

Social mobility through education: the United Kingdom in comparative perspective

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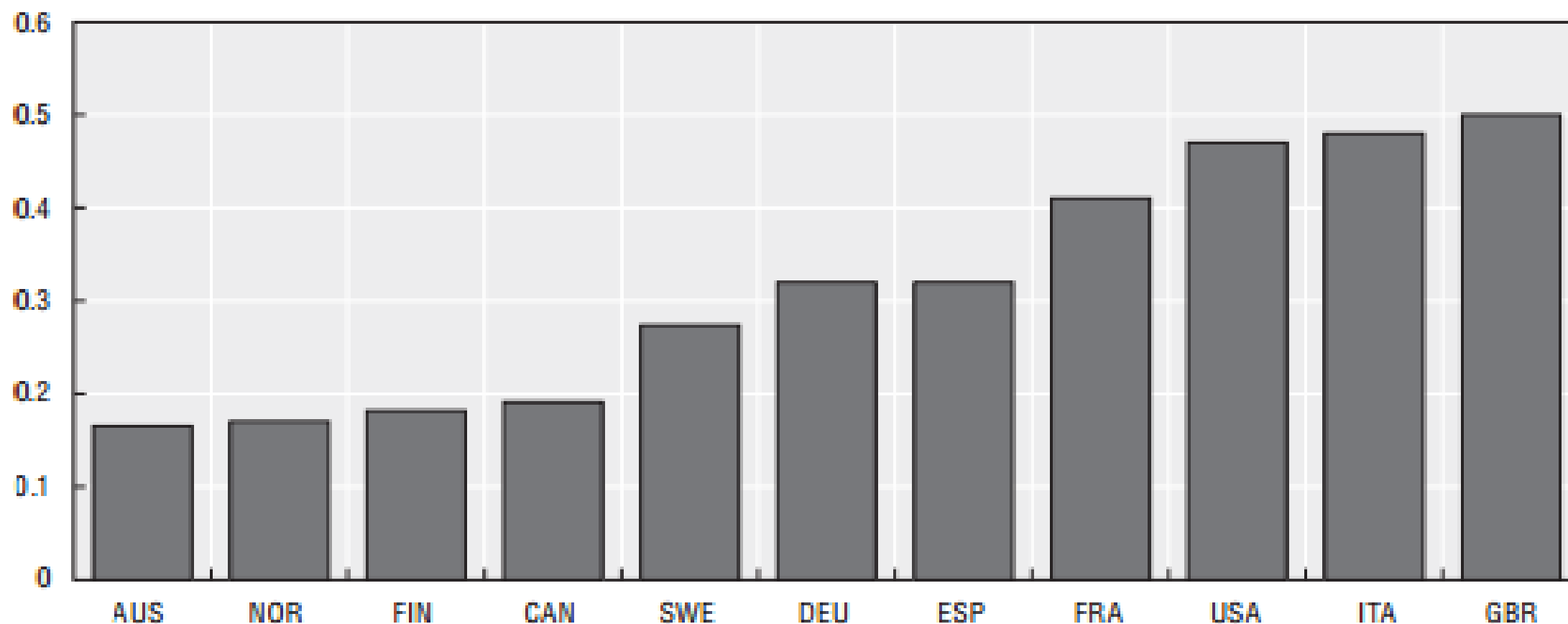


Social mobility in the United Kingdom

Key observations:

- Notions of social mobility and meritocracy underpin liberal societies like the United Kingdom
- But the UK does not live up to the ideal:
 - Intergenerational social mobility is comparatively low
 - It is in decline since the 1980s (Blanden, Gregg and Machin 2005)
- Education plays an increasingly strong role in determining social positions

Figure 2. **Intergenerational earnings elasticity,¹ estimates from various studies: selected OECD countries**



1. The height of each bar measures the extent to which son's earnings levels reflect those of their fathers. The estimates are the best point estimate of the intergenerational earnings elasticity resulting from an extensive meta-analysis carried out by Corak (2006) and supplemented with additional countries from d'Addio (2007). The choice of empirical estimates in this meta-analysis is motivated by the fact that they are based on studies that are similar in their estimation technique, sample and variable definitions. The higher the value, the greater is the persistence of earnings across generations, thus the lower is the intergenerational earnings mobility.

