socio-economic background and representation. Research shows that descriptive representation, beyond its normative importance (Pitkin 1967; Phillips 1995; Elsässer and Schäfer 2022), has substantive effects on policies and outcomes, and important symbolic effects (Mansbridge 1999; Gay 2002; Montoya, Bejarano, Brown, and Gershon 2022). Jane Mansbridge's (1999) famously answered the question whether blacks should represent blacks and women should represent women with a contingent "yes". This research mostly referred to political institutions, but there are good reasons why these insights apply not only to politics, but also to political science. Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives are grounded in the idea that descriptive representation matters in all areas of society, including academia. If our own discipline so clearly falls short of descriptive representation on a major socio-economic criterion that it has identified as key in its own research, educational family background, then, according to the same research itself, this has implications for the discipline.

How exactly does it matter? First, the (under)representation of groups – in terms of gender, race, or socioeconomic background – shapes the research that political scientists produce, the questions they ask, and the answers they give. First-gens, for instance, have closer connections to segments of society that many political scientists study, but rarely, if ever, meet. Examples are radical right voters who are predominantly from a lower educational family background. First-gens can contribute a different perspective on, and perhaps a clearer understanding of, the insecurities of these voters than a researcher from a progressive, upper-middle class background. As political scientist Frank Baumgartner put it, "…we've had a blind spot when it comes to social privilege. Our discipline has been shaped by the socially advantaged, and that's limited our ability to fully understand the dynamics that can lead to dramatic change…."[4]

This is even more evident when it comes to the social identities of these voters. Sociological approaches not only highlight the identity of the subjects, but also of the researcher and their ability to dive into the social environment of those who they study (Hockey 1993; Soedirgo and Glas 2020; Adu-Ampong and Adams 2020). There is no reason why this should be different for identities linked to socio-economic background. We can easily imagine that a researcher who grew up in a less

[4] Interview with Beatriz Rey, May 10, 2025. Available at https://beatrizrey.substack.com/p/on-the-limits-of-political-science (accessed May 13, 2025).

privileged community has a different understanding of the identities and the political behavior of low-education voters than a researcher who never spent much time in such an environment and barely ever met these people. To adapt Mansbridge's (1999) statement, our answer to the question whether first-gens should study less privileged voters is also a contingent "yes."

Second, academics not only produce knowledge. As teachers we reproduce it. First-gen academics can be role models for first-generation students (Gomez 2020; Laiduc, Herrmann, and Covarrubias 2021; Benson and Montoya 2022), even those who may be considering a career in academia, affecting their chances of social mobility (Henderson and Shure 2018) – and for peers in our academic community: the same barriers of access to the profession affect the career progression of first-gen scholars (Holley and Gardner 2012).[5]

This paper draws on our experiences in a series of first-generation panels and events and a symposium at the 2024 EPSA that explored the reasons for this under-representation. Although we do not rely on individual testimonials (Saldaña, Castro-Villarreal, and Sosa 2013), our discussion centers around the most common experiences shared in these contexts. We organize the specific experiences as five common themes – money, information, the 'hidden curriculum', aspiration and self-perceptions, and community and family – for analytical reasons, but also to preserve the confidentiality of the personal anecdotes that were shared.

2. Evidence

We define first-gens as those individuals whose parents or guardians did not attend to university (Ishitani 2006; Cataldi, Bennett, and Chen 2018), and thus lack the family background that can provide guidance and support through college and later, in their academic careers. This simple definition is not uncontested. For example, some use "first in family" referring only to parents or guardians, while others include the immediate family (siblings), those who co-habit with the individual even if not related, or a more extended family. Additionally, others describe first-gens as those whose parents have "some college" but did not complete a bachelor's degree – that is, they may have started but not

[5] See https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/07/08/dept-of-data-academia-elite/.

finished college[6] – or to refer to the first in their families to attend post-graduate education in the country of reference.[7] Our discussion may be useful for cases that fit looser definitions of first-gen. Our narrower focus allows us to discuss common themes arising from not having been able to rely on family experience with higher education and how that may affect professional paths.

Beyond definitional issues, the main challenge for analyses of first-gens in academia (or anywhere else) is the difficulty to identify them. "First-gen" is not an easily observable trait. Universities and professional associations normally collect data along different personal characteristics, e.g. gender and ethnic background. In comparison, however, there is very little information on educational background of students and academics.

Two notable exceptions are the APSA and EPSA.[8] APSA has asked different questions regarding first-gen status since 2019. We take their question from the 2024 survey because it best reflects what we want to measure and is most consistent with EPSA's question in an online survey among participants who registered for the annual conference 2023.[9] Figure 1 shows that 28.3% of the APSA participants were first-gens. Although EPSA has a slightly higher share of first-gens participants (36.7%), non-first gens are still a large majority. The APSA survey (unlike the EPSA survey) also distinguishes further among non first-gens by asking if one or two (or more) parents or primary guardians have a college degree. The large majority, almost 50%, of the APSA participants have parents who both have a college degree (hence, 22% have one parent with a college degree).[10]

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[6] See https://www.firstgenforward.org/

[7] See https://www.insidehighered.com/news/diversity/socioeconomics/2023/08/03/varied-definitions-first-generation-confuse-students#.

[8] EPSA published their data here: https://github.com/rayduch/EPSA-Survey. We did not have access to the APSA raw data, but the APSA office kindly shared aggregate figures for the first-generations question with us.

[9] The wording in the 2024 APSA survey was: "Thinking of the people whom you consider to be your primary parental or guardian figures, did any graduate from 4-year college with a bachelor's degree?" Answer categories were: "None of my parents/guardians graduated from college", "One of my parents/guardians graduated from college", "Two (or more) of my parents/guardians graduated from college", "Not sure or prefer not to answer". The wording for the EPSA 2023 survey was: "Do you consider yourself to be a first-generation scholar? We generally speak of first-generation scholars when none of the parents received a university degree." Answer categories were: "Yes", "No", "Don't know", "Prefer not to say".

