

Abstract

This article examines the influence of anti-intellectual ideology in the United States, with a particular focus on its effect on citizen voting. Historical context is used to show the innate American tendencies to choose an anti-intellectual system of belief to uphold cultural and democratic norms, which can be seen through the lack of adequate required education to understand cultural diversity or democratic systems, geographical differences, polarization, and the prioritization of monetary success (the “American Dream”). This results in the disenfranchisement of diverse and systemically impacted voters: individuals who are non-white, non-male, non-cisgender, non-able-bodied, or intersectional.

Introduction

Following the 2024 presidential election, amid a multitude of Truth Social tweets that could be deemed less than intellectual, then-president-elect Donald Trump was quoted as saying, “smart people don’t like me” (Crowley, 2025). While this video clip caused controversy for being considered immature and was claimed to be “taken out of context” according to the original poster, it does pose a few questions regarding those who support Donald Trump and their reasoning. If this quote were taken at face value, it would indicate that the sitting president believes all individuals who voted for him and his Republican/conservative agenda are uneducated and unintelligent. Is this true? It is completely unfair to assume any category of millions of United States voters is not “smart,” nor could any generalization based on intelligence within voting capacity be taken lightly, considering the stain of Jim Crow era literacy tests.

So, why did U.S. voters vote Donald Trump in for a second term when his approval ratings were low during his first term and have consistently dropped during this second term, despite having been in office for less than two years upon the publication of this paper (Daniel et al., 2025)? Education and literacy are tricky to question as current generations are seven percent higher in postsecondary achievement than the previous decade (NCSL Task Force on Higher Education, 2024); however, the term education itself is far too broad a categorization. It is therefore relevant to lessen the umbrella of this term into one focus: anti-intellectualism, as a direct influence on conservative voting trends and ideology.

Intellectuals are individuals who pursue intellectual action, most often connected with the interest in becoming educated, for the sake of it. This interest in intellect and education must surpass the general means of attaining education, which includes any foundational K-12 education, and is more modernly encompassing both associate and baccalaureate degrees as the general population pursues them more frequently. Anything above this level of attainment would, in turn, describe an intellectual; however, individuals capable of obtaining these secondary levels of education will not all be intellectuals and may simply be chasing a better-paying career in the long run. An anti-intellectual would then be the antithesis of this—someone who is against intellectual action, thought, institutions, and individuals. Being that education builds intellect, it must be factored in, but it must not be looked upon as the main issue, for this would be both untrue and dangerous due to historical factors. It must simply be defined as people or systems that are driven to learn for the sake of learning rather than for the sake of making a profit. Under these definitions, there arises an argument for voter disenfranchisement by means of anti-intellectual ideology influencing the education and democratic systems. This can disqualify systemically impacted groups from access to adequate foundational education and, therefore, set them up for future voting and political participation trends, as well as discourage public opinion from being shared and trusted to carry influence.

History

The United States has a history of anti-intellectualism because of the national attitudes towards “the American Dream” and the capitalistic prioritization of financial success. Intellect is not sought out for the sake of learning, but rather for economic gain. Anti-intellectualism has, by William E. Leuchtenburg (1955) and his studies, been deemed an inherently United States American trait which originated in the colonial settlers’ need to focus simply on day-to-day circumstances of land, power, and livelihood, which took away from any human need or want to think intellectually. This anti-intellectualism may look like a rejection of intellectual pursuits such as thought, theory, and learning, or the rejection of intellectuals themselves: people who embody one, if not all three, previously listed things (Leuchtenburg 1955, 3).

In a more modern context, a recent study on civic engagement among college students showed: “Four in 10 young adults reported being pessimistic about the future of American democracy, and more than five in 10 reported having no or little trust in government institutions. More importantly, public trust in higher education is also on a downward trend, particularly across ideological lines” (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024, p. 5).

In this, there is a lack of understanding of what political ideology the United States abides by, either because the terms “republic” and “democracy” are misunderstood, with the latter often used to describe the U.S., and being something it is under threat of losing. In believing the U.S. is a “democracy,” civilians are taking some part in government-promoted anti-intellectualism, as it was originally founded as a constitutional republic. This longstanding political confusion and division allows for limited change to take place, as the institutions capable of teaching about politics and the advanced methods of technically patching governmental issues are also distrusted by those who stand against either the government, higher education, or both. Anti-intellectualism, while not exclusive to the U.S., is certainly uniquely existent in the national culture because of this deep historical context of anti-intellectualism within power and success.

