

The People vs. the Political Professionals

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Commentary

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Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton—as well as his defeat of 16 rivals for the Republican nomination—was nothing if not a repudiation by a significant segment of American voters of rule by elites. Were the people justified?

In one view, favored by Trump voters, the repudiation was a long time in coming and thoroughly warranted. Seldom did his supporters deny Trump's bombast, vulgarity, carelessness with facts, and weak grasp of policy detail. For them, his brazen trampling over the niceties of acceptable political discourse was part of his appeal.

The Republican candidate's swagger and taunting tweets reflected his disdain for a Washington establishment that prided itself on knowing better than ordinary people what was good for them and heaped on rules and regulations codifying the D.C. insiders' presumed wisdom. For many Trump voters, the time had come to put in their place the policy experts and political professionals who ignored common concerns about stagnant wages and evaporating jobs, skyrocketing health-care costs, lawless immigration, and foreign policies that cost American lives and drained the U.S. Treasury.

Meanwhile, elites embraced a contrary story line. Trump's election confirms their worst suspicions: namely, that working-class white America is ignorant and ungrateful, racist and sexist, authoritarian and xenophobic. It demonstrates that those who work on farms and in factories and live in small towns and in rural areas vote oblivious to their self-interest and the public interest. It proves that "red state" Americans can't be trusted with power.

But Trump voters are more informed about the elites than are the elites about them. Trump voters see the elites on network and cable news and late-night talk shows. They encounter them in the dominant print media. And they take in the elite sensibility through feature films, and television sitcoms and dramas.

In contrast, members of the so-called knowledge class seldom acquire more than a passing acquaintance with those in "flyover country," their dismissive term for the approximately 2,600 of 3,100 counties—or 84 percent of the geographic United States—where Donald Trump bested Hillary Clinton. Knowledge of how the other half lives and thinks is one glaring hole of elite education.

In a new Brookings Institution report, "More professionalism, less populism: How voting makes us stupid, and what to do about it," Senior Fellows Jonathan Rauch and Benjamin Wittes seek a rapprochement between the grass roots and the elites by restructuring political relations between them. Shifting—or rather returning—power to political elites, they contend, will be to everybody's advantage.

The authors' reason for rejecting the conviction common to "many commentators and reformers" that "increasing popular involvement in politics and government is the remedy for the ills of our political culture" is voter ignorance—to which, they emphasize, abundant social science research attests. Nevertheless, Rauch and Wittes offer a sympathetic account of ordinary voters. They view them as citizens with many interests and responsibilities, but also as rational individuals who know their votes have an infinitesimal chance of deciding elections, and therefore reasonably decline to dedicate themselves to mastering the facts and overcoming natural biases.

Defective political judgment, the authors recognize, also afflicts elites: "If anything, wealthier and better-educated voters are often more, rather than less, subject to partisanship, systematic bias, rationalization, and overconfidence in inaccurate beliefs," they write. The

Brookings fellows nevertheless insist that career politicians, party officials, policy experts, and lawyers bring knowledge of institutional arrangements, complex trade-offs, and technical detail that are essential to good government.

To reset the distribution of power between the experts and ordinary voters, Rauch and Wittes advance proposals to correct a century of progressive reforms that gave the people a more direct hand in choosing candidates and overseeing policy formation. The authors' aim is to strengthen "intermediation, the work done by institutions (such as political parties) and substantive professionals (such as career politicians and experts) to organize, interpret, and buffer popular sentiment." This, they argue, would enable government officials to frame superior policies and implement them more expeditiously.

Despite apparently siding with the elites against the people, Rauch and Wittes contend that fortifying the professionals does not dilute democracy. To the contrary, their proposals, they maintain, produce the best of both worlds: "professional intermediaries make democracy *more* inclusive and *more* representative than direct participation can do by itself."

That's a tempting gambit, but it's unlikely to satisfy working-class voters—or, without the reform of our elites, produce the superior results the authors anticipate. Even if elite professionals adopt policies that better reflect the people's true interests, such benevolence no more expresses rule by the people than if it had been accomplished on the people's behalf by philosopher-kings or divine-right monarchs.

Further, Rauch and Wittes claim that their "hybrid" of "direct democracy and elite rule" embodies Madisonian principles of constitutional government. They are right that Madisonian constitutionalism is a hybrid. But our Constitution does not constrain popular will in order to enhance democracy; it does so to safeguard individual freedom. Although the authors obscure it, Madison also stressed the acute threat to individual freedom posed by elite will, which our Constitution constrains through the separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, and, not least, popular sovereignty.

Contrary to Rauch and Wittes, moreover, Alexis de Tocqueville's critique of the tyranny of the majority did not target populism and does not support their case for transferring power to professionals. Tocqueville's concern was with the threat to liberty and self-government posed by the rise of public opinion—more akin to today's political correctness. He also feared the "gentle" or "democratic" despotism of an all-powerful central government—which anticipates our ever-expanding welfare, regulatory, and administrative state. To counteract these forces, Tocqueville advocated, in contrast to the Brookings scholars, *greater* political power for the people, exercised locally.

Rauch and Wittes also selectively portray the history of progressivism. Yes, some progressives have called for increased participatory democracy. At the same time, the authors, like generations of progressives, follow in the footsteps of Woodrow Wilson, who

disparaged the people's capacity for self-government while seeking to empower the professionals to advance the public interest.

The authors' oversights and inaccuracies tend in one direction: the vindication of elite claims. They even invoke "intelligence oversight" as an exemplary instance of rule by professionals. This, despite a recent rash of unlawful leaks by intelligence officials to the New York Times and Washington Post, and last month's disclosure of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court proceedings that discussed numerous violations of U.S. citizens' privacy rights by the National Security Agency, the FBI, and the Obama administration while handling foreign intelligence.

A satisfactory argument for transferring more power to today's elites would require addressing the people's legitimate anxieties about the professional class. These include policy incompetence ranging from mismanagement of the economy and immigration to botching diplomacy and the conduct of war; politicization of the administrative state as illustrated by IRS targeting of conservatives during Obama's first term; and the elite media's use of double standards in reporting and opining about left and right. Underlying it all is the corruption of liberal education, which has become boot camp for progressivism, and of graduate and professional schools, which provide advance training in the progressive exercise of power.

To play the vital role contemplated for them by our constitutional system, intellectual and political elites have a long way to go in regaining the people's trust.

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