

**Anti-intellectualism: A Danger to Our Future**

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### **Introduction**

There are a number of issues that threaten our nation and our world. Today, nations are at war, disasters threaten the coasts, and open challenges have been made to American democracy. Stability in the future has been hindered recently by problems including vaccine hesitancy and climate change denial. Anti-intellectualism has driven these issues and posits a growing threat to American and global stability. Deaths and destruction have already been wrought by misinformation surrounding vaccinations and an unwillingness to prepare for the coming climate disaster. The longer we wait to address these problems, the more outbreaks will occur, the more homes will burn, the higher the flood waters will rise. **To secure our future, we must address anti-intellectualism as the crux of these issues that threaten our country and the global community.** As I write this paper, anti-intellectualism has cost lives and will continue to do so. In this paper, I will make the case that we as a society must reject this disdain for science and expertise or risk setting progress back.

### **Analysis**

Anti-intellectualism is not a new concept:

“Today, when the territory of the intellectual is invaded either by anti-intellectuals or subverted by misguided anti-intellectualists, we all run greater risks than ever before. Today, the recognition that knowledge of the truth cannot be attained by mere feeling or instinctive skill is a necessary condition for the survival of those who are capable of that recognition as well as of those who are not.” (White 1962)

The trend of anti-intellectualism has grown both at home and abroad. “I find that anti-intellectualism is associated with not only the rejection of policy-relevant matters of scientific consensus but support for political movements (e.g., “Brexit”) and politicians (e.g., George

Wallace, Donald Trump) who are skeptical of experts.” (Motta 2017) We are already seeing the negative effects of the anti-intellectual movement. I believe that a failure to combat this wave of anti-science, anti-expert behavior will lead to even greater disaster and the degradation of our society.

After his victory in the 2016 Nevada Republican Presidential Primary, Donald Trump stated “I love the poorly educated.” (Fares, Chelerus 2016) This phrase drew heavy criticism across social media. There is, however, reason for Trump and other Republicans to love the poorly educated. “A majority of Republican voters in 2022 had no college degree (63%).” (Hartig 2023) Many of those voters would have been in middle school a decade earlier, where “by the standards used in various large-scale literacy assessments, only about a third of U.S. students in middle school possess the knowledge-based competencies to "read" in this more comprehensive sense.” (Reardon 2012) The only group with similar conservative leaning in the Pew study was White evangelicals.

Trump would go on to be president during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The pandemic was a flashpoint displaying the dangers of anti-intellectualism, especially when touted by political leaders. As of this writing, over 1.2 million Americans have died from the disease. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024) Many of these deaths likely could have been prevented if not for anti-intellectualism; over 200,000 from May 30, 2021, to September 3, 2022 alone. (Jia, Et Al 2023) The Covid-19 Pandemic saw a wave of anti-intellectual sentiment spread, especially regarding vaccines. This was clear in other countries as well, “Anti-intellectualism appears to be a central predisposition governing the response of citizens (Canadiens) to the COVID-19 pandemic and is deserving of further research in other contexts.” (Merkley, Loewen 2021) In

addition to finding anti-intellectualism as a factor in Canadian citizens decisions to not vaccinate, they also found:

“Some groups of citizens, such as ideological conservatives, populists, religious fundamentalists and the like, may see experts as threatening to their social identities. Consequently, they will be less amenable to expert messages, even in times of crisis<sup>7</sup>. We thus expect citizens with higher levels of anti-intellectualism to perceive less risk from COVID-19, to engage in less social distancing and mask usage, to more frequently endorse related misperceptions and to acquire less pandemic-related information.”

It is clear from these studies that groups prone to anti-intellectual learnings contributed to excess deaths from the pandemic.

Vaccines for Covid-19 are not the only ones affected by anti-intellectualism. The World Health Organization has recognized vaccine hesitancy as one of the 10 biggest threats to global health. (Farhart, Et Al 2022) Vaccine hesitancy in general has been on the rise in recent years, “Although misinformation and conspiracy theories about vaccines are not entirely new phenomena, the proliferation of the internet and social media has facilitated their spread and has entrenched belief.” (Farhart, Et Al 2022) Post-Covid, rates of routine vaccinations for children are lower than they were before the pandemic. (Frazzini 2024) Even before the pandemic, the effects of vaccine hesitancy was made clear. In 2019, the largest outbreak of Measles in the US since 1992 occurred in New York City. (Zucker, Et Al 2020) Measles had been considered extinct in the United States since 2000. Continued anti-intellectual views on vaccines will likely lead to more outbreaks of once eradicated diseases.

Climate Change has been another area in which anti-intellectualism has taken root.