[10] Appendix A1 discusses these data in greater detail and offers some subgroup analyses, to the extent that this is possible and meaningful with the data that we have. We limit our analysis to the U.S. and Western Europe

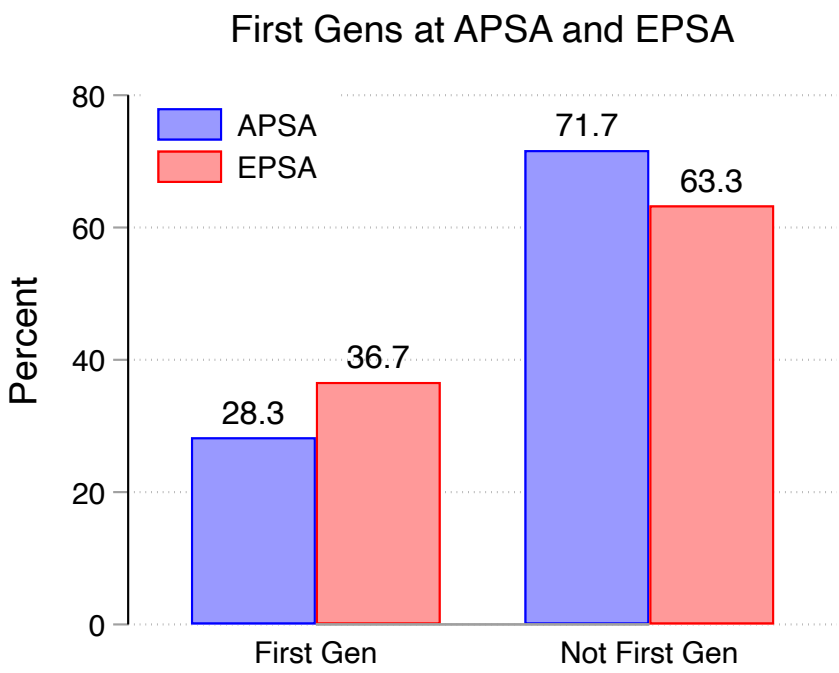

Figure 1: Share of first-generation participants at APSA conference 2024 and EPSA conference 2023. Sources: APSA and EPSA participant surveys.

To get a sense of the degree of over- or underrepresentation of first-gens in political science, we compare the share of first-gen participants at the EPSA conference to the share of citizens aged 25-65 with parents who did not attend college/a university in the population, Figure 2 shows this share for the U.S. and Western Europe.[11] To make educational attainment comparable across European countries we use a harmonized educational attainment measure based on the International

because most participants at the APSA and EPSA conferences come from Western European and U.S. universities. For Eastern European or non-European countries, the share of citizens with parents who attended college / university is likely to be even lower.

[11] The U.S. data is from the General Social Survey 2022. The European data is from the European Social Survey, wave 11. European data used for figure 2 is from Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).[12] We note that some educational systems offer more attractive alternatives to a university education than others, e.g. the vocational systems in Austria, Germany or Switzerland, which decreases the incentive to go to university. In Appendix A2, we, therefore, show the results for the individual countries and also for a broader measure of tertiary education, including advanced vocational/non-university education, which is important in Austria or Germany.

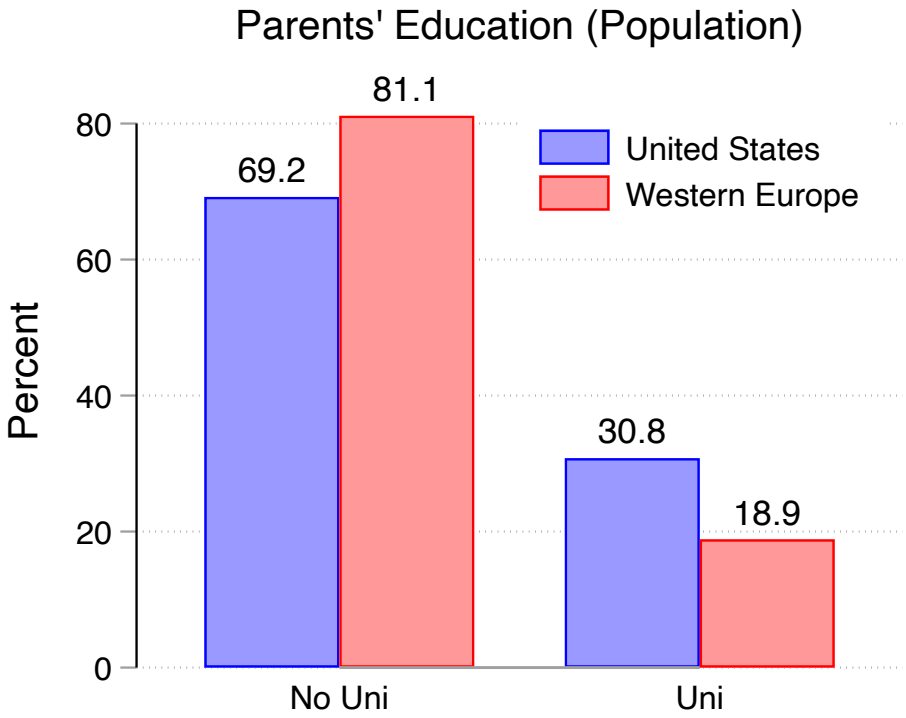

Figure 2: Share of population with at least one parent with a college / university degree. *Notes:* U.S. and Western European countries, sample restricted to respondents between 25 – 65 years of age. Sources: General Social Survey (GSS) 2022 and European Social Survey (ESS) wave 11.

[12] For figure 2, ISCED categories 6, 7 and 8 are coded as college / university education.

If we take these numbers as benchmarks, the discrepancy between the share of first-gens at the EPSA conference and the share of citizens with parents without college / university education is around 40 percentage points. This discrepancy is 6 percentage points lower if we use the broader definition of tertiary education for Western European countries.[13] Since both conferences are highly international, it is not clear which country or combinations of countries should serve as benchmark.[14] We, therefore, note that the gap shrinks by 18 percentage points for the country with the highest share of parents with college/university education.[15] But even there, the discrepancy is still massive.

Selection into a tenured academic job is of course a multi-stage process. The first step is to enter a university, then to pursue a Ph.D., and then to stay in academia and aim for a professorship. The probability of taking the first step is already significantly lower for first-gens: on average, the share of university students with parents without a tertiary degree is 47% across European countries (Hauschildt, Vögtle, and Gwosc 2018, p. 8).[16] This number lies in-between the shares for the population and academics in figures 1 and 2, which suggests that selection takes place on all stages.[17] There is significant cross-country variation, however, which is related to national educational systems, the societal value attached to university education and the prior share of citizens with a university degree.

[13] See figure A2.1.

[14] We do not have data on nationality for the APSA survey. In the EPSA survey, the number of observations is small for most countries.

[15] 37% in Belgium. See figure A2.3.

[16] In Switzerland, for instance, the share of persons who enter university is around 30 percentage points lower for persons with parents without a university degree compared to those whose parents have a university degree (Wolter et al. 2023, p. 221).