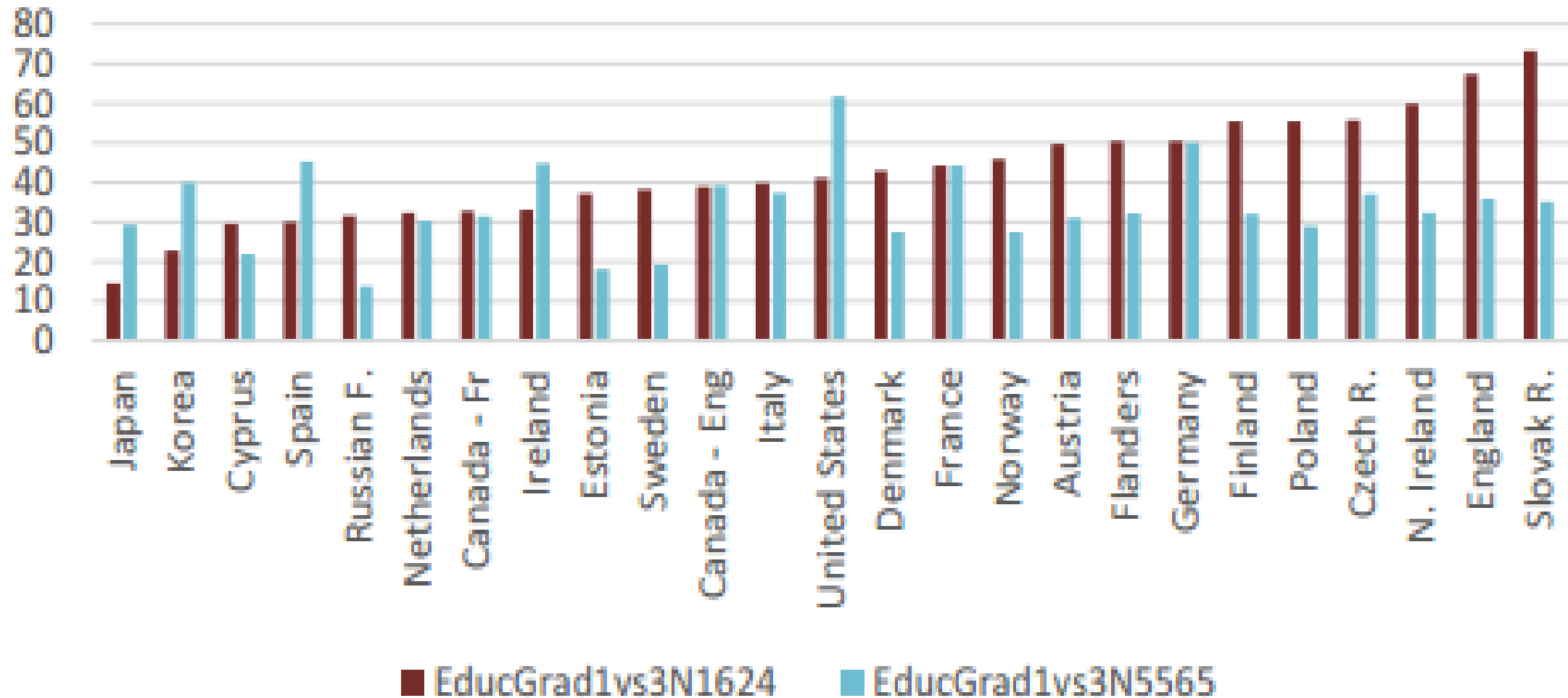
Source: D'Addio (2007).

Research questions

- How does the UK compare to other Western countries in terms of social mobility through education?
- What are the causes and consequences for the UK's relatively poor performance in this regard, and what lessons can we learn from this?

