

Disdain for the Less Educated Is the Last Acceptable Prejudice

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

Sept. 2, 2020

By Michael J. Sandel

Mr. Sandel is a political philosopher.

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 elites. By the time of Mr. Trump's election, the Democratic Party had become a party of technocratic liberalism more congenial to the professional classes than to the blue-collar 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.

Being untainted by the Ivy League credentials 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.

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 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 with inequality is to encourage upward mobility through higher education.

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 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.

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

OPINION DEBATE

What should the Biden administration prioritize?

- **EDWARD L. GLAESER**, an economist, writes that [the president should use his infrastructure plan](#) as an opportunity to “break the country out of its zoning straitjacket”
- **THE EDITORIAL BOARD** argues the administration should [return to the Iran nuclear deal](#), and that “at this point, the hard-line approach defies common sense.”
- **JONATHAN ALTER** writes that Biden needs to do now what [F.D.R. achieved during the depression](#): “restore faith that the long-distrusted federal government can deliver rapid, tangible achievements.”
- **GAIL COLLINS**, Opinion columnist, has a few questions about gun violence: “One is, what about the [gun control bills](#)? The other is, what’s with the filibuster? Is that all the Republicans know how to do?”

The credentialist prejudice is a symptom of meritocratic hubris. By 2016, many working people chafed 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 disfavored 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 disfavored 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?

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.

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.

It also requires reconsidering the meaning of success and questioning our meritocratic hubris: Is it my doing that I have the talents that society happens to prize — or is it my good luck?

Appreciating the role of luck in life can prompt a certain humility: There, but for an accident of birth, or the grace of God, or the mystery of fate, go I. This spirit of humility is the civic virtue we need now. It is the beginning of the way back from the harsh ethic of success that drives us apart. It points beyond the tyranny of merit toward a less rancorous, more generous public life.

Michael J. Sandel is a professor of government at Harvard and the author of the forthcoming “The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?,” from which this essay is adapted.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.