As culture in America becomes subject to increasingly fast changes, Brameld (1955) can be drawn back to the forefront of considering anti-intellectualism in education. In this dated but relevant article, Brameld (1955) indicated two groups of individuals within the realm of education, the traditionalists and the progressivists. The latter becomes the author's subject as he presents it as the less anti-intellectual group and highlights its importance in a quickly changing society:

For one thing, progressivism needs to incorporate into its theory and practice much more of the recent findings of the psychological and social sciences that demonstrate the unrational or, if you please, the *un*-intelligent aspects of individual and collective behavior. To accomplish this does not contribute further to anti-intellectualism; on the contrary, it enables education to become more maturely intellectual by assessing more fully the emotional and cultural obstacles that must be coped with through intelligent means (p. 40).

As progressivism and the inclusion of more in-depth cultural understanding (including modernizing understandings of race, class, and marginality) will help to curb anti-intellectualism, the prioritization of STEM degrees and careers can pose a dangerous risk of perpetuating anti-intellectual ideology in the United States.

Anti-Intellectualizing Race and Class in Education

An altercation with the attitude of education being a necessity to civic engagement was seen during the Jim Crow era, when schools for African Americans “received about one-third the funding of schools for white students, their teachers earned less pay, and the students received fewer months of schooling each year” (Hill 2017, 11). Education and literacy were weaponized against particularly Black citizens to uplift the vote of the “literate,” who were mostly white and had access to better education and funding. Literacy has always had a negative connotation in the United States; those who have it are powerful and typically white, and those who lack it are undeserving and typically people of color or low-income (often both). When looking at education through the light of being a tool for wielding power, the recent demonization of curricula such as critical race theory and AP African American Studies becomes nothing more than an attempt to erase historical diversity in a continuous national effort to protect and empower white interests. On the other hand, the way historical courses are regulated when allowed to be taught will also leave room for erasure if the communities they discuss are not the ones creating the curricula. Disallowing large groups of people from learning any kind of specific curriculum with the expectation that this will create an educated voter, then makes the fact of having education or not completely irrelevant to the person or to the argument of anti-intellectualism. As foundational education is state-sanctioned and government-enforced, it is not a power that is fully in the hands of the people. President Trump has even gone so far as to “pursue these federal cuts on the campaign... saying he would focus on schools that push “critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content.” Public school systems are targets for cuts too” (Seminera, 2025).

Education is, to a large extent, an instrument held outside the hands of the voters themselves. Peltzman (1993) found that “rising parental education attainment and declining school performance suggest that better-educated voters do not constitute a powerful pressure group for better public schools” (p. 367). Education is obviously an important priority, with parents pursuing post-secondary education themselves; however, this did not motivate them to vote for better education for children. Instead of being straightforwardly read as such, it can instead be looked at as an influence of anti-intellectual thinking rising among developing generations. The author described college as “a new middle-class birthright” (p. 367), in which it can be assumed that the majority of the middle-class are white families with immediate access to better primary and secondary school zones, and later on higher rates of attendance to colleges and universities as they can better afford it. There would be a much smaller need for members of these communities to vote for supposed “better education” for their children, as their children already have access to it.

In lower-income communities, which will likewise have less access to the same quality of foundational education for their children, the parents will likely not have had the same financial income to afford post-secondary schooling for themselves, or often later for their children. Voting in person for either of these communities will depend on the ability to have time off work and have transport to and from the location where they must cast their ballot. The latter community will again have far less opportunities to do so. It is not a question of which broad economic group wants the best for their children, but which group has the means to fight for that cause. The group that does have the means to fight for that cause, the middle-class or above families, do not have any need to because they already have been awarded the privilege of access to adequate education. The resistance to voting in the benefit for communities outside of one's own is inherently anti-intellectual as it is selfishly safeguarding education based upon class and oftentimes racial factors.

Likewise, Ray and Mahmoudi (2022) found that “the blind pursuit of educational degrees and status as means to an end (e.g., jobs, careers, and wealth) breeds practices in schools and communities that reinforce social stratification and thus inequality” (p. 131). The cyclical nature of this pursuit of monetary success in the United States perpetuates the class boundaries and glass-ceilingesque structures that keep certain individuals and families in specific class situations. Those who have the means to afford higher education will pursue it and will likely earn a degree, which leads to a job with pay equal to or higher than their parents’. While scholarship does exist, it is not in enough abundance to send people from marginalized communities to school at the same rates as those who can already afford it out of pocket or through loans over time, depicted by low-income families enrolling at a rate of nearly 50 percent less than their high-income peers (Cahalan et al., 2024).