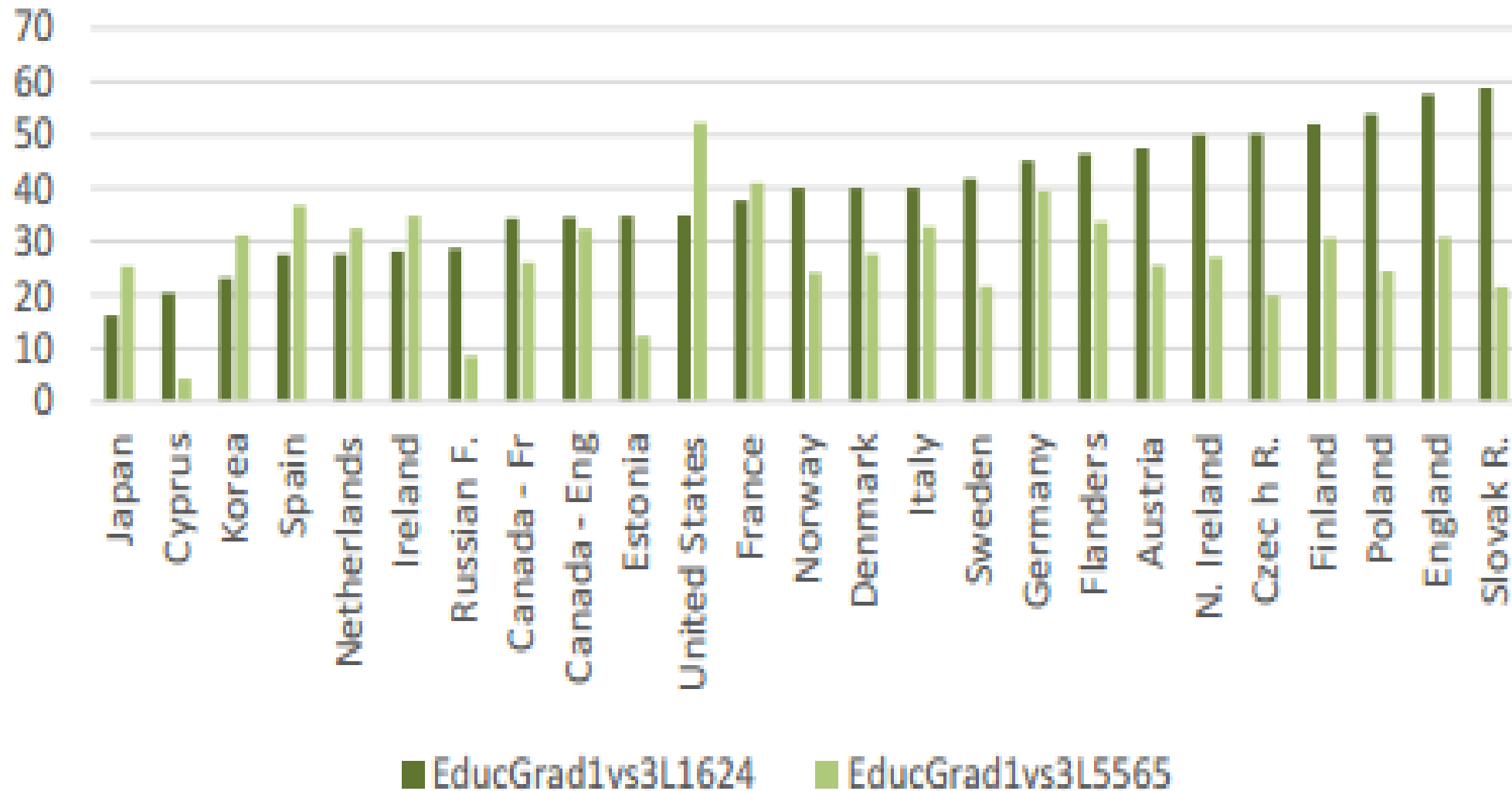
Social gradients for numeracy skills for younger and older age groups

(source: Green, Green and Pensiero 2014; based on SAS 2013)



