

This Is What Elite Failure Looks Like

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By Oren Cass

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I first learned about the opioid crisis three presidential elections ago, in the fall of 2011. I was the domestic policy director for Mitt Romney's campaign and questions began trickling in from the New Hampshire team: *What's our plan?*

By then, opioids had been fueling the deadliest drug epidemic in American history for years. I am ashamed to say I did not know what they were. Opioids, as in opium? I looked it up online. Pills of some kind. *Tell them it's a priority, and President Obama isn't working.* That year saw [nearly 23,000 deaths](#) from opioid overdoses nationwide.

I was no outlier. America's political class was in the final stages of self-righteous detachment from the economic and social conditions of the nation it

ruled. The infamous [bitter clinger](#) and “[47 percent](#)” comments by Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney captured the atmosphere well: delivered at private fundraisers in San Francisco in 2008 and Boca Raton in 2012, evincing disdain for the voters who lived in between. The opioid crisis gained more attention in the years after the election, particularly in 2015, with Anne Case and Angus Deaton’s [research](#) on deaths of despair.

Of course, 2015’s most notable political development was Donald Trump’s presidential campaign launch and subsequent steamrolling of 16 Republican primary opponents committed to party orthodoxy. In the 2016 general election he narrowly defeated the former first lady, senator and secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who didn’t need her own views of Americans leaked: In public remarks, she [gleefully](#) classified half of the voters who supported Mr. Trump as “deplorables,” as her audience laughed and applauded. That year saw more than [42,000 deaths](#) from opioid overdoses.

In a democratic republic such as the United States, where the people elect leaders to govern on their behalf, the ballot box is the primary check on an unresponsive, incompetent or corrupt ruling class — or, as Democrats may be learning, a ruling class that insists on a candidate who voters no longer believe can lead. If those in power come to believe they are the only logical options, the people can always prove them wrong. For a frustrated populace, an anti-establishment outsider’s ability to wreak havoc is a feature rather than a bug. The elevation of such a candidate to high office should provoke immediate soul-searching and radical reform among the highly credentialed leaders across government, law, media, business, academia and so on — collectively, the elites.

The response to Mr. Trump’s success, unfortunately, has been the opposite. Seeing him elected once, faced with the reality that he may well win again, most elites have doubled down. We have not failed, the thinking goes; we have been failed, by the American people. In some tellings, grievance-filled Americans simply do not appreciate their prosperity. In others they are incapable of informed judgments, leaving them susceptible to demagoguery and foreign manipulation. Or perhaps they are just too racist to care — never mind that polling consistently suggests that most of Mr. Trump’s supporters are women and minorities, or that polling shows he is attracting far greater Black and Hispanic support than prior Republican leaders.

Mr. Trump is by no means an ideal tribune of the popular will, especially considering his own efforts to defy it after the 2020 presidential election. But the nation, given full opportunity to assess that conduct, seems to have decided it likes him more than ever, at least compared with the alternatives on offer. Somehow the response of elites to that humiliating indictment of their leadership is a redoubled obstinance: Democracy itself is at stake if the election does not go their way, they lecture, even as they [pursue plainly anti-democratic](#) strategies. How's that going? One [recent poll](#) of swing-state voters found that most see "threats to democracy" as an extremely important issue in the coming election, and that they are more likely to believe Mr. Trump can handle the issue well.

The result is a shockingly irresponsible national game of chicken. Barreling from one side are elites who remain fully committed to their own preferences, to pulling the levers of power for their own benefit and to offering candidates in both parties who would preserve the status quo. Barreling from the other are ordinary people, the majority of Americans, who reject elite preferences but feel unable to assert others, except through the last resort that democracy affords them. Both sides are honking as loudly as they can.

The people do not pull to the side, nor should they. "The administration of the government, like the office of a trustee, must be conducted for the benefit of those entrusted to one's care, not of those to whom it is entrusted," observed Cicero more than 2,000 years ago. Anyone worried about the future of American democracy should be concerned foremost with the elites' bizarre belief that the road is theirs. This is the root cause of present instability and poses the most serious long-term threat to the Republic.