[17] There is a fair amount of variation across countries and disciplines. Hauschildt et al. (2018) find a higher share of first-gens at universities in Italy and Portugal and a particularly low share in Germany, Denmark and Norway. Wolter et al. (2023) find that, in Switzerland, the share of first-gens is lower in medicine, natural sciences and engineering and higher in the social sciences, humanities and law; the share in economics is between these two groups (p. 222). Similarly, Kniffin(2007) finds that among the professoriate, first-generation graduates "tend to be under-represented at research universities and disproportionately represented at teaching-focused comprehensive universities."

3. Why are first-gens underrepresented?

This section discusses what first-gens tend to identify as the key reasons for their under-representation among scholars in political science. We concentrate on the challenges that are specific to an academic career that were mentioned often in the literature and by participants in events we draw upon.[18] But since an academic career is a multi-stage selection process – from starting a university degree, to postgraduate and Ph.D. studies, the decision to pursue an academic career, and the ability to secure a tenure-track or permanent job – some of these challenges are more relevant at some stages of this process than others.

Money

The most common, initial answer to explain the low share of first-generation scholars in academia points to economic resources.[19] Although equating first-generation with low-income individuals may be an oversimplification, money certainly matters (Bui 2002; Brinkman, Gibson, and Presnell 2013). The first effect is direct. A university education is a costly investment. When the family background allows for only limited or no financial support, living costs, student fees and opportunity costs to forgo a paid job, can pose a serious obstacle. Extra-curricular activities and unpaid internships that increase the odds of admission to more prestigious programs may be outside the realm of possibilities. This is the case on all stages of an academic career: from tuition fees for under- and postgraduate education to small stipends at the Ph.D level or poorly paid postdocs in the first years of an academic career.[20] It also includes the ability of visiting the location for choosing among academic programs or potential job opportunities.

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[18] Among others, we draw on a roundtable discussion at the Annual Conference of the European Political Science Association (EPSA) in Köln on July 5, 2024, and the experiences of the authors in their role as organizers of first-generations activities. We particularly thank Anita Gohdes (Hertie School of Governance, Germany) for organizing the roundtable with Despina Alexiadou (University of Strathclyde, UK), Denis Cohen (University of Mannheim, Germany), Carolina Garriga (University of Essex, UK), Mathias Poertner (London School of Economics, UK) and Thomas Sattler (University of Geneva, Switzerland).

[19] The first question to the panelists at the EPSA roundtable in fact was about money.

[20] This direct financial effect should vary across countries, depending, for instance, on student fees or the employment status and pay of Ph.D. students.

The second effect, which unfolds after the entry into university, is indirect. During their studies, the material differences among students often appear small because most of them live on a tight budget. But greater family wealth provides a safety net that influences career decisions with long-term implications for an academic career – even if it does not significantly raise life standards as a student. Students from wealthier backgrounds can take more risks, such as spending time in study abroad/exchange programs, getting an additional, specialized degree, or accepting a poorly paid postdoc at a more prestigious university. Less wealthy students may opt for more security and in exchange go for less prestige, e.g. a better paid position at their local university (Shure and Zierow 2023).[21] Given the importance of academic 'pedigree' in an internationalized academic job market, this poses a serious disadvantage for first-generation students.

Although money matters, directly and indirectly, it is not the only, and probably not the most important, challenge that most first-generation scholars face.[22] In the next sections, we identify four, non-material factors that are crucial.

Information

A true obstacle for many first-generation scholars is lack of information for selecting into academic institutions that could best fit the student's interests and career prospects. First-gens may simply ignore differences among programs, majors or courses, particularly regarding the quality and prestige of academic institutions. This (lack of) knowledge influences decisions regarding where to pursue a Bachelor's or Master's degree, or the choice of university for an academic exchange. This, in turn, influences the prospects for a doctoral degree because more prestigious institutions are likely to recruit students from other similarly recognized universities.[23] First-gen students may be aware that these

[21] Shure and Zierow (2023) find that high achievers who are first-gens are more likely to study at closer to home or less prestigious universities. They also find a bias towards subjects that are (thought to be) associated with higher salaries or job security.

[22] As one of the authors of this paper recalls, a common objection by many first-generation students is: "But I was not economically deprived." There was a wide agreement among the panelists and the audience at the EPSA roundtable that first-generation challenges should not be conflated with money.

[23] "Moving up" in the university hierarchy is possible when applying for postgraduate studies, but the choice of the undergraduate institution strongly affects the future academic trajectory, either because of easier access to supervisors' networks or because of reliance on the universities' prestige as "shortcuts" in the admission processes.

differences exist, but their importance and their long-term consequences for their professional or academic career may be less obvious.[24] Internet has somewhat reduced the information problem, but awareness of how much these differences matter, and what it takes to be accepted by more prestigious institutions is not solved by the internet.[25]

Beyond awareness about differences between universities, early and boarder information is crucial to increase the prospects for admission.[26] Good grades are essential, but many additional "soft factors" are necessary to prevail in a highly competitive selection process. Universities also consider social engagements and leadership roles during high school. The ability to write a convincing application letter and to leave a competent personal impression in an interview in selection processes that require personal interviews are also decisive. Many of these competences and can be acquired, e.g. by attending a debating club, model UN or student conferences, interacting with mentors and supervisors as undergraduate students, confidence in contacting faculty in the prospective institution with their questions. A major challenge is the 'unknown unknowns': not only the lack of information how to acquire these soft factors, but also the lacking awareness of first-gens that they need, but lack this information in the first place (Grim, Bausch, Hussain, and Lonn 2024). Addressing the information problem is a long-term process that interacts with the three other, non-material factors that we discuss next.

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[24] An illustrative example is Didier Eribon's description of his own university trajectory (Eribon 2019, p. 172-173). Due to his working-class background, he had never even heard of the *Grandes Écoles*, which are the most prestigious academic institutions in France and require the attendance of additional preparatory schools after high school to pass their entry exams. When Eribon learned about these institutions, he first thought that the public university that he attended was a better choice simply because he was not aware of the differences in prestige between French public universities and the *Grandes Écoles*. It is difficult to imagine that a French student with parents who went through the French university system would have thought the same way, let alone the son or daughter of a university professor. The authors of this article heard many, very similar stories in their interactions with other first-gens and made similar choices themselves in their own academic contexts.

[25] Awareness of the differences can vary across countries. In the U.S., the differences are deeply entrenched in the system. In Germany, the differences are less prominent in public discourse.