Anti-Intellectualism in STEM Education versus Humanities Education

As education has been ruled too broad a factor on voting influence, so must anti-intellectualism. It is important to note that STEM education has been on the rise in the U.S. since 2012, while historical and social science-related degrees have been experiencing downwards trends and hold only seven percent of bachelor's degrees awarded in the 2021-2022 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, Figure 4). STEM has been societally deemed the most prosperous field(s) to pursue due to the prospect of higher-paying jobs seen in, for example, healthcare and engineering. This increase of interest because of financial concern is inherently anti-intellectual, looking back to Leuchtenburg's explanation of the term, due to the lack of interest in pursuing thought and theory, and, arguably, learning, for the sake of doing so. STEM majors have also shown less civic engagement than their peers in humanities-based education (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024, p. 3). With these upward trends in STEM education showing less civic engagement, and a slight downward trend in humanities education, the two are not differentiated enough to prove that people are choosing their degree paths due to anti-intellectualism (NCES, 2024), and it must therefore be considered that the curriculums of any number of degrees themselves are becoming or have always been more anti-intellectual in their own nature.

When granted access to institutes of higher education, it is decidedly more honorable to choose a career that will make more money than will be more meaningful or enjoyable to the individual. It is placing educational favor on survival, which these days is based almost entirely upon income and finances, rather

than the pleasure of pursuing the intellectual endeavors themselves. This is not to say that every person pursuing STEM is only doing it for the money, as many will enjoy the career itself; however, it is certainly an aspect of U.S. culture that must be acknowledged. Is it societally more honorable to be a teacher or a surgeon? The answer to this question is entirely influenced by the American hunger for money.

STEM-based intellect, and therefore the higher honor placed in choosing a career as a surgeon, is racialized property. In a study done by Erika Bullock on the gentrification of schools in Memphis, Tennessee, under a lens of critical theory, she found that high schools with a majority-Black student base were being bought out and repurposed into STEM-based schools, which then became majority-white. These schools exist on the presumption that students with more desirable skills will enter the economy and help the city, and are therefore founded on merit-based admissions (Bullock 2017). This ideal of meritocracy, making students better suited to the economy, is not only anti-intellectual because of its reliance on, once again, money as a measure of success, but also shows how this attitude is inherently racialized. The kids gaining access to these pre-college institutions are privileged by their status of race and income, which makes it easier for them to access more economically desirable education. In pushing marginalized racial and class groups out of “better” schools, citizen and voter disenfranchisement becomes clearer.

Additionally, in nationally funded research done by Riegle-Crumb, King, and Irizarry (2019), it was found that:

“STEM is the only field where Black and Latina/o youth are significantly more likely than White peers to switch and earn a degree in another field... [there is] evidence of White privilege in STEM degree attainment that is not mirrored in other major fields” (Does STEM Stand Out? p. 141).

There is then not only an issue with the accessibility of STEM at a youth level but also at the collegiate level, proving that people belonging to marginalized racial groups are withheld at all levels from achieving the same education and therefore financial success that comes with the prioritization of STEM education in the United States. An industry that already rejects the necessary diversity and cultural-humanities education required to fully understand the nation's civilization is also rejecting the diverse members of the society from participating in and gaining access to the elite class of wealth. Race and financial success within this industry are then almost entirely codependent.

STEM-based schools, such as those in Memphis and at the collegiate level, will be considered “good” because of their economic implications. Ray and Mahmoudi (2022) argue that “the establishment of “good” schools, as we know them conventionally, in stratified societies such as the United States also means the perpetuation of social and economic segregation... [this] is neither a race nor a class-neutral project” (p. 131). This would also include other economically promising schools that may exist without a curriculum focused only on STEM. This, however, does not exclude the inaccessibility seen in the Memphis STEM-based schools from “good” schools. Both will exist under meritocratic management, either through special admissions or training students to have competitive merit so they are well-suited to enter the market economy. If race is a major factor in gaining access to the STEM industry, which has a likelihood to provide the most financial success and entrance to the “American Dream,” then the so-called “American Dream” cannot be accessible to anyone who is non-white. This will only be perpetuated as wealthy white and STEM-educated individuals continue to vote to uphold the system(s) they benefit from, as their money and race provide them with more powerful say. People who have been denied access to the same institutions will continue to be awarded less and less access to the power required to make a democratic influence.

