

DAVID BROOKS

Voters to Elites: Do You See Me Now?

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By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

We have entered a new political era. For the past 40 years or so, we lived in the information age. Those of us in the educated class decided, with some justification, that the postindustrial economy would be built by people like ourselves, so we tailored social policies to meet our needs.

Our education policy pushed people toward the course we followed — four-year colleges so that they would be qualified for the “jobs of the future.” Meanwhile, vocational training withered. We embraced a free trade policy that moved industrial jobs to low-cost countries overseas so that we could focus our energies on knowledge economy enterprises run by people with advanced degrees. The financial and consulting sector mushroomed while manufacturing employment shriveled.

Geography was deemed unimportant — if capital and high-skill labor wanted to cluster in Austin, San Francisco and Washington, it didn’t really matter what happened to all those other communities left behind. Immigration policies gave highly educated people access to low-wage labor while less-skilled workers faced new competition. We shifted toward green technologies favored by people who work in pixels, and we disfavored people in manufacturing and transportation whose livelihoods depend on fossil fuels.

That great sucking sound you heard was the redistribution of respect. People who climbed the academic ladder were feted with accolades, while those who didn't were rendered invisible. The situation was particularly hard on boys. By high school two-thirds of the students in the top 10 percent of the class are girls, while about two-thirds of the students in the bottom decile are boys. Schools are not set up for male success; that has lifelong personal, and now national, consequences.

Society worked as a vast segregation system, elevating the academically gifted above everybody else. Before long, the diploma divide became the most important chasm in American life. High school graduates die nine years sooner than college-educated people. They die of opioid overdoses at six times the rate. They marry less and divorce more and are more likely to have a child out of wedlock. They are more likely to be obese. A recent American Enterprise Institute study found that 24 percent of people who graduated from high school at most have no close friends. They are less likely than college grads to visit public spaces or join community groups and sports leagues. They don't speak in the right social justice jargon or hold the sort of luxury beliefs that are markers of public virtue.

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The chasms led to a loss of faith, a loss of trust, a sense of betrayal. Nine days before the elections, I visited a Christian nationalist church in Tennessee. The service was illuminated by genuine faith, it is true, but also a corrosive atmosphere of bitterness, aggression, betrayal. As the pastor went on about the Judases who seek to destroy us, the phrase "dark world" popped into my head — an image of a people who perceive themselves to be living under constant threat and in a culture of extreme distrust. These people, and many other Americans, weren't interested in the politics of joy that Kamala Harris and the other law school grads were offering.

The Democratic Party has one job: to combat inequality. Here was a great chasm of inequality right before their noses and somehow many Democrats didn't see it. Many on the left focused on racial inequality, gender inequality and L.G.B.T.Q. inequality. I guess it's hard to focus on class inequality when you went to a college with a multibillion-dollar endowment and do environmental greenwashing and diversity seminars for a major corporation. Donald Trump is a monstrous narcissist, but there's something off about an educated class that looks in the mirror of society and sees only itself.

As the left veered toward identitarian performance art, Donald Trump jumped into the class war with both feet. His Queens-born resentment of the Manhattan elites dovetailed magically with the class animosity being felt by rural people across the country. His message was simple: These people have betrayed you, and they are morons to boot.

In 2024, he built the very thing the Democratic Party once tried to build — a multiracial, working-class majority. His support surged among Black and Hispanic workers. He recorded astonishing gains in places like New Jersey, the Bronx, Chicago, Dallas and Houston. According to the NBC exit polls, he won a third of voters of color. He's the first Republican to win a majority of the votes in 20 years.

The Democrats obviously have to do some major rethinking. The Biden administration tried to woo the working class with subsidies and stimulus, but there is no economic solution to what is primarily a crisis of respect.

There will be some on the left who will say Trump won because of the inherent racism, sexism and authoritarianism of the American people. Apparently, those people love losing and want to do it again and again and again.

The rest of us need to look at this result with humility. American voters are not always wise, but they are generally sensible, and they have something to teach us. My initial thought is that I have to re-examine my own priors. I'm a moderate. I like it when Democratic candidates run to the center. But I have to confess that

Harris did that pretty effectively and it didn't work. Maybe the Democrats have to embrace a Bernie Sanders-style disruption — something that will make people like me feel uncomfortable.

Can the Democratic Party do this? Can the party of the universities, the affluent suburbs and the hipster urban cores do this? Well, Donald Trump hijacked a corporate party, which hardly seemed like a vehicle for proletarian revolt, and did exactly that. Those of us who condescend to Trump should feel humbled — he did something none of us could do.

But we are entering a period of white water. Trump is a sower of chaos, not fascism. Over the next few years, a plague of disorder will descend upon America, and maybe the world, shaking everything loose. If you hate polarization, just wait until we experience global disorder. But in chaos there's opportunity for a new society and a new response to the Trumpian political, economic and psychological assault. These are the times that try people's souls, and we'll see what we are made of.

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David Brooks is an Opinion columnist for The Times, writing about political, social and cultural trends.
[@nytdavidbrooks](#)

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