

Anti-Intellectualism Is Biggest Threat to Modern Society



By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 26, 2016



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My wife, who was born and raised in Poland, once told me what it was like to go to school in that country. In her classes, which largely focused on the hard sciences, the most popular students were the smart ones. Students looked up to their intelligent, hard-working colleagues. When she came to the United States as a high school exchange student, she found the exact opposite to be true. The smart students were the outcasts, while the popular ones were jocks and cheerleaders.

Though admittedly anecdotal, her experience isn't unusual and seems to illustrate a larger truth about America: As a society, we never grew up beyond high school. Not being smart continues to be cool. Rejecting the collective wisdom of scientists, economists, academics, and journalists is applauded. Spurning the "establishment" (defined, it seems, as anybody with expertise on any subject) has become the new national pastime.

This trend has lethal consequences. Every single year, public health experts beg and plead for people to receive influenza vaccinations, but [most Americans ignore them](#) [2]. Despite the fact that the seasonal flu vaccine is imperfect (due to the unpredictable nature of the virus), thousands of Americans have died unnecessarily because they choose to reject their doctor's advice.

Less dramatically, the thoughtless dismissal of expertise ultimately underlies all of the anti-science movements in America, from denial of evolution to rejection of biotechnology. Regulation and litigation have replaced scientific investigation.

What is causing this anti-intellectual populist movement? Three things are to blame.

First, the "democratization of information" that is the direct result of the internet -- perhaps the most liberating and revolutionary invention of mankind -- has a darker side. Anybody with access to Google and five minutes to kill believes that he can become an expert in anything. Consequently, people believe that their opinions are just as good as anybody else's, including

those of experts.

For instance, in the recent EU referendum, pro-Brexit politicians [claimed](#) ^[3] that UK citizens "have had enough of experts," and that the only expert that matters is the voter. A radio show caller [noted](#) ^[3], "Experts built the Titanic." (That is indeed true. So, who should we have preferred build the Titanic? Non-experts?)

Second, nearly every important topic has been politicized. Support for GMOs largely [splits among party lines](#) ^[4]. Acceptance or rejection of climate change has become a political litmus test. And policies that were once bipartisan and widely endorsed are now opposed, merely because the opposition party is in favor of it.

Third, it is far easier to attack the integrity of the messenger rather than the content of the message. Proponents of GMOs are called shills for Big Ag. People who support vaccines must be on the payroll of Big Pharma. Academics who speak out are know-it-all eggheads who have no idea what the real world is like.

Fortunately, there is a solution to this. The best place to start would be to cool down the political rhetoric. It is difficult to listen to the other side when tempers are hot. Additionally, though "facts are stubborn things," there is often plenty of room for disagreement on policy. Discussions ought to focus there. Civility can be reestablished, but it takes a collective effort.

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