The U.S. Constitution is designed to bend without breaking regardless of any one election's outcome. It has done so before and it will do so again. In [words widely attributed to James Madison](#), "dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions." Thus the separation of powers, the checks and balances, the countervailing state and federal power. But no system can save a nation from a ruling class so unresponsive that it would choose to accelerate toward political collapse.

Taking the majority's preferences seriously, even when they conflict with the preferences of more sophisticated experts, is often disparaged as populism. But while elected officials and their technocratic advisers may have special insight

into how the people's goals are best achieved, only the people can determine what those goals should be and whether they are being met.

Opioid deaths are more than a terrible tragedy. They are also a telltale sign of national decay and desperation. Wages for the typical worker have stagnated for decades, and [research I conducted at American Compass](#), the think tank where I work, has found that the typical worker no longer earns enough to provide middle-class security for a family.

We also found that only around [one in five](#) young Americans makes the transition smoothly from high school to college to career, and for young men the figure is lower still. The anti-poverty scholar Scott Winship [has shown](#) that for men ages 25 to 29, inflation-adjusted median earnings and compensation were lower in 2020 than they were 50 years earlier. The years leading up to Mr. Trump's election coincided with [the first time on record](#) that Americans ages 18 to 34 were more likely to be living at home with their parents than independently with a significant other.

Measured in flat-screen televisions owned, health-care treatments received and calories consumed, Americans have been on an upward trajectory. But while popular media often translates the American dream as being better off than your parents in materialistic terms, polling conducted by American Compass in partnership with YouGov indicates that [Americans between 18 and 50](#) were more than twice as likely to say "earning enough to support a family" is what's most important. Related, our polling has found that the vast majority of American parents consider "being able to support your family on one parent's income" to be an important or essential [marker of middle-class life](#). For all the talk of "upward mobility," [more than 90 percent of Americans](#) chose "financial stability" as more important in a 2014 Pew survey.

Note the contrast with the small cohort of upper-class Americans with college degrees and the highest incomes, who see the American dream more in terms of going as far as their talents and hard work take them than as either supporting a family or even getting married and raising children. They prefer having both parents work full-time and using paid child care full-time, and regard the chance for their children to pursue postsecondary education that would offer "the best possible career options but was far from home" as [more desirable](#) than one that would offer "good career options close to home." All other groups said they preferred the latter.

The same pattern repeats itself on issue after issue. While policy initiatives so often seek to maximize efficiency and growth, move people to opportunity and redistribute from the economy's winners to the losers, the typical American has an attachment to place, a focus on family, a commitment to making things, and would accept economic trade-offs in pursuit of those priorities.

Public education [devotes disproportionate resources](#) to getting students into and through college as compared to the other pathways most ultimately take. But an American Compass survey found that American parents say nearly three to one that the more important [task](#) should be to “help students develop the skills and values needed to build decent lives in the communities where they live,” compared with helping students “maximize their academic potential and pursue admission to colleges and universities with the best possible reputations.” Most would prefer to have their children offered three-year apprenticeships that lead to good jobs over full college scholarships.

Adam Posen, president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, [remarked](#) recently that concern for American manufacturing reflects “the fetish for keeping white males of low education outside the cities in the powerful positions” he believes they have occupied in America. But to most people, it's just common sense that making things matters.

Another American Compass poll found that [Americans agree](#) by 10 to one that “we need a stronger manufacturing sector,” most often because it “is important to a healthy, growing, innovative economy.” Asked to choose, most say they would much rather pay higher prices to strengthen domestic manufacturing than to combat climate change. Only the upper class was evenly split on this question. Is America a “nation of immigrants”? Perhaps. But while most Americans believe that immigration is a good thing for the country, at no time on record have more than around one-third wanted to [increase immigration levels](#); support for decreasing the level is almost always much stronger.

The important feature of all these preferences is that they are inherently valid. No set of facts or statistical analyses, to which an expert might have superior access, overrides what people actually value and what trade-offs they would choose to make. Leaders might seek to shape public opinion and alter preferences — indeed, that is part of leading — but they must yield to the outcome. Their obligation is to pursue the community's priorities, not their own.