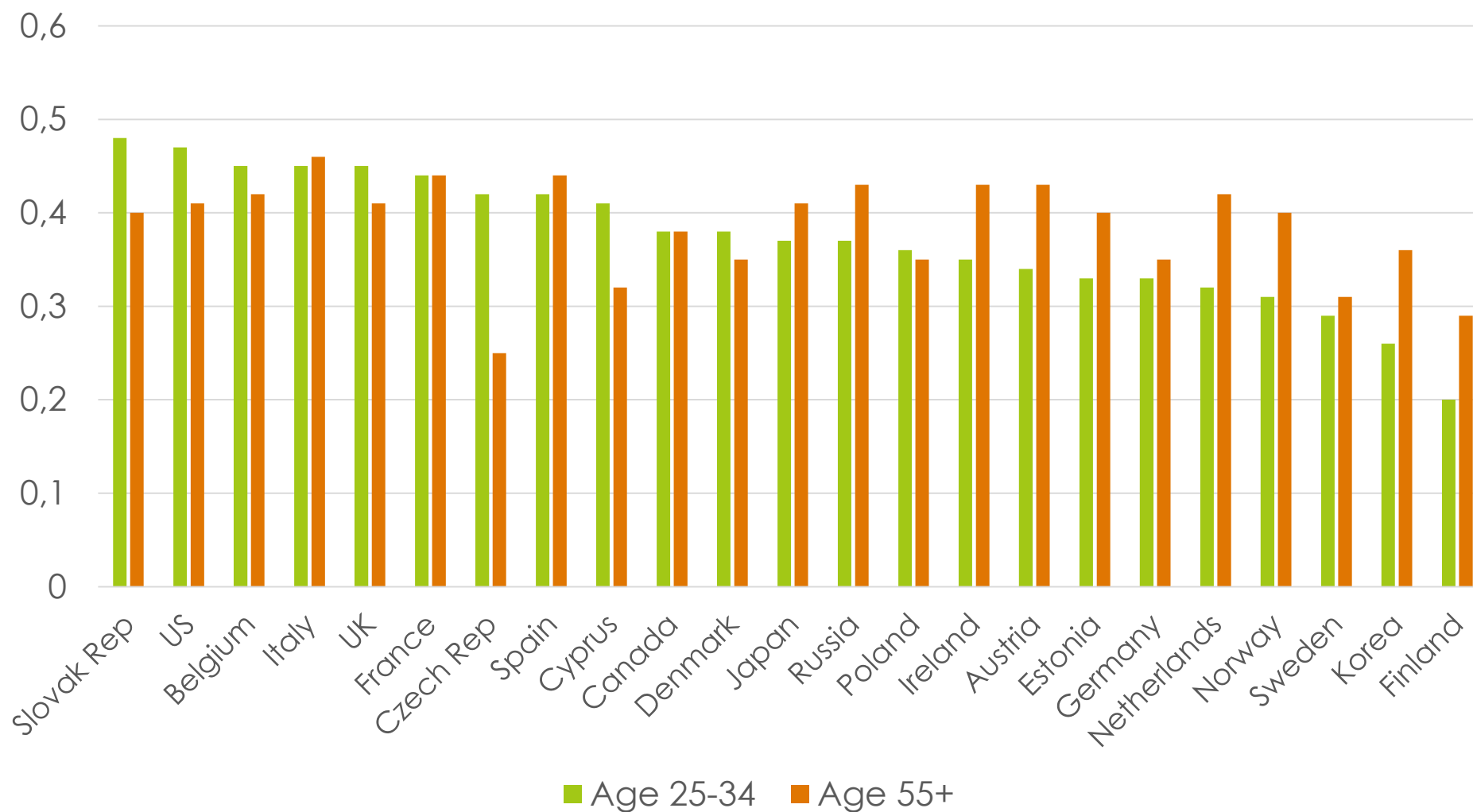
Social gradients for literacy skills for younger and older age groups

(Source: Green, Green and Pensiero 2014; based on SAS 2013))

