

Better Beings: Education, Progressive Reform and Eugenics in the United States

Elliott Ash Guohui Jiang Hans-Joachim Voth Noam Yuchtman

This version: September 2024

Very Preliminary. Please don't circulate.

Abstract

Inspired by the works of Darwin, Mendel, and Galton, eugenics seeks to breed better humans through selective reproduction, encouraging those considered superior to procreate while sterilizing the "unworthy". Eugenic ideas became popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The United States led the early application of eugenicist ideas to policy, resulting in the passage of eugenic sterilization laws in thirty-two states. More than 60,000 individuals were forcibly sterilized as a result. How did these ideas come to have far-reaching consequences? In this paper we systematically examine the role of upper-tail human capital in the diffusion of eugenics. First, we find that counties with higher education levels were more likely to have state representatives who voted for forcible eugenic sterilization laws; they also had more members of eugenics societies. This pattern holds when we instrument human capital with a shift-share instrument. Second, we analyze use of the term "race suicide". Intended to convey concern about the declining fertility of white Americans of good "breeding", this concept became more popular in counties with higher human capital after President Theodor Roosevelt first popularized it. Finally, we analyze congressional speeches and find that more educated lawmakers used more eugenic arguments, including supporting immigration restrictions during the 1910s and 1920s. These findings question enlightenment notions of an essential synergy between education and social progress