American “Rural Identity” and Patriotism

An additional factor encouraging anti-intellectual thought is the “rural identity” of Americans. This concept is introduced by Kristin Lunz Trujillo (2022) as a preexisting anti-intellectual mode of thought in which rural-dwelling Americans see intellectualism as an urban endeavor and are therefore opposed to it. This is characterized by a long-standing divisiveness between rural and urban communities based on a historic difference in education access and geographically influenced stereotypes that reinforce the concepts

of certain educated individuals as belonging to certain geographical areas (Lunz Trujillo, 2022). However, seeing as these rural communities are less densely populated than typically coastal urban states, this concept of a “rural identity” needs to be broadened in order to be applicable to the argument of anti-intellectualism influencing conservative voting trends. The author found that “The results of this study imply that anti-intellectualism in American society is group-based and rooted in longstanding norms and attitudes relating to groups,” and that “rural identification encompasses a worldview not *necessarily* tied to current location” with some 27 percent of rural identifiers not residing in rural areas (Lunz Trujillo, 2022). This “rural identity” must then encompass some form of American patriotism to classical southern or otherwise rural roots in order to include non-rural dwellers who still subjugate themselves to this “rural identity.”

In targeting this American sense of patriotism and its occasionally accompanying “rural identity,” Susan Giroux (2009) exemplifies prior presidential “appeals to practicality and patriotism” in running campaigns. These appeals were aimed directly against opponents who showed open value in things outside of Christianity and whiteness, such as Thomas Jefferson's stance on education and Barack Obama's race, among other things (p. 297). While both of these individuals were elected after their campaigns, it does not take away from the attempts to disarm them for stepping outside of the stereotypical patriotic attitude. To be a patriot has been manipulated into being seen as toting unwavering loyalty for the United States government and complying with gender, race, or religious standards. If one does not exude these “unspoken” policies, they must not be patriotic, and politicians enjoy to make that known through their heeded warnings of losing the romanticized patriotic America “as a result of some marauding horde—thugged out young black men, welfare queens, overpopulating Latinos, illegal immigrants, radical Jihadists, or “gay married terrorists” in economist Paul Krugman's satiric phrase” (S. Giroux, p. 297). It is no mistake that the way in which the powerful political elites speak to the people whom they serve—which is a highly optimistic term to use—is meant to manipulate. In establishing fear over certain marginalized and minority groups of people, there is a perpetuation of patriotism being an alternative term for white supremacy.

This use of extreme polarization as a tool in manipulating the masses is no stranger to historical or modern American politics. In an article from Gordon Clapp (1955), it is emphasized once more how intellect is looked down upon in the United States government:

I strongly suspect that when we know more about the “security system” now operating in the federal government, we shall find that one of its primary characteristics is a prejudice against dissent, an impatience with dissenters, and apprehension, even resentment, about those who as public employees insist upon thinking for themselves under the discipline of an active and informed conscience. Perhaps we shall find that scorn for the “brain truster” has raised a crop of petty tyrants and ambitious cynics who seek to be “brain-busters” (p. 32).

The continuation of this act of “brain-busting,” most evidently seen by government officials and the citizens who have come to support them, can be seen in the current Trump administration's efforts to silence and repress political opposition. From aggressive rhetoric and lawsuits against media outlets that have openly criticized anything to do with Trump (Spike and Riccardi, 2025) to a massive increase in citizen surveillance in a historic anti-immigration campaign (Campbell et al., 2025), there is no explanation other than anti-intellectualism and its hunger for power.

There should, in theory, be nothing less patriotic to the American public than to revoke their constitutional rights, including, but not limited to, the right to freedom of speech; however, patriotism and the “rural identity” connected to the feeling of being American has never been about being a proud American, rather it has only ever been about forcing citizens into control by feeding them a false sense of autonomy and belonging—if you are an embodiment of whiteness, that is.

Language

Language, too, becomes important in assessing anti-intellectual influence as the meaning of words change to fit desired realities. Henry Giroux (2017) argues that this control over speech and ultimately the

“capacity for critical thought” have been shaped by the growing desire for “a market logic that narrows their meaning [of words] to either a relationship to a commodity or a reductive notion of self-interest” (p. 15). Essentially, the language used when discussing any given topic can conflate or reduce the urgency and definition of the subject. Under an anti-intellectual structure, education will be spoken about with hostility and untrustworthiness by higher powers, in turn manipulating the public understanding of such. This goes hand in hand with selective truth-telling and lying by omission.

If monetary success is said to be the main goal of the “American Dream,” the public will then prioritize the attainment of money above all else. This, however, shows the first and most important flaw in its definition. The concept of achieving the “American Dream” allows the public to believe they have a choice in participating in capitalism and the market economy—they do not. Lack of participation is shunned because of this, allowing for the widely accepted demonization of the poor and unhoused communities in the States, which is sitting at around ten percent of the U.S. population as of 2024 (US Census Bureau, 2025). This can also be applied directly to how officials speak about immigrants or “illegal aliens,” LGBTQ+ communities, and groups of specific gender or race (including religion), among others. It is important to note that oftentimes the tone of voice is what indicates derogatory meaning or not, which cannot be displayed as easily in text.