The Democratic Party celebrates worker power but has little appetite for enforcing immigration law, let alone reducing the legal level of low-skill immigration. Its education policy strives to pay off the debts of the college-educated while leaving the broken system that created the debts largely untouched and the majority who do not earn college degrees underserved. President Biden's agenda features welcome emphasis on domestic manufacturing, but with a counterproductive and distinctly elite approach to a green transition.

Climate change is a problem worth fighting, but many Americans have been rightly doubtful that the enormous cost of economic transformation is [worth the benefits](#) these programs promise. The existing energy sector provides productive blue-collar jobs and a source of inexpensive power. A [coherent industrial policy](#) would double down on those advantages; investing hundreds of billions of dollars to jeopardize them may satisfy climate activists, but the trade-off is a poor one for workers and their communities.

As for the Republican establishment: During the Trump administration, a G.O.P. Congress made its one major accomplishment a tax cut. Wall Street remains mostly off-limits to criticism, let alone constraint. Representative Patrick McHenry, chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, has obstructed efforts to restrict U.S. investment in China and in fact [argued for expanding it](#). Former Vice President Mike Pence's organization Advancing American Freedom [says](#) that making more working-class families eligible to receive the full child tax credit would transform it "into another welfare program." The party's anti-Trump faction spent eight years plotting its return to power only to rally behind Nikki Haley, the quintessential vessel for the anti-government, pro-globalization ideology already rejected by the party's voters.

The promise — and necessity — of the more populist mode of economic policy gaining momentum in the United States is that it chooses differently on all these fronts. Mr. Trump himself represents that movement imperfectly, and most often just by rejecting the old regime. Like an earthquake triggered by the shifting tectonic plates of American politics, he disrupted a great deal. And in shaking existing structures to their foundations, he exposed and collapsed those that were outdated or poorly constructed. But his manner is not that of a rebuilder.

Look toward the horizon, though, to the next generation of conservatives poised to lead the post-Trump Republican Party, and the signs of a possible sea

change are visible. A cadre of young senators, led by Marco Rubio, J.D. Vance, Josh Hawley and Tom Cotton, have released a flood of proposals in the past few years for reshaping global trade and confronting China, rebuilding domestic manufacturing, removing environmental constraints on industrial development, enforcing immigration law and reducing the flow of low-wage workers into the country, discouraging mergers and taxing stock buybacks more aggressively, shifting resources from higher education to noncollege pathways, providing financial support directly to working families instead of through child-care subsidies, and so on. (My organization has worked with all four lawmakers on a variety of proposals.) They have done things like join picket lines with striking workers, push to increase the minimum wage and demand stronger regulation of railroads. Not coincidentally, Mr. Rubio, Mr. Vance and Mr. Cotton have [all received attention](#) as potential running mates for Mr. Trump.

They have areas of agreement with Democrats that present enormous opportunities for progress — and have already yielded some bipartisan legislation — but the conservative reformers’ positions on immigration, climate, education and family policies signal a different set of priorities. They also pair this economic agenda with an unapologetic patriotism and more traditional views on hot-button issues such as policing, racial preferences and transgender athletes.

Two threads run through this more populist, conservative economics, and they offer the best hope of rebuilding a capitalism that first and foremost serves the prosperity, liberty and security of the American people. The first thread is creating productive markets, which starts with an acknowledgment that many are anything but. The key to capitalism, as Adam Smith observed with his metaphor of the invisible hand, is that private actors pursuing their own self-interest can behave in ways that advance the public interest as well. But this holds true only if the activities that yield the greatest profit are also ones that yield broad benefits. Smith was quite explicit: For the invisible hand to work, the capitalist must prefer “the support of domestic to that of foreign industry” and “direct that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value,” which would also “give revenue and employment to the greatest number of people of his own country.”