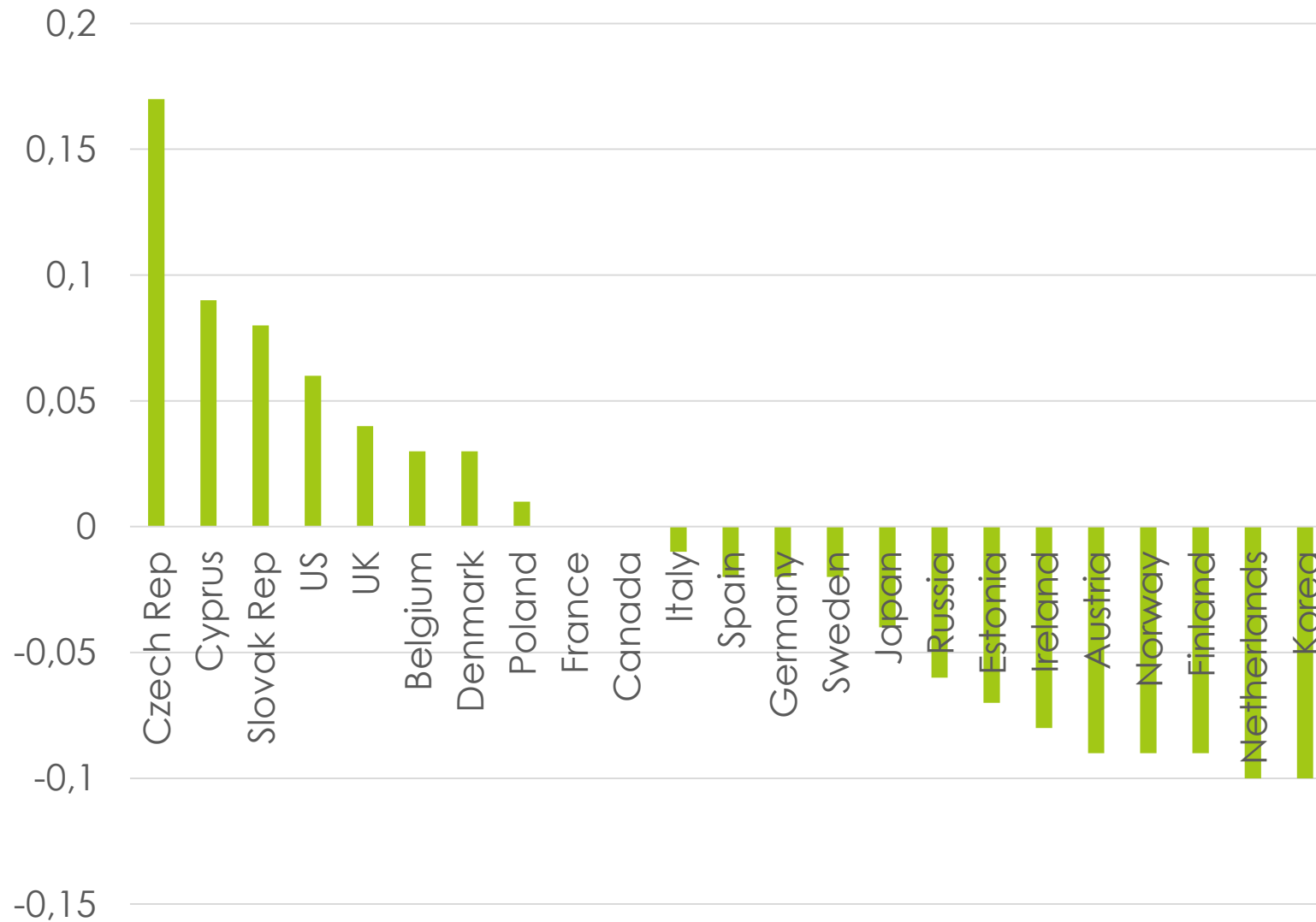


The effect of social background on education level for younger and older age groups

Correlation between parental and respondent's level of education (SAS 2013)