In more recent concerns regarding language and allowance of terminology, the Trump administration has directly moved towards targeting the language in grants seeking federal funding. This has slimmed down even the rhetoric within the prioritized STEM industry to fit into a growing national standard of white-cisgender-heterosexual-masculinity. Instead of simply rejecting classically “woke” terminology, which is typically anything that makes reference to equity, gender identity and transgender individuals, or other members of the LGBTQ+ community, the current administration is also aiming to remove words in reference to womanhood and the research of biological females as well as anything mentioning diversity, equity, and even the term race (Yourish et al., 2025). Some of these terms have been redefined as being separate from the politically woke agenda (Gay Stolberg, 2025); however, even any initial questioning of including them or not in scientific grant funding allowances is inherently anti-intellectual and dangerous to the development of science and production of beneficial, factual truth.

Public Protest and Policy

It is also important to acknowledge the impacts of public protest on United States policy decisions. In a study done on the use of public protesting during the civil rights movement, Andrews and Gaby (2015) found that “At the beginning of 1963, few within or outside the Kennedy administration expected significant policy to be imminent... protest was critical for seizing the opportunity” (p. 525). It was with the immense help and recognition of civilian-led and backed campaigns that legislation was capable of being pushed to pass. This trend can also be seen throughout history as governments are forced to respond to social movements that have become so popular that they can no longer control or ignore them.

This is articulated through the concept of political opportunity, which explains how “In a polity in which political organizing is heavily restricted, for example, virtually everyone with a grievance has interest in cooperating in opposition—to the degree that the threat of repression allows” (Meyer, 2004, p. 140). This can be further explained by more modern spikes in support for public protest and the corresponding response of the government and media. In 2020, which exhibited a heightened interest in the Black Lives Matter movement, support for the movement faltered, sometimes more than ten percent, among racial and political affiliation categories of Americans between June and September of the same year (Blazina, 2024). While Pew Research Center does not provide a direct explanation for the cause of this, it is fair to assume that both distance from the movement and lacking or changing media coverage played large roles in the loss of support. This can also be applied to the increase of protests throughout 2025, with a large majority being in response to the genocide in Palestine and the Trump administration (*Crowd Counting Consortium 2025 U.S. Protest Event Data*, 2025), as the Trump administration has continuously disapproved and discouraged national protests. This has not resulted in the halt of civilian protests but has actually significantly increased them, even in more Republican-leaning states and districts (Shay et al., 2025).

As public protest has historically resulted in public policy influence, there is hope for the recent increase of American civilian action to result in a continued push for political understanding of citizens and residents; however, the concern regarding the language and adamant disapproval of some political power figures, or non-action of others, still presents difficult political opportunities for public protest to currently result in much democratic policy change. Ultimately, under the current system, the decision to enact or repeal policies is up to those in power and how much scrutiny they are willing to take before changing their mind or taking action. There is only so much civilians can legally do, otherwise more changes would likely have already been made at the hands of civil rights movements.

Conclusion

As anti-intellectualism continues to exist and risks heightening levels under the ruse of “patriotism,” it is increasingly important to consider its effect on American voting trends and disenfranchisement. Without diverse cultural understanding in a nation that is consistently displaying mixation, voters will not be capable of recognizing discrimination and a lack of political representation. When whiteness has never been taken out of the norm, yet the public continues to become less white, there can be no means of democratically qualifying systemically impacted groups. Direct access to adequate foundational education, which is diverse and inclusive to represent the true population, is a major key in enfranchising the true voices of voters. It cannot be expected that without this truly equal access and understanding that any one person could make a directly informed and inclusive political decision. Those who have access to adequate education often lack diverse cultural understanding and experience with systemic marginalization, whereas people with diverse cultural understanding and experience with marginalization are often withheld from accessible education that can provide adequate understanding of the current democratic institution and its implications.

Anti-intellectualism is not an exclusive actor: the more that we as Americans allow it to impact us, the more that will be lost. This includes the current understanding of whiteness and its continual empowerment. It must not be forgotten that once Italians and the Irish were not considered to be white either, and now that they have gained access to this racially privileged group, they have likewise gained access to better education. Under this flexible logic, other racially marginalized communities can also gain access to the same privilege. If the current state of the U.S. remains largely unquestioned, voters will continue to be silenced without care or recognition as the privileged white class of Americans continues to be served. This trend of privilege and access is historic and cannot stand forever. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King, 1963, p.1). Likewise, the lack of adequate education cannot exist if a society wants to deem itself intelligent and democratic.

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