

Disdain for the Less Educated Is the Last Acceptable Prejudice

It's having a corrosive effect on American life — and hurting the Democratic Party.

By Michael J. Sandel

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Joe Biden has a secret weapon in his bid for the presidency: He is the first Democratic nominee in 36 years without a degree from an Ivy League university.

This is a potential strength. One of the sources of Donald Trump's political appeal has been his ability to tap into resentment against *meritocratic (功績/精英主義) elites. By the time of Mr. Trump's election, the Democratic Party had become a party of *technocratic (技術官僚) liberalism more congenial (相投) to the professional classes than to the blue-collar (藍領) and middle-class voters who once constituted its base. *In 2016, two-thirds of whites without a college degree voted for Mr. Trump, while Hillary Clinton won more than 70 percent of voters with advanced degrees.

* [Meritocracy is a system in which people are rewarded by the society based on ability and talents, rather than social class as in aristocracy.](#)

* [Technocratic refers to the involvements of lots of experts in a government or organisation](#)

* [The 2016 election reveals the deep rooted divisions between urban and rural cities in the US in terms of values \(nationalism, patriotism versus moral cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism\), ethnicity composition, education level and economic status,](#)

Being untainted (未受沾染的) by the Ivy League credentials (文憑) of his predecessors may enable Mr. Biden to connect more readily with the blue-collar workers the Democratic Party has struggled to attract in recent years. More important, this aspect

of his candidacy should prompt us to reconsider the meritocratic political project that has come to define contemporary liberalism.

At the heart of this project are two ideas: First, in a global, technological age, higher education is the key to upward mobility, material success and social esteem. Second, if everyone has an equal chance to rise, those who land on top deserve the rewards their talents bring.

This way of thinking is so familiar that it seems to define the American dream. But it has come to dominate our politics only in recent decades. And despite its inspiring promise of success based on merit, it has a dark side.

Building a politics around the idea that a college degree is a precondition for dignified work and social esteem has a corrosive effect on democratic life. It *devalues the contributions of those without a diploma, fuels prejudice against less-educated members of society, effectively excludes most working people from elective government and provokes political backlash.

* [This is an interesting issue to think about. It is widely believed that jobs that well paid and sought after are contributing most to society, like financiers and lawyers, but is this really the case? For example, aren't corporate layers and lobbyists harmful to society? With the rise of unproductive finance, does the financial sector bring much economic value? Is financialization a true to regret? Is it harmful to have so many of the best minds to work in these sectors, instead of the areas that concretely bring values like the teaching profession.](#)

Here is the basic argument of mainstream political opinion, especially among Democrats, that dominated in the decades leading up to Mr. Trump and the populist (平民主義的, 民粹主義的) revolt he came to represent: A global economy that outsources jobs to low-wage countries has somehow come upon us and is here to stay. The central political question is not to

how to change it but how to adapt to it, to alleviate its devastating effect on the wages and job prospects of workers outside the charmed circle of elite professionals.

The answer: *Improve the educational credentials of workers so that they, too, can “compete and win in the global economy.”

Thus, the way to contend (抗衡) with inequality is to encourage upward mobility (上流) through higher education.

* [With everyone becoming more 'educated', the bar is only raised higher, so there will always be a group of people who are relatively uneducated. The central issue here should be what policies to take that would help in securing a good life \(in aspects of life expectancy, mental health, financial security\) for all people, regardless of his educational level. It would be a problem if a society is failing the uneducated and only the educated can flourish in the modern economy. You could take a look at the book 'Bullshit Jobs: A Theory' for further understandings.](#)

The rhetoric of rising through educational achievement has echoed across the political spectrum — from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Barack Obama to Hillary Clinton. But the politicians espousing (擁護) it have missed the insult implicit in the meritocratic society they are offering: If you did not go to college, and if you are not flourishing in the new economy, *your failure must be your own fault.

* [The US is a society with higher degree of economic and income inequality, which then results in educational inequality.](#)

[If children are not starting on a level playing field, is it just to say that their failure is a lack of effort? The prerequisite of meritocracy is equality, which is incapable to be achieved in a meritocratic society that disproportionately reward the talents, while the losers are left miserably suffering. Set aside the discriminations it implies or the political problem it caused, it is an ideology that simply defeats itself.](#)

It is important to remember that most Americans — nearly two-thirds — do not have a four-year college degree. By telling

workers that their inadequate education is the reason for their troubles, meritocrats moralise success and failure and

unwittingly promote credentialism — an insidious prejudice against those who do not have college degrees.