[26] One of the authors recalls an example resembling the experience of Eribon in footnote 24 and that illustrates how information at an early stage of an academic career has long-term effects: after three years in a 5-year *Diplom* program (common in Germany before the Bologna reform), a fellow student, child of a university professor, transferred to the Master's program of a prestigious British university. Other students without academic family background had no idea that such a transfer was possible, and had never even heard of this university and its leading role in academia. This kind of academic trajectory was outside the realm of imagined possibilities.

The 'hidden curriculum'

The hidden curriculum refers to tacit norms regarding how academia "actually works," and are grounded in the intuitive understanding how to interact with faculty and peers (Portelli 1993; Phelan and Burnham 2022).[27] In comparison to the formal curriculum, i.e. lectures, assignments, and exams, these hidden norms pose a significant obstacle for first-gens (Chatelain 2018). A recurring theme in discussions with first-gens is the feeling of being in the wrong place, to feel excluded in informal conversations, but without knowing why and how to address this (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, and Davis 1991). This is related to the information problems discussed above, but goes much deeper. These norms require social competences to communicate with professors, to advocate for oneself in seminars, and to distinguish yourself in a professional environment (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, et al. 2012). This *habitus* is the result of long-lasting socialization processes in the family and the community and often overlaps with cultural competences that allow individuals to distinguish themselves from others.[28] These competences, therefore, almost by definition, vary with the educational attainment of the parents.

The implications of the awareness of and ability to follow with the hidden curriculum are far-reaching. Without understanding the unwritten rules, students may struggle to navigate critical aspects of their academic careers, such as how to build professional relationships or find a mentor. This lack of awareness can affect their perceived competence, both among teachers and classmates. This, in turn, influences who gets included or excluded from valuable opportunities, like research assistantships, research projects or funding. Likewise, these perceptions affect access to important networks, from Ph.D. positions to jobs at prestigious institutions, and even opportunities to publish. The ability to engage in informal interactions, like small talk with influential people, can make a difference in advancing one's academic career.

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[27] These norms range from the importance of speaking up in class rather than just listening or attending office hours to become known to professors and not just to solve problems, to applying to research assistantships for future reference letters or publications; or how to frame achievements in applications, annual reports, and tenure and promotion files.

[28] The most famous analysis of this *habitus* is from Bourdieu (1984) who argues that cultural knowledge, e.g. about food, allows students to signal their class and to distinguish themselves from others. Even if the signal is not only about class affiliation, but about subject-specific competences, the social ability to convey these competences as illustrated in footnote 27 is crucial and varies with cultural and social background.

Self-perception and aspirations

The self-perceptions and aspirations of individuals are crucial for professional trajectories in general, and especially in a profession as individualistic as academia. Again, these factors play out at multiple stages of an academic career, as generally mentioned in discussions with first-gens. They influence if a person chooses to go to university in the first place. Among those first-gens who opt for university, there is a tendency to apply at local rather than more prestigious universities not only because of the informational reasons discussed above, but also because of self-restrained aspirations. Clearly, the sense of entitlement, or a lack thereof, affects the ambitions of students and shapes their careers. In many first-gens' perception "a Ph.D. is something that other people do." Even as Ph.D. students, many first-gens do not expect that they could pursue an academic career after their dissertation. This self-image continues throughout a career, even when big challenges were mastered, e.g. with the recurrent perception that a job or a promotion was the result of luck rather than deserved.

Many of these self-perceptions and restrained aspirations are the result of the socialization processes of first-gens (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, and Davis 1991). Role models in the family shape beliefs about what a person can achieve. These beliefs can be shaped by the educational experiences of parents and the wider family and their networks. Or they may emerge from a lack of encouragement, or even explicit discouragements, to pursue a university education or postgraduate studies. A repeating thread among professors with a first-gen background is that some of their teachers were skeptical that they should even go to university. This is striking when we consider that the people that we have talked to all obtained their Ph.D, and successfully pursued an academic career, which means that they ultimately performed very well compared to the rest of their cohorts. This misperception of others, teachers, fellow students and professors, reinforce the effects of hidden norms and social knowledge of appropriate social behavior described above (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, et al. 2012).[29]

Community and family

The final challenge concerns the relations with the family and community of origin. Many first-gens who succeeded in academia were encouraged and supported by their parents. But this group represents

[29] See, again, Eribon (2019, p. 153-154) for an illustrative example.

the small fraction of first-gens that self-selected into academia and were able to make a career as academics – not all first-gens can count on this support, and we cannot easily assess the deterring effects of lack of support (Westbrook and Scott 2012). And even if family and friends encourage the first-gens academic paths, often are not aware how academia works.

In contrast with students from academic background, the first-gens' families and communities often may not understand why they go to university in the first place (Brinkman, Gibson, and Presnell 2013).[30] A lot of weight is given to opportunity costs, i.e. the loss of immediate income relative to the investment into human capital that generates future income, or an intense dedication to an intellectual pursue that can be seen at odds with family life. The value assigned to university education in the community of origin not only inhibits the entry into university, but also affects how students approach their studies. It is not uncommon for first-gen students to miss classes because they work, "as if studying were a hobby."[31] (Covarrubias and Fryberg 2015). This is partially related to the material constraints that we discussed above, but to an important degree, it reflects a lack of consciousness how important this investment will be for their future professional life.

Even in families that support a university education, first-gens tend to report a widespread lack of understanding of why they would and pursue an academic career (Brinkman, Gibson, and Presnell 2013). This is paired with a lack of understanding what academics do and a perception of academia not as a proper job. An experience that almost all first gen academics share is the question when they would finally get "a real job."[32] To be clear, the families and communities of those who are ultimately successful in academia do appreciate and are proud that one of them became a professor. But simply due to the lack of experience in academia, it is very hard for them to offer much support on the way.

[30] Some of the challenges in this section are described, in a very pointed way, by Ernaux (1991). Her account of the (lack of) habitus, self-perceptions and aspirations of those in the community that she describes also speak to the previous two sections, although again in a much more pointed way than first-gens today experience it.

[31] Comment during the EPSA panel discussion.

[32] Comment during the EPSA panel discussion.

4. Implications

The data presented in this paper, although limited in its scope and coverage, suggest that first-gens are significantly underrepresented in political science. This underrepresentation is problematic for a discipline that has long emphasized the importance of socioeconomic backgrounds in shaping political behavior and that has advocated descriptive representation in other areas of society. The lack of socioeconomic diversity creates the risks for the production and reproduction of knowledge, and the climate in the profession. First-generation scholars can bring essential perspectives to better understand social groups that their peers frequently study but rarely encounter personally. As teachers, first-generation scholars are important role models for first-generation students and peers, potentially affecting social mobility and diversity in our profession.