“Scientific evidence on climate change and the need for environmental regulation became the target of a well-orchestrated campaign of the fossil-fuel industry, conservative think tanks, front groups, politicians, and contrarian scientists. This campaign sought to discredit climate science, challenge the need for environmental regulation, and promote – even manufacture – climate denialism” (Hatzisavvidou 2019)

The focal point of Hatzisavvidou’s article was former Alaska Governor and Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin; specifically, Palin’s use of personal experience and anecdotes to undermine the consensus of experts. Hatzisavvidou found Palin to be a symptom of the aforementioned anti-intellectual campaign and that “Palin’s anti-intellectualism also resonated well with the spirit that prevailed in 2016 during the US Presidential campaign.” (Hatzisavvidou 2019)

In the course of writing this paper, Hurricane Helene crossed the Florida coast and made its way into the lower Appalachian Mountains. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration stated in May, 2024 that this year’s hurricane season would be “above-normal,” (NOAA 2024) citing a La Nina and above average ocean temperatures. Despite this warning, communities were unprepared for the devastation. Much of this lack of preparation is due to anti-intellectualism. Despite climate change and its effects being the consensus of the overwhelming majority of scientists, over a third of Americans do not believe humans have played a role in it. (Motta 2017) North Carolina, one of the states hit hardest by Helene, passed a law in 2012 that “will ban the state from basing coastal policies on the latest scientific predictions of how much the sea level will rise.” (ABC News 2012) The ABC News article notes one of the bill’s chief proponents was a climate change denier. According to the Associated Press, (Schreiner

2024) 225 people have died from the hurricane as of this writing, the deadliest such storm since Hurricane Katrina in 2005; roughly half the deaths have been in North Carolina.

While anti-intellectual politicians not only push climate change denial, but actively pass public policy based on it, the scientific consensus is clear:

“Under even the most optimistic scenario, one in which the world bands together to slash emissions immediately, the world can avoid the most catastrophic version of the climate crisis, but it will continue to warm until at least mid-century, due to the impact of past emissions. “Some of the changes already set in motion—such as continued sea level rise—are irreversible over hundreds to thousands of years,” the report says. That means we can expect climate impacts, from storms to sweltering temperatures, to get worse before they get better, though these interactions are complex and can vary by region.” (Lindwall 2023)

More, and more dangerous storms, including hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, floods, and blizzards will impact the world. Denying these realities will cost more lives than already lost, and more lives than need be lost just as with the Covid-19 Pandemic.

While the majority of scholarly writing I have found shows correlation between anti-intellectualism and conservatism, that is not to say that the left is not guilty of it to some degree or that conservative beliefs equate to anti-intellectualism:

“Leftist anti-intellectualism replaces institutional change with cultural and historical denial. Social change is censoring the past and not learning from it. It is refusing to confront opposing hegemonic opinions and thinking that by preventing them from being expressed they will disappear. Leftist anti-intellectualism is the smugness of thinking one is correct, that the arc of history or demographic change is on your side, or that simply one merely needs to wait out the opposition to win a political battle.” (Schultz 2021)

Schultz, a professor of political science at Hamline University, does appear to be in the minority of scholars that have looked at anti-intellectualism to some degree. Others have noted however that “while the polarization of anti-intellectual attitudes may be a partisan phenomenon, some conservatives may not hold these attitudes and some liberals might also hold some distrust toward experts.” (Motta 2017) It could be argued that “poorly educated” conservatives are more likely to given the aforementioned data on support for Donald Trump.

### **Reflection**

As of this writing, a new tropical storm has formed in the Gulf of Mexico and is set to hit Florida just days after Hurricane Helene. Wildfires burn in California, which has seen increases in burn area and damages over the last 40 years. (Buechi, Et Al 2021) Earlier this year, the Surgeon General of Florida advised parents that unvaccinated children could still attend school even if opposed to measles, after previously calling Covid-19 vaccines unsafe with no evidence. (Jetelina, Panthagani 2024) At least 11 cases were confirmed from the outbreak in Florida and cases from three states were linked to it, showing how easily and quickly the damages from anti-intellectualism can spread. Having more and more anti-intellectuals in positions of power will only exacerbate these kinds of issues; “As populist rhetoric increasingly saturates political discourse, we can expect anti-intellectualism to be a stronger force in shaping public attitudes, including those related to areas of scientific and expert consensus.” (Merkley 2020) Further, America’s position of leadership in the global sphere means that allowing anti-intellectual policies to take root here will likely have global consequences.

A recurring theme amongst the scholarly works cited in this article was the mention of the 1966 Pulitzer-Prize winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* by Richard Hofstadter. Hofstadter provided one of the earliest and most referenced works on the subject of

anti-intellectualism. Many of the beats were similar today, right-wing extremism, i.e. McCarthyism, a decrying of experts, etc. (Hofstadter 1966) While Hofstadter did not believe anti-intellectualism could be outright eliminated, he did believe that it could be fought.

One way to fight anti-intellectualism is improvements to education. What kind of education however remains to be seen. “The “deficit model” of trust in science ([Gauchat, 2008, 2012](#); [Sturgis & Allum, 2004](#)) argues that conservatives are simply less educated and knowledgeable about basic scientific facts than liberals, which holds them back from exhibiting higher levels of support for scientists and experts.” (Motta 2017.) Motta goes on to explain communication, particularly what he calls “verbal intelligence” could be a catalyst for combating anti-intellectualism. He states that “This study demonstrates that individuals holding high levels of verbal intelligence are less likely to hold anti-intellectual views than those with lower levels of verbal intelligence.” Motta’s work is promising but requires further study. I cannot help but draw a comparison between these findings and the previously mentioned statistics concerning American literacy rates.

There is no denying that anti-intellectualism poses a clear threat to the United States and abroad. Anti-intellectual policies and beliefs have already been shown to have caused preventable deaths. Politicians pass laws blatantly disregarding or denying the consensus of experts in a given field. The unfortunate reality is that these ill-conceived pieces of legislation will not protect people from the next pandemic or the next disaster. There will be another pandemic, there will be more hurricanes. We must find and enact methods to reverse the trends of climate change denial and vaccine hesitance before they cause losses of such magnitude that we simply cannot recover from them.

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