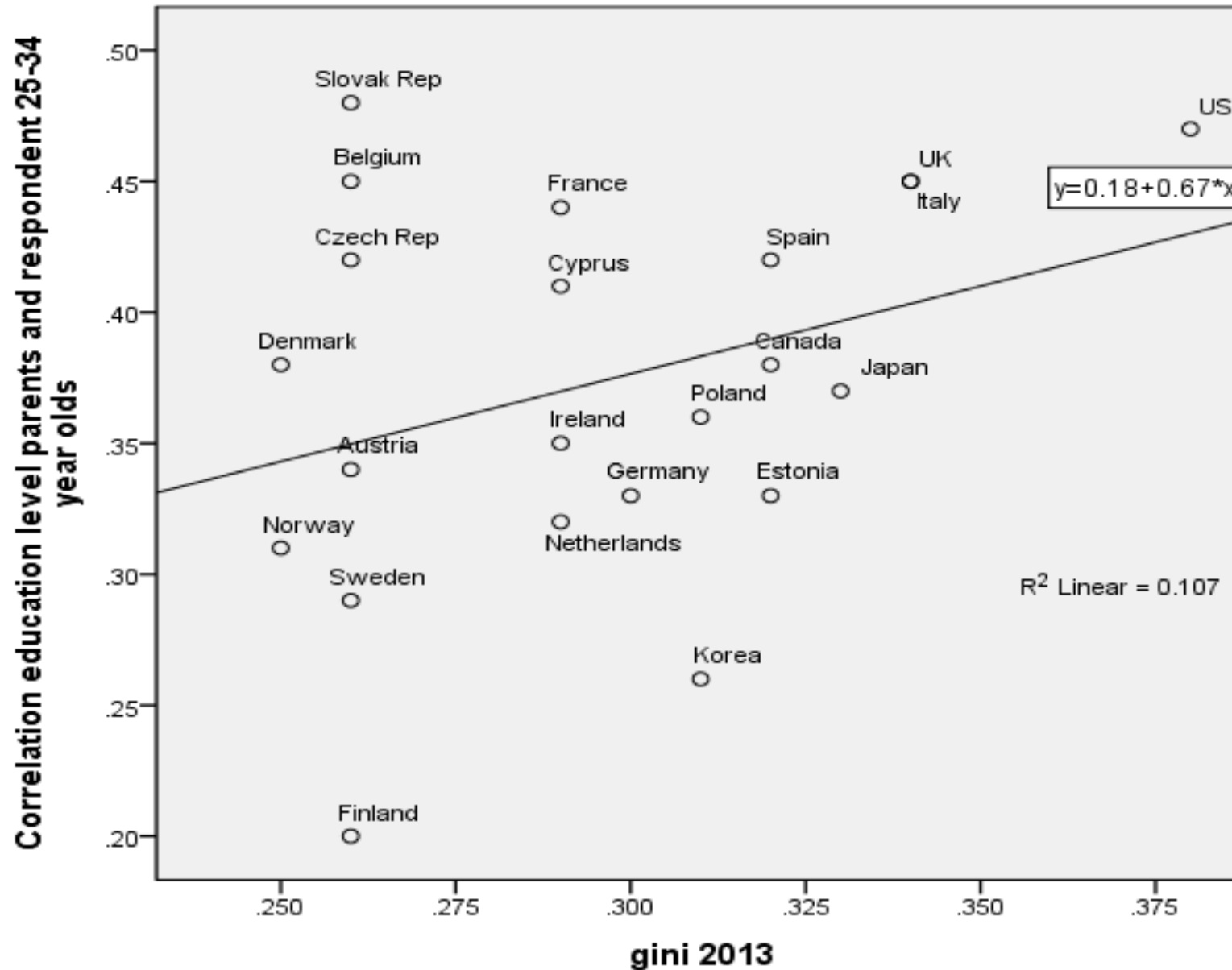
Correlation between parental and respondent's level of education: difference between younger and older age groups (SAS 2013)