Of note, the main goal of this article is to systematically explore and assess the origins of underrepresentation of first-gens in political science. It is beyond the scope of this article to research programs and best practices in our discipline to address this underrepresentation, and we leave this to future research. Nonetheless, the data presented here suggest several possibilities to address the underrepresentation of first-gens.

The first is to increase the visibility of first-generation status (Housel and Harvey 2009). Visibility means that the members of the out-group, in this case first-gens, need to see themselves and that the in-group, non-first-gens, need to see the group. Because this characteristic is not easily observable, it remains largely hidden. This prevents both community-building among first-generation scholars and broader recognition of the representation gap and is, perhaps, one reason why few first-gen initiatives exist. For instance, it would, be useful for universities and professional organizations to include first-gen status as part of their systematic data collection efforts. This would allow to track the progression of first-generation scholars through different career stages, from undergraduate applications through tenure decisions. These data would help identifying specific junctures where first-generation scholars face barriers and offer targeted support.

Given the challenges first-gens face, support may entail different actions at different points in their academic path. Recruitment of first-gen undergraduate students may require outreach from universities explaining what postsecondary education entails, and the value of this time and effort investment, to both prospective students and their parents. Financial support and mentoring,

including highlighting role models from different socioeconomic backgrounds and "success stories" are likely to be key for the successful transition and progression through university studies.

But, as Phillips et at. (2020) put it, "access is not enough." At all stages of the academic career, it would be useful for universities, professional organizations and first-gens themselves to make as much of the tacit academic norms explicit. Departments can implement orientation programs or informal sessions to discuss communication skills, academic etiquette, and how to build relationships with faculty, a strategy that some departments have successfully piloted and pursued.[33] Writing centers can help first-generation students develop a confident communication style often rewarded in academic settings. Peer mentoring groups and 'buddy-systems' at universities and professional associations, e.g. at APSA or EPSA meetings, not only increase visibility, but also create the opportunity for junior academics to get in touch with senior first-gens who can give advice and act as role models. Similar strategies have been adopted by groups with other identities.

Ultimately, addressing the underrepresentation of first-generation scholars is not merely a particular-interests issue, but essential broader efforts to make academia more welcoming and more representative of the society in which it is embedded.

[33] For example, the Department of Government at the University of Essex started a first-gen program in 2020. Advertised among incoming undergraduate students. In a series of sessions, students were introduced to the university life. The leader of the sessions explained how to engage with faculty and peers, discussed expectations and use of university resources and support, and addressed practical issues – from how to use the syllabus to how to organize study time or group work. Participants found particularly useful the opportunity of talking with other first-gen students and faculty members. A similar program, focusing on the needs of post-graduate students, started in 2021.

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A. Online Appendix

A1. APSA and EPSA data

The APSA data is from the survey of participants of the 2024 APSA Annual Meeting. Figure A1.1 shows all the possible answers the first-generation question, including those who did not answer. The APSA survey further distinguishes between non-first gens by asking if one or two parents graduated from college. The figure shows that the large majority of respondents have parents who both have college degrees.

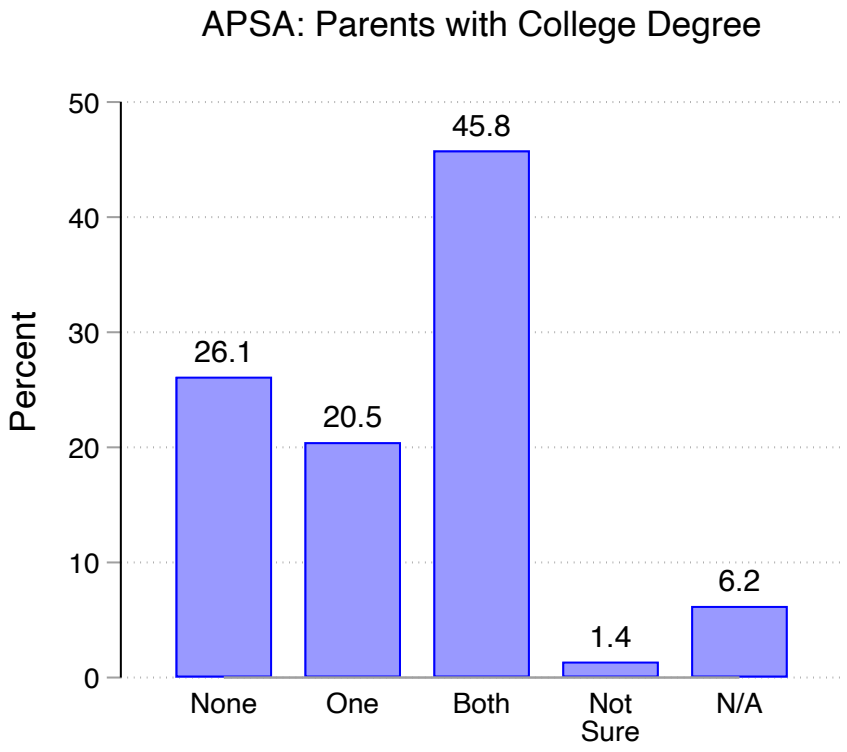


Figure A1.1: APSA participants with parents without / with college degree, including separation by only one or both parents with college degree. 'None' is equivalent to 'First Gen', 'One' and 'Both' are equivalent to 'Not First Gen' in the other graphs

For the APSA survey, we did not have access to the individual-level data, but only to the aggregate numbers by question answers. The APSA office kindly provided us with information on first-gens by subgroups, notably race gender and rank. About 90% of responses to the rank question were non-responses and therefore do not provide much information. We do not have data on the distribution of APSA participants or membership to allow further meaningful comparisons.

The EPSA data is from a survey that participants of the 2023 conference completed with their registration, but completion of the survey was voluntary. Figure A1.2 shows the distribution of the responses over all possible answer categories. 20% of the respondents did not answer the first-generation question, which was not a forced choice. The share of non-responses is very similar across the other diversity questions asking about personal background.