The credentialist prejudice is a symptom of meritocratic hubris. By 2016, many working people chafed (生氣) at the sense that well-schooled elites looked down on them with condescension. This complaint was not without warrant. Survey research bears out what many working-class voters intuit: At a time when racism and sexism are out of favor (discredited though not eliminated), credentialism is the last acceptable prejudice.

In the United States and Europe, disdain for the less educated is more pronounced, or at least more readily acknowledged, than prejudice against other disfavoured groups. In a series of surveys conducted in the United States, Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium, a team of social psychologists led by Toon Kuppens found that college-educated respondents had more bias against less-educated people than they did against other disfavoured groups. The researchers surveyed attitudes toward a range of people who are typically victims of discrimination. In Europe, this list included Muslims and people who are poor, obese, blind and less educated; in the United States, the list also included African-Americans and the working class. Of all these groups, the poorly educated were disliked most of all.

Beyond revealing the disparaging views that college-educated elites have of less-educated people, the study also found that elites are unembarrassed by this prejudice. They may denounce racism and sexism, but they are unapologetic about their negative attitudes toward the less educated.

By the 2000s, citizens without a college degree were not only looked down upon; in the United States and Western Europe, they were also virtually absent from elective office. In the U.S. Congress, 95 percent of House members and 100 percent of

senators are college graduates. The credentialed few govern the uncredentialed many.

It has not always been this way. Although the well-educated have always been disproportionately represented in Congress, as recently as the early 1960s, about one-fourth of our elected representatives lacked a college degree. Over the past half-decade, Congress has become more diverse with regard to race, ethnicity and gender, but less diverse with regard to educational credentials and class.

One consequence of the diploma divide is that very few members of the working class ever make it to elective office. In the United States, about half of the labor force is employed in working-class jobs, defined as manual labor, service industry and clerical jobs. But fewer than 2 percent of members of Congress worked in such jobs before their election.

Some might argue that government by well-educated university graduates is something to welcome, not regret. *Surely we want well-trained doctors to perform our appendectomies. *Aren't highly credentialed leaders best equipped to give us sound public policies and reasoned political discourse?

* [Socrates has made a famous argument against democracy. Socrates once described the flaws of democracy by comparing a society to a ship. If you were heading out on a journey by sea, asks Socrates, who would you ideally want deciding who was in charge of the vessel? Just anyone or people educated in the rules and demands of seafaring? The latter of course, says Adeimantus, so why then, responds Socrates, do we keep thinking that any old person should be fit to judge who should be a ruler of a country?](#)

* [A further question would be, 'Should we only allow the educated to vote?' The common argument for is that many are irrational and dominated by passion. For example, blue collar workers vote for Trump whose policies will bring more harm to them and the US, thereby they are irrational and incapable of deep analysis. But in that case, we are denying the integrity,](#)

feelings and intuition of the majority of people if we dispossess them a medium of expression. No matter how sound the society is objectively speaking, if people subjectively think that are living an unhappy life, something is wrong. After all, the purpose of policies is to improve the living of citizens. So if irrationality is inherent in our judgements of a good life, why should we try to eliminate it in our political process? Depriving people of a chance for civic expression is depriving society a chance to adjust its trajectory. Frustration and anger that are accumulated over time may manifest in a even less desirable way.

Not necessarily. Even a glance at the parlous state of political discourse in Congress should give us pause. Governing well requires not only technocratic expertise but also *civic virtue — an ability to deliberate about the common good and to identify with citizens from all walks of life. But history suggests little correlation between the capacity for political judgment and the ability to win admission to elite universities. The notion that “the best and the brightest” are better at governing than their less-credentialed fellow citizens is a myth born of meritocratic hubris.

* Civic virtue can be understood as the dedication to the societal good or the common welfare even at the expense of individual interests.

If the rhetoric of rising and the reign of technocratic merit have led us astray, how might we recast the terms of moral and political aspiration? We should focus less on arming people for a meritocratic race and more on making life better for those who lack a diploma but who make important contributions to our society — through the work they do, the families they raise and the communities they serve. This requires renewing the dignity of work and putting it at the center of our politics.