Possible causes of UK's relatively poor performance

- Immigration is not likely to play a role (Green, Green and Pensiero 2014);
- But overall inequality is;
- As well as the number and time of branching-off points in an education system (Boudon 1974)

The link between inequality and the effect of SES on education level



The English education system: core features

Basically comprehensive

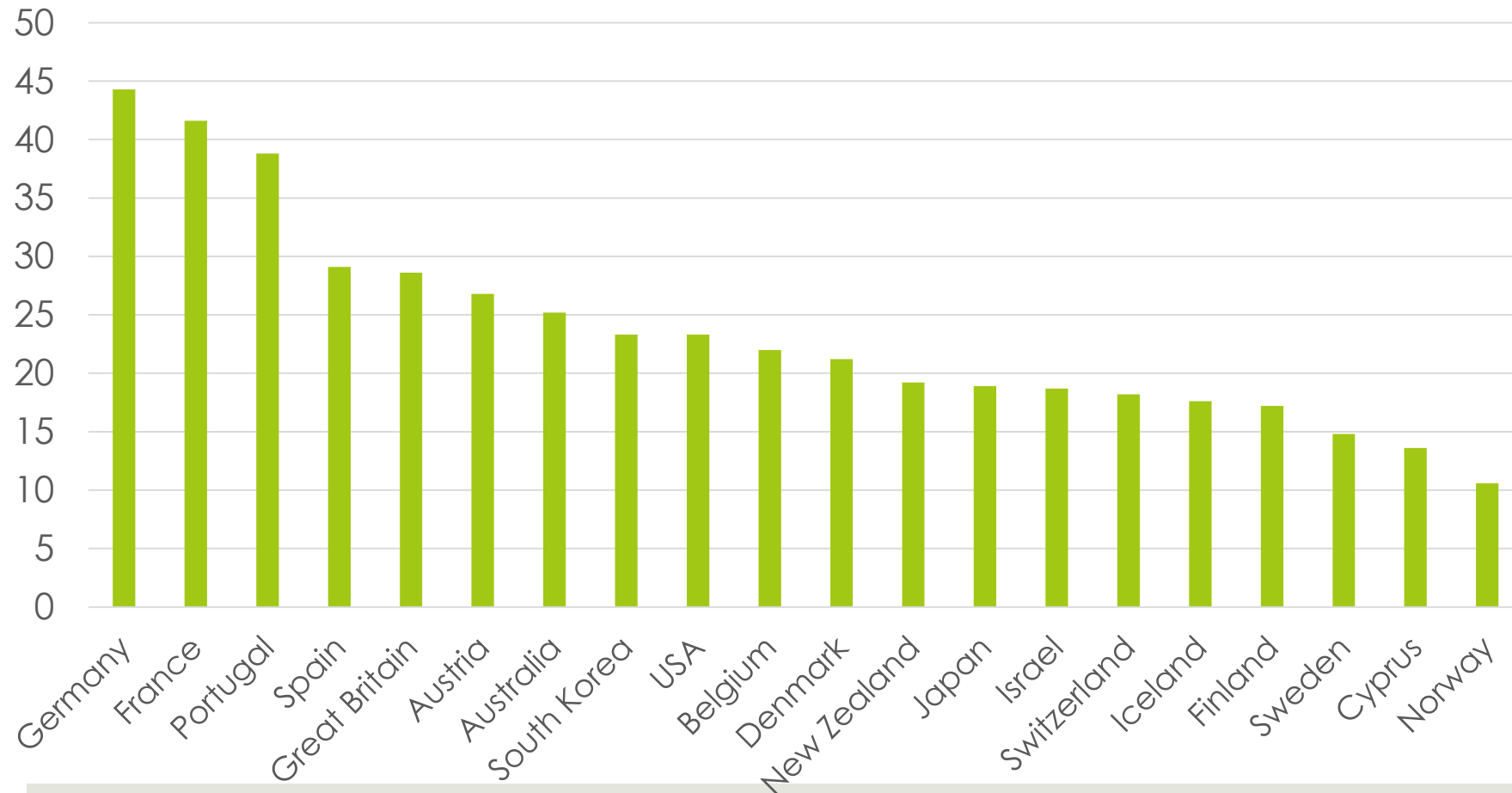
But

- With retention of a stratified system in some regions
- An influential private sector
- Different faith schools
- Single sex + coed schools
- Academies and free schools
- Social segregation through school districts

