

Academic and Political Elitism

Musa al-Gharbi warns of the dangers of politicizing educational attainment.

By [Musa Al-Gharbi](#) August 27, 2019



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Amir Attaran, a professor of law and medicine at the University of Ottawa, recently set off a [social media firestorm](#) by describing Conservatives as the “party of the uneducated.”

Facing backlash, Attaran subsequently [denied](#) affiliation with any political party and [claimed](#) to be merely conveying what the “data” says. Yet his remarks were clearly intended as disparaging. Their implication: Conservatives are less rational or informed than other voters. As if to alleviate any doubt about this subtext, Attaran went on to [state](#) that the lack of education among these voters is why conservative governments offer “numbskull policy,” even as he [condescendingly dismissed](#) critics as “unintelligent.”

Attaran was speaking to the political milieu of Canada. But a similar partisan education gap exists between Republicans and Democrats in the United States -- and similar sentiments often prevail among the left-leaning American intelligentsia toward conservative-leaning voters.

Throughout the 2016 election cycle ([beginning in the primaries](#)), pundits and analysts seized on the apparent “[diploma divide](#)” between those who supported Trump and those who did not. This trend [continued through the recent 2018 midterms](#). A subtext running through many of these essays (sometimes even an [explicit theme](#)) is that the consolidation of support among degree holders for the DNC is somehow proof that Democrats’ political preferences are more intelligent, informed, rational or effective than those of the opposition. As comedian Stephen Colbert once [put it](#), “Reality has a well-known liberal bias.”

Maybe it does. But despite the reality that social psychological literature also has a [well-known liberal bias](#), it nonetheless throws cold water on the idea that a constituency's education level suggests *anything* about the wisdom of a political party's policies or platform.

Mixed Blessings

For many people, it is [intuitive and comforting to believe](#) that while the political preferences of others may be driven primarily by prejudices, emotions, superstition, dogma and ignorance, the positions of well-educated or highly intelligent voters are shaped by logic and "the facts." *We* make decisions based on a careful consideration of the issues; *we* would readily change our minds if the facts were not "on our side" or as the relevant circumstances evolved. The faith that education produces just these kinds of citizens has been baked into the project of modern universities [from the outset](#).

Yet the cognitive and behavioral science literature suggests that those who are highly [educated](#), [intelligent](#) or [rhetorically skilled](#) tend to be significantly *less* likely than most to [revise their beliefs](#) or [adjust their positions](#) when confronted with evidence or arguments that contradict their priors. This is because, in virtue of knowing more about the world, or being better at arguing, they are better equipped to punch holes in data or arguments that contradict their prior views or to otherwise make excuses for "sticking to their guns" regardless. And so, they do.

Indeed, research suggests that people with highly refined critical capacities often deploy them [to scrutinize others](#). Hence, those with higher [education levels](#) and [academic aptitude](#) (college [GPA](#)) tend to be less attuned than most to ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty and limitations in their own knowledge -- and less prone to innovative or creative thinking.

Although highly educated people tend to be more politically engaged on average, their involvement is also much less likely to be oriented toward pragmatic ends. Instead, those with high levels of education gravitate toward "[political hobbyism](#)" and "[expressive voting](#)" -- that is, engaging in political research, discourse and participation for the purposes of self-aggrandizement, entertainment, validating one's identity and views, and so forth.

According to Mark R. Joslyn and Donald P. Haider-Markel in "[Who Knows Best? Education, Partisanship and Contested Facts](#)," those who are highly educated tend to be more politically partisan than most. They are also [significantly more likely](#) to conform their evaluations of historical or present circumstances to fit the messaging of party elites. In fact, as compared to the general public, cognitively sophisticated voters are [much more likely](#) to form their positions on issues, or even change their positions on issues, based on partisan cues of what they are "supposed" to think in virtue of their identity as Democrats, Republicans, etc. People tend to [grow more politically polarized](#) as their scientific literacy, numeracy or reflectiveness increases, and evoking [scientific studies](#) or [statistics](#) in the context of sociopolitical arguments tends to polarize people even further.

By virtue of their tendencies toward political hobbyism, highly educated people tend to follow political horse races much more closely than the general public and are often much better versed with respect to contemporary political gossip, dramas or scandals. Yet they tend to be [little more](#)

[informed](#) than most with regards to more substantive facts -- often lacking even rudimentary knowledge about civic institutions and processes. In fact, research suggests that highly educated people tend to be [less self-aware](#) of their own sociopolitical preferences than most people -- typically describing themselves as more left wing than they actually seem to be. They also tend to be significantly worse at [gauging others' political beliefs](#), often assuming other people are much more extreme or dogmatic than they actually seem to be.