Those are substantial constraints, which modern economists managed to miss. When larger, easier profits can be achieved by offshoring production to countries that exploit workers or bringing foreign workers who will [accept lower](#)

[wages into the country](#), corporations will do just that. When the highest compensation goes to Wall Street speculators and the developers of addictive social-media algorithms, the most promising business leaders will pursue those careers. What share of Ivy League graduates bring their talents to vocations that will improve the productivity, and with it the earning potential, of anyone without a college degree, or create booming new businesses in struggling regions? It should be no surprise that the productivity growth [necessary for rising wages](#) has slowed and, in manufacturing, turned negative, that the longtime pattern in American economic development of poorer areas catching up with richer ones [no longer holds](#).

The tragedy, but also the good news, is that these trends are not inevitable. They represent foolish policy choices, which means we can choose differently. Instead of the globalization that cast aside workers like unsold inventory and hollowed out communities, we can structure our trade and industrial policies to ensure the path to profit runs through domestic investment that creates productive jobs throughout the country. Instead of allowing migrants to enter the country illegally and employers to exploit them, we can enforce our laws rigorously and further restrict entry into the labor market's low end, forcing employers to offer good, highly productive jobs to American workers [instead of undercutting them](#).

In the financial sector, deregulation, tax and bankruptcy laws, international agreements and the [mismanagement of public pensions](#) have all encouraged the smart money and top talent to gravitate toward manipulating and trading piles of assets rather than building anything. Capital markets that once served to deploy the nation's accumulated wealth broadly now extract value from enterprises and communities to reaccumulate it in narrow enclaves. The financial sector keeps growing, salaries and profits keep rising, and yet my research has shown that [actual investment](#) has been weakening. This is not the capitalism that any coherent economics would celebrate. Some leaders on the right have now joined those on the left in arguing that its excesses must be discouraged, regulated, taxed and perhaps banned.

The second thread that runs through this new conservative economics is supporting communities. Everyone relies on the institutions around them, beginning with their families, to form them as productive citizens, to help them build decent lives and to prepare them to raise children of their own. But it is the Americans most in need of supportive communities who are often least likely to have them. The elite conception of support for families tends to be paid

leave and child-care subsidies that push toward the career-optimizing and G.D.P.-maximizing arrangement of all parents in the work force. Proper family policy, as a range of Republicans [have now proposed](#), would provide funds directly to working families to help with the cost of raising children and let them arrange their lives as they themselves prefer. Public education, likewise, would focus less on filling the high-school-to-college-to-career pipeline that benefits so few and more on improving the range of pathways that most people in fact travel.

Another key institution is the labor union. Organized labor can be a vital force for giving workers power in the labor market, representation on the job and support in the community. Unfortunately, in the United States, the labor movement now often operates as a force for progressive political activism unrelated to the priorities of most workers, which may help explain why [nearly three-quarters of potential union members say](#) they would prefer a worker organization that focused only on workplace issues to one that is also engaged in national politics. Some conservatives are making progress by working directly with less partisan unions and proposing alternative forms of representation that might put worker representatives on corporate boards or encourage industrywide bargaining rather than company-by-company fights.

In 2023, the United States saw [81,000 deaths](#) from opioid overdose. Other forms of drug overdose are climbing faster: Fatal cocaine overdoses rose sixfold in [the past decade](#), to 30,000. Psychostimulant deaths rose 10-fold, to 36,000. All told, the rate of drug overdose deaths in the United States is now similar to the average death rate from alcohol use disorders in Russia during the decade after the Soviet Union's collapse.

Are American elites capable of seeing beyond their own preferences? Can they admit that what they value is not what's best for everyone — shoddily constructed rationales notwithstanding? Their moment of decision — the oncoming car — feels like it is fast approaching. The off-ramp is available, but only they can decide to take it.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/06/opinion/populism-power-elites-politics.html>

From Biden to Trump to Macron to Justin Trudeau and his Liberals, factions of elites come together and take over political parties, and then operate as though they have earned the right to say “We know what’s good for the country—you” and refuse to give way. National and collective ideals are only viewed as legitimate if they include precedence for the clique’s interests and power. The continual political jockeying convinces them the opposition is no different from them in method and goal. Then along comes an opportunist like Trump ... TJB