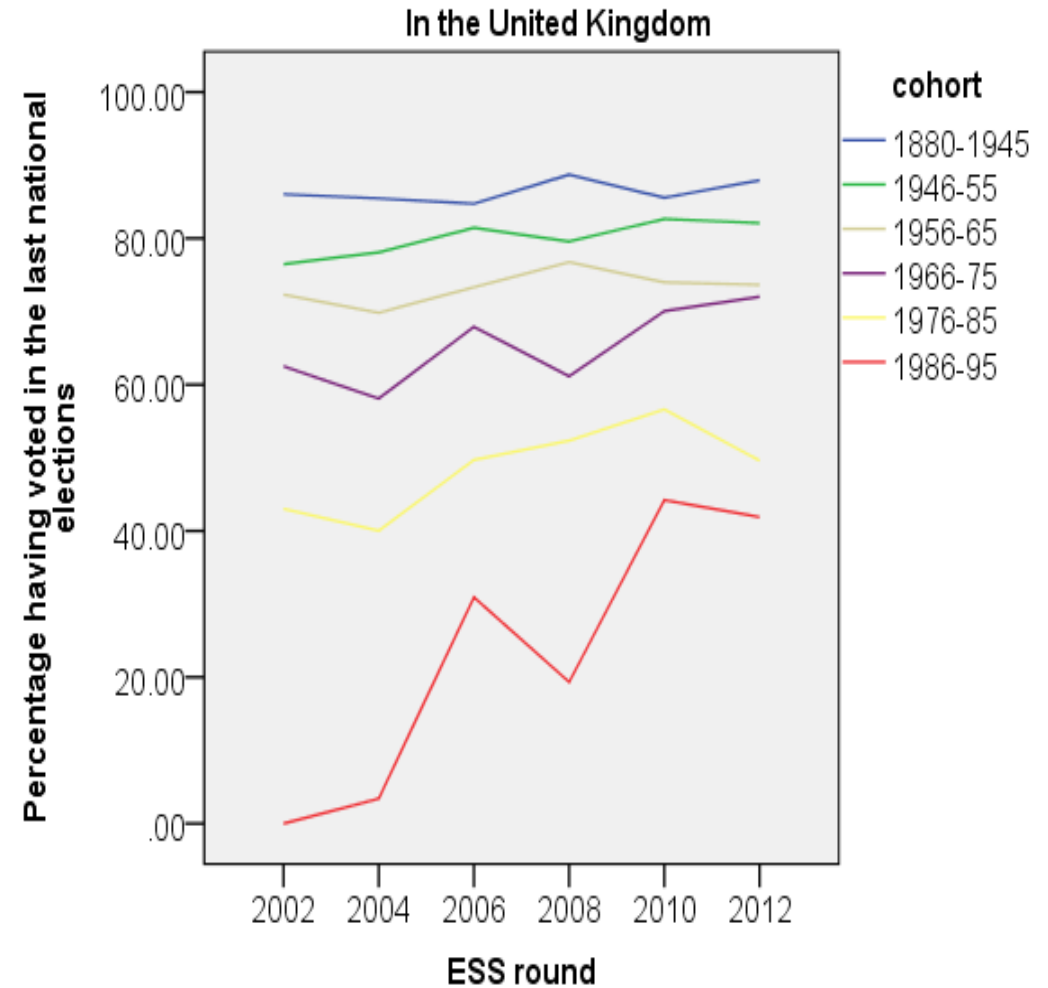
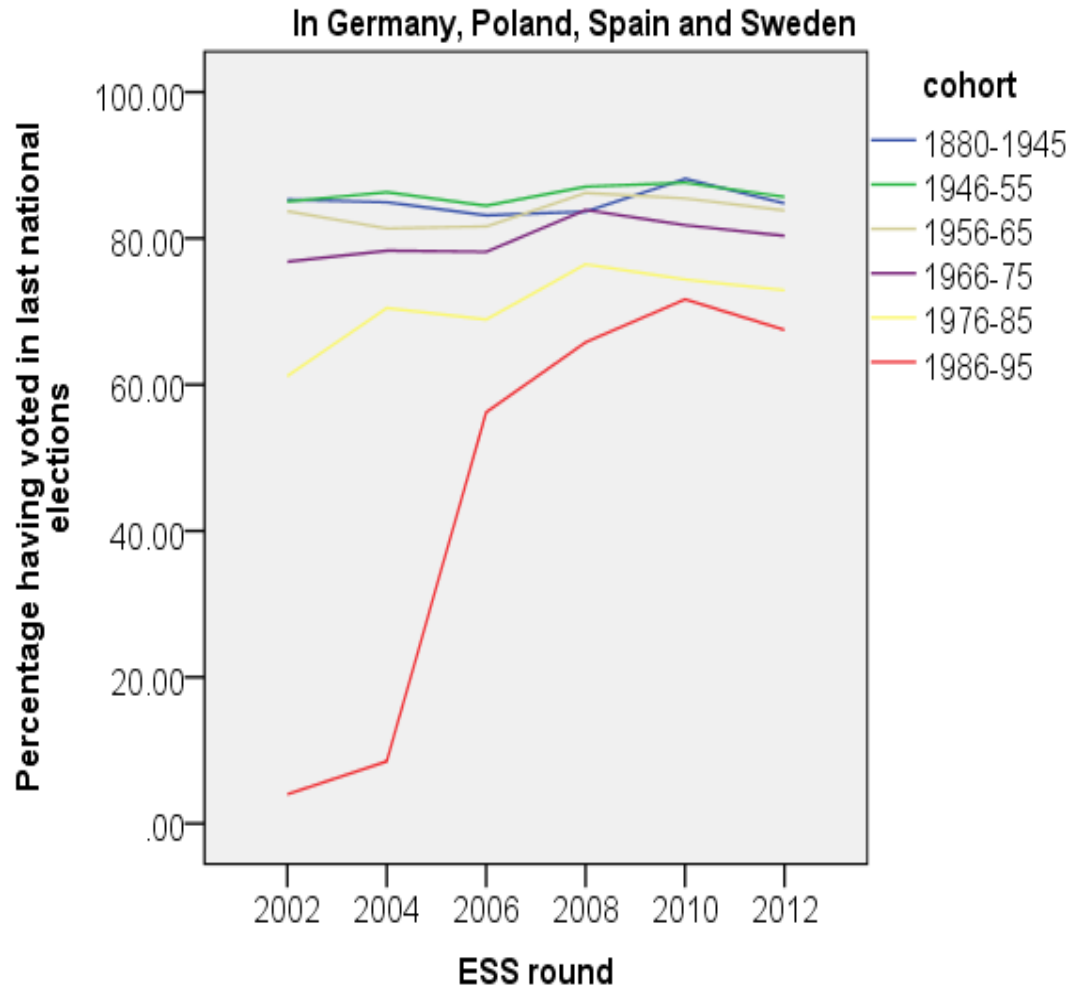
Ergo: a very diverse system with many inequalities

Consequences: Perceptions of unequal opportunities among adults (ISSP 2009)

"People have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background"
(% disagree + strongly disagree)



Consequences: trends in electoral participation by birth cohort



Conclusions and lessons to be learnt

Conclusions:

- Relatively strong class reproduction in the UK education system;
- This is likely to be related to high levels of inequality in combination with a diverse school landscape;
- A possible consequence is disengagement among young people

Lessons:

- Be careful with school choice and diversity in contexts of high inequality
- Monitor political engagement among youngsters