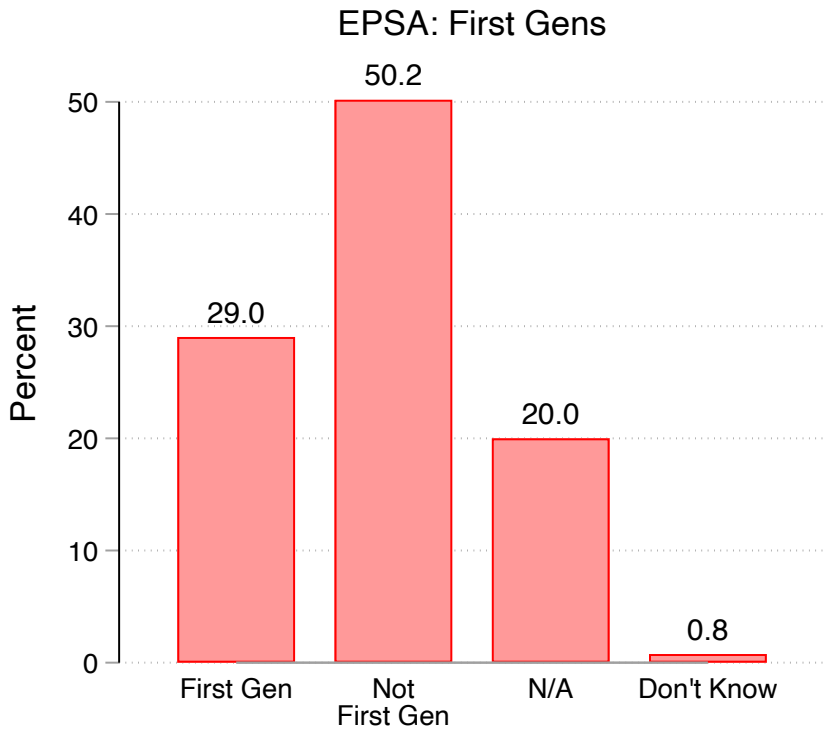


Figure A1.2: EPSA participants with parents without ('First Gen') / with ('Not First Gen') college degree, all categories.

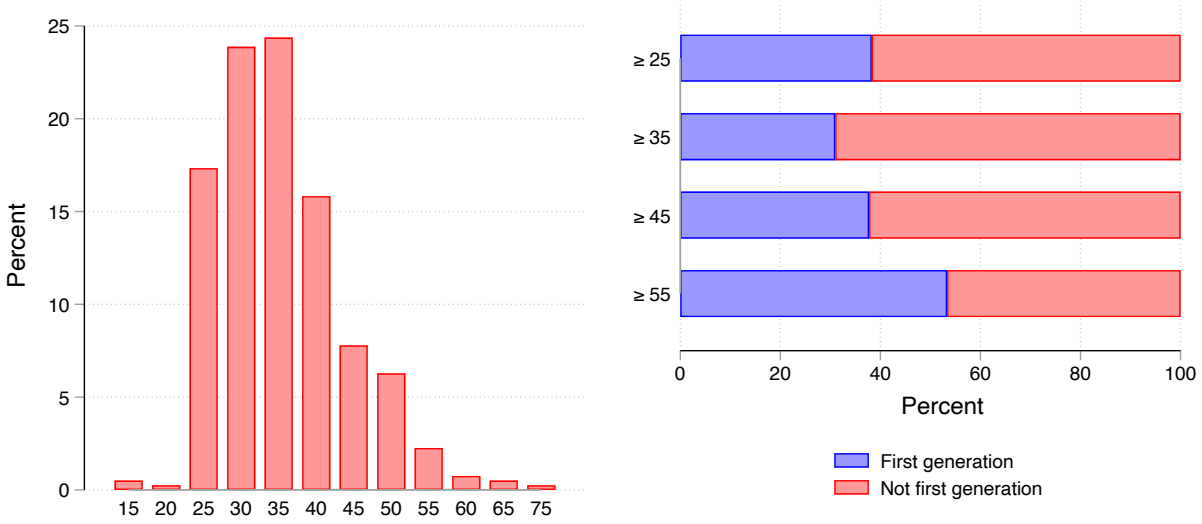
The EPSA data also allows us to examine first gens by a number of subgroups. We look at the ten largest groups in terms of nationality and country of work.[34] For country of work, we see a somewhat higher share of first gens in the Netherlands and Denmark (between 45% and 50%). The share is particularly low in the U.S. and Norway. Looking by nationality, the share of first-gens in slightly higher for Danish, Swiss and Turkish participants, and again particularly low for Norwegians and Americans.[35] We note, however, that for some of these countries of work / nationalities breakdowns, the number of observations is very small. We do not find significant differences in first-gen shares for males and females. The share of first-gens is 6 percentage points lower for EPSA participants who are professors (34% first-gens vs. 66% non-first gens) than for participants who are not professors (40% first-gens vs. 60% non-first gens).[36]

Figure A1.3 shows that EPSA participants tend to be younger, with a peak between 35 and 40 years of age. We, therefore, examine if the share of first-gens systematically differs across age groups. This share is almost identical for participants between 25 and 34 and between 45 and 54. It is higher for those above 55, but as the graph on the left shows, we have only very few (15) respondents in this category.

[34] The 10 countries of work with the largest share of EPSA participants are Germany, the UK, the U.S., Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands and Ireland (in this order). The 10 nationalities that are most present at EPSA are German, American, Spanish, Italian, British, Swiss, Dutch, Danish, French, Norwegian and Turkish (in this order).

[35] The particularly lower shares for the U.S. and Norway can be related to the higher share of citizens with parents who are a university education in these two countries. See figures 2 and A2.3.

[36] Ca. 46% of EPSA participants are Ph.D. students or postdocs. Ca. 54% are junior or senior faculty.



(a) Age distribution (b) First-gens by age group

Figure A1.3: Age structure of EPSA participants

A2. ESS data

To assess the degree of over- or underrepresentation of first-gens in political science, we compare the share of first-gen participants at the EPSA conference to the share of citizens with parents who did not attend college / a university in the population. This raises the question which countries should be considered to construct this benchmark. In principle, these type of international conferences are open to participants from all over the world, but de facto, most participants come from Western Europe and the U.S.. To keep it simple, we limit our comparison to these countries and note that for Eastern European or non-European countries, the share of citizens with parents who attended college / university is likely to be lower. We show the results for the pooled data in the main text, but we also present them country-by-country below.