That is perhaps because studies show that, compared to the [general public](#), highly educated or intelligent people tend to be [more ideological in their thinking](#), more [ideologically rigid](#) and [more extreme](#) in their ideological leanings. Highly educated and intelligent people are also more likely to grow obsessed with some [moral or political cause](#). Research suggests that they are [more likely to](#) overreact to small shocks, challenges or slights. Other studies have found that, while they are less likely to be prejudiced against others on the basis of things like race, they tend to be [more prejudiced](#) than most against those who seem to think differently than they do -- and [often look down on](#) those with less education.

In short, many of the biases and distortions to which [all people are susceptible](#) seem to be even more pronounced among those who are highly educated or intelligent.

Given such realities, it is far from clear that the consolidation of America's educated class into a single political party would actually prove to be a boon for that party, its platform or its decision making. Indeed, history from the [United States](#) and [abroad](#) is [replete with examples](#) of grievous harm caused by well-intentioned [technocrats](#) and [ideologues](#) when they grow insufficiently accountable to ordinary folk.

In other words, while the growing diploma divide along partisan lines may tell us many things about the trajectory of America society and culture, it does not prove -- [or even suggest](#) -- that one party's political platform and priorities are any more rational, informed or effective than another's. If it is the case that Democrats' positions are more ethical or practically effective than those of their rivals, that would be incidental to (perhaps even despite) partisan differences in constituents' average education levels.

Consider: up until the 2012 elections, Republicans [tended to have a larger share](#) of college-educated voters than Democrats (an effect that was even more pronounced [among white voters](#)). Most of us on the left did not take this as evidence that Republican policies were consistently more ethical and well grounded than those of Democrats. Instead, many interpreted these trends as a sign that the Republicans were the party of elites, while Democrats were the party of "the people."

Yet now that the educated class has shifted their allegiance, condescension and elitism have become increasingly vogue on the left, while "populism" has become something of a [dirty word](#).

Academics and Elitism

Many branded Attaran's remarks, disparaging the uneducated and their preferred political party, as "elitist." He has [attempted to dismiss this charge](#) on the grounds that he is a son of immigrants

and therefore (in his mind) must not be an “elite.” Yet the average income for full-time faculty member at the University of Ottawa, according to Glassdoor, is [roughly \\$138,000](#) -- about twice [Canada’s median household income](#). Given the specific departments he is affiliated with (law and medicine), Attaran’s salary probably puts him into the top [10 percent](#) of Canadian income earners. It is hard to see how this does not qualify as elite.

In the United States, similar dynamics hold. The median income for postsecondary teachers is [roughly \\$78,000](#). That is well above the overall [median household income](#) in the country. The typical American professor falls solidly into the uppermost quintile of income earners; many are well into the top 10 percent ([earning \\$118,000 or higher](#)). Yet relatively few academics actually seem to recognize themselves as social elites.

Instead, as Rachel Sherman noted in *Uneasy Street* (Princeton University Press), her study of [affluent New Yorkers](#), or as Richard Reeves [pointed out](#) in his book *Dream Hoarders* (Brookings Institution Press), many relatively well-off Americans mischaracterize themselves as “middle class” -- especially those who are not born into wealth. This [lack of self-awareness](#) among many academics about their socioeconomic and cultural position, and their frequent elitist tendencies, is far from harmless.

Indeed, while those with college degrees may increasingly [lean Democrat](#) -- and the number of degree holders has [increased in recent years](#) -- only about a third of Americans possess a bachelor’s degree, let alone an advanced degree. And those voters tend to be [geographically concentrated](#) in areas of the country that already skew decisively blue. As a result, even if the diploma gap continues to expand, and the number of degree holders continues to climb, Democratic gains from these trends [may be minimal](#) with regard to congressional seats or national races. They could even suffer at the ballot box if they [lose touch](#) in the process with less educated voters -- who are more broadly distributed throughout the country, and twice as plentiful as degree holders.

Finally, it’s worth emphasizing that people typically disinvest from institutions that they [are not reflected in](#). As education becomes increasingly associated with allegiance to the left, incentives to slash university funding will [grow even stronger](#) among right-leaning politicians. Already, [experts](#) -- and the institutions that produce them ([universities](#)) -- are widely perceived as having a political agenda that is out of step with the will and interests of the general public. As the diploma divide continues to expand, and inequality [continues to rise](#), right-aligned populists will be able to seize and maintain power even *more* easily by exploiting the [growing mistrust of elites](#). It is incumbent upon us to avoid exacerbating those dynamics.

It may be emotionally satisfying for academics and intellectuals to disparage or patronize the less educated and their political allegiances, but this condescension is unearned. The political leanings of highly educated or intelligent people tend not to be any more rational or informed than anyone else’s. Putting on a pretense of superiority is likely to blow up in our faces.

Bio

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