For the analysis of European countries, we use data from the most recent wave of the European Social Survey (ESS, wave 11), which was collected between March 2023 and June 2024, i.e. around the time of the EPSA conference for which we have data. We restrict the sample to respondents between 25 and 65 years of age, which approximately corresponds to the age range of

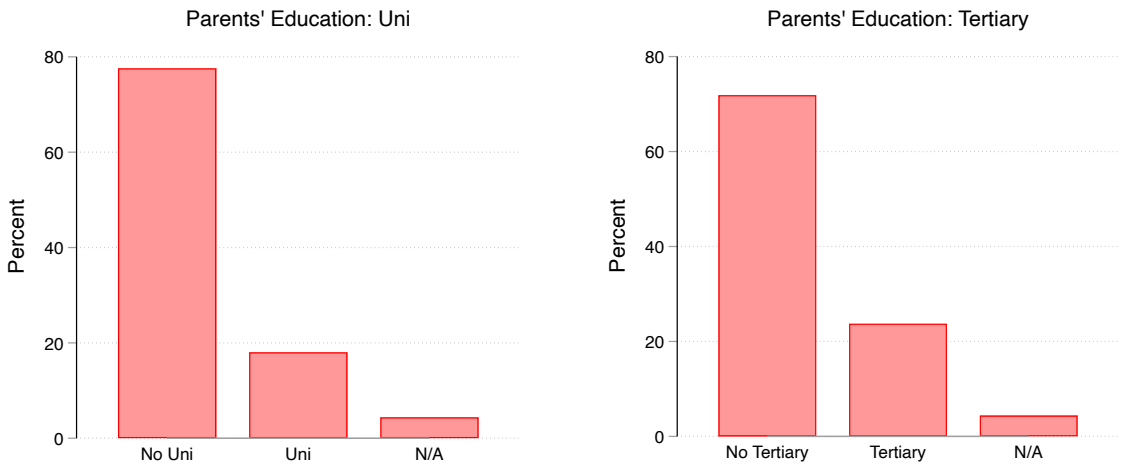
most conference participants (see Figure A1.3 above).[37] The ESS captures education levels based on country-specific classifications that account for the different education systems. The ESS then translates these country-specific measures into a harmonized educational attainment measure based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) that is comparable across countries.[38]

The ISCED-based ESS variables code educational attainments into categories from 0 to 800. On the corresponding 1-digit scale, categories 6 ("Bachelor or equivalent"), 7 ("Master or equivalent") and 8 ("Doctoral or equivalent") represent university education. Category 5 corresponds to short-cycle tertiary, but not university-level education (it comprises 3-digit categories 510 "short, intermediate/academic/general tertiary below bachelor" and 520 "short, advanced vocational qualifications"), which are important, for instance, in educational systems with strong vocational systems such as Austria or Germany. This category does not correspond to our concept of "first generation", but we nonetheless present results that distinguish between all forms of tertiary vs. non-tertiary (as opposed to university vs. non-university) education to assess how much it affects our results (see Figure A2.1 below).

The ESS asks respondents about the educational attainments of their parents and provides this information on the harmonized ISCED scale in two variables, *edulvlmb* for the mother and *edulvlfb* for the father. In line with our definition of first generation, we create a variable that takes the higher value of the two and code it as no university for values below 600 and as university for values from 600 to 800 and as no tertiary for values below 500 and as tertiary for values from 500 to 800.

[37] The data is available here: https://ess.sikt.no/en/ (accessed 28 March 2025).

[38] See European Social Survey, Appendix A1 Education ESS11-2023 ed. 2.0. Available at https://stessrelpubprodwe.blob.core.windows.net/data/round11/survey/ESS11_appendix_a1_e02.pdf (accessed May 6, 2025).



(a) Uni education, including N/As (b) Tertiary education, including N/As

Figure A2.1: Share of population with at least one parent with uni / tertiary education, including N/As. Uni education includes ISCED 1-digit codes 6 and higher; tertiary education includes ISCED 1-digit codes 5 and higher. Western European countries, sample restricted to respondents between 25 – 65 years of age. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), wave 11.

For the sake of completeness and for comparison, we also present the educational attainment of respondents themselves (as opposed to their parents) in figure A2.2. As one would expect, it shows that the share of respondents with a university education is 17.7 percentage points higher than for the parents and that the share of "No Answers" is very low and lower than for the educational attainment of the parents.

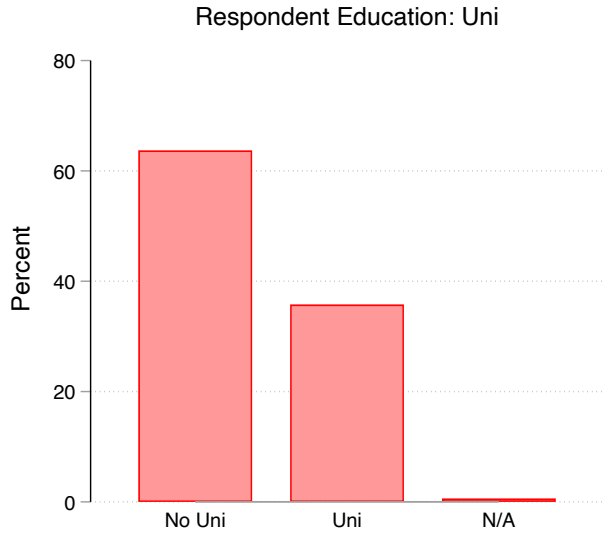


Figure A2.2: Share of population with university education, including N/As. Western European countries, sample restricted to respondents between 25 – 65 years of age. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), wave 11.

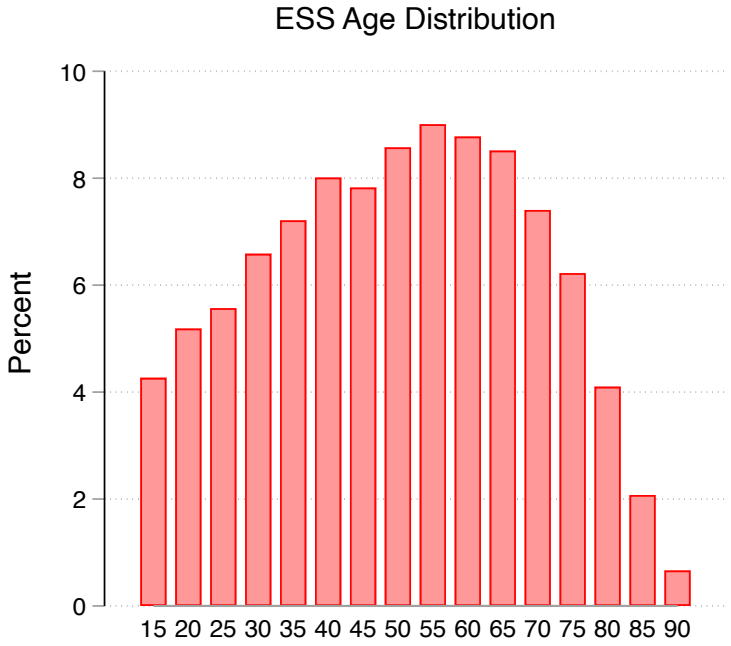


Figure A2.3: Age distribution in ESS survey, wave 11.

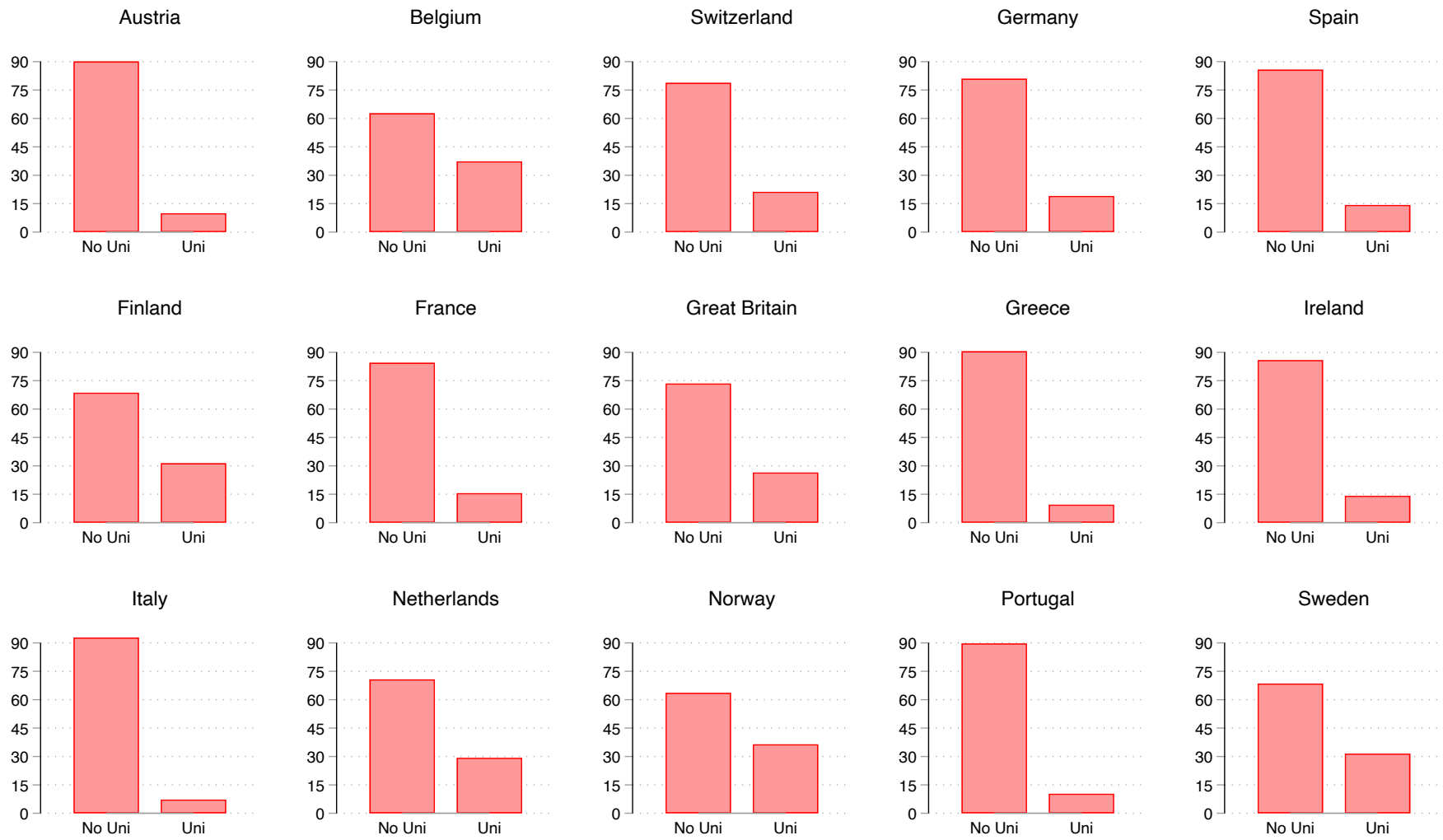


Figure A2.4: Share of population with at least one parent with a college / university degree, by country. *Notes:* Sample restricted to respondents between 25 – 65 years of age. Source: European Social Survey (ESS), wave 11.

A3. GSS data

The data on parents' education in the U.S. comes from the General Social Survey (GSS). [39] Parents' education is captures in two variables, *padeg*, which is father's (or oldest same-sex parent's) highest degree, and *madeg*, which is mother's (or youngest same-sex parent's) highest degree. Figure 3.1 also shows the age distribution in this dataset.

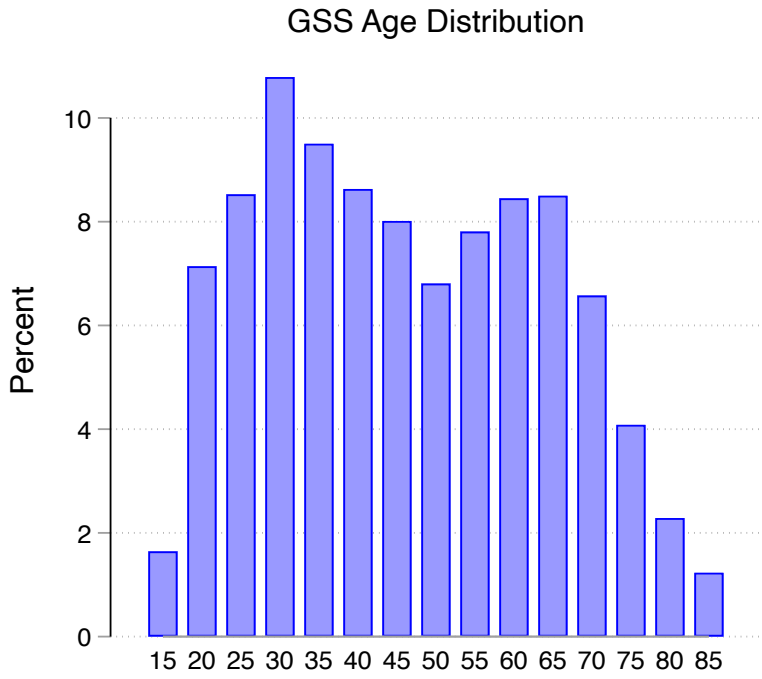


Figure A3.1: Age distribution in GSS survey, 2022.

[39] The data is available here : https://gss.norc.org/us/en/gss/get-the-data/stata.html (accessed May 19, 2025).