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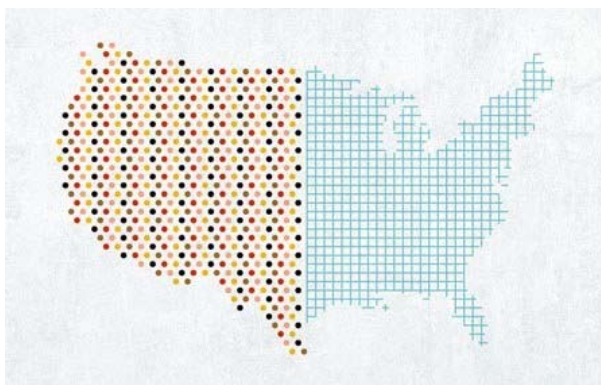
## Competing for Elites

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**The Swedish political Right has increasingly managed to recapture the support of a large segment of the chattering classes. There may be lessons for the United States.**



Ask most Europeans or coastal Americans: “Who are smarter, liberals or conservatives?” and chances are they will tell you that the liberals are smarter, in addition to being more modern, more tolerant, and more likeable overall. After all, poorly educated states such as Mississippi and Alabama vote Republican, while highly educated ones like Massachusetts and New York vote for Democrats.

The self-congratulating view among the media and in popular culture is that “smart and educated” is intrinsically linked to liberal political views. Many social psychologists go further, claiming that high intelligence automatically leads to liberal political views.

On closer examination, the picture is more complex. The Left and the Right in the United States are in fact roughly equally educated and appear to have equally high levels of cognitive achievement. However, while averages are similar, the extremes tend to be more Democratic: in the 2012 election, for example, Democrats were overrepresented both among high-school dropouts and those with a post-graduate degree, while Republicans voters were concentrated among the wide middle.

Historically, two forces pulled elites in opposite political directions. College education (with the liberal political indoctrination that sometimes goes along with it) made the elites more Democratic, but their eventual high incomes and high income taxes made them more Republican.

But that dynamic is changing. Highly educated professionals were once solid Republican voters. As recently as 1988, George H.W. Bush was supported by 56 percent of voters with a college degree. Mitt Romney, however, only received 48 percent of the college-educated vote. Political scientist Andrew Gelman has shown that in many blue states, the

correlation between economic success and voting Republican has attenuated. It would seem Jon Stewart's audience doesn't mind paying some extra taxes as a price for maintaining its progressive cultural identity.

And so the Republican Party is losing the educated elites. The disproportional political influence of this group makes this a dangerous development for American conservatism.

The good news for American conservatives is that the left-leaning nature of the educated elite is not a natural law. It may be interesting to look at the experience of Sweden. After decades in the wilderness, the Swedish Right managed to recapture the elites in what was once the impregnable fortress of progressivism. Today, voting for the Right is associated with being more educated and having higher IQ test scores. There is no reason the American Right cannot achieve the same feat.

### **Are You Smarter Than a Republican?**

In 2004, The Economist published an article stating "so Democrats really are smarter," with a table showing blue states having far higher IQs than red states. The table was shown to be a hoax, however, and was promptly retracted by the elite British magazine. The "Super-Economy" blog later provided actual estimates of state IQs published in the academic journal *Intelligence*,<sup>1</sup> showing that blue and red state IQs are identical on average.

In the United States, while liberals do not have a large advantage in IQ over conservatives on average, they nonetheless dominate the highest strata. In Sweden, however, the picture is quite different.

New York University assistant professor of economics David Cesarini has generously provided us high-quality data for a representative sample of approximately 4,000 Swedish men who had their cognitive skills tested by the Swedish military around age 18. The test in question is highly "g-loaded," a good measure of IQ which has been used extensively in labor market research. Later in life this group was surveyed on voting behavior and political views.

The average IQ of those who voted was 103. The average IQ was 100 for those who voted for the left-wing coalition in Sweden and 106 for those who voted for the right-wing coalition. The survey asked participants to place themselves on a left-right political scale. The results are similar; those who placed themselves to the left had an average IQ of 101 while those who placed themselves to the right had an average IQ of 106.

Swedish men who identify with or vote for the Right have a sizable IQ advantage of 0.4 standard deviations over the Left. The Right dominates even more strongly among those with the highest test scores. The fact that the Right in Sweden tends to have higher IQs than the Left is strong evidence against the theory that right-wing sympathies are inherently linked to lower IQ.

The objection can be raised that Sweden is too different from other countries to make comparisons meaningful. The political debate in Sweden is further to the left compared to the United States. Self-described conservative Swedish parliamentarians happily march in gay-pride parades and no one batted an eye when Bo Lundgren, the former leader of the conservative party, described himself as "an agnostic" on religion. Still, the main fault lines between the Right and Left are similar to those in the United States, with the size and scope of government being at the center of the debate.

## The Swedish Right's Path to Intellectual and Electoral Victory

In Sweden, students and the intellectual elites turned toward the Left in the 1960s, just as they did the United States. This helped the Left capture the commanding heights of public life, such as the media and the universities, advances that played an important part in prolonging the long era of social democratic dominance.

However, the Swedish Right has increasingly managed to recapture the support of a large segment of the chattering classes. Remarkably, a recent study of Swedish social scientists found that the Right holds a slight advantage over the Left; as the researchers note, this stands “in sharp contrast to the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

This shift did not happen by chance. Starting in the 1980s, the intellectual foundations of the Swedish Right were largely rebuilt by new (U.S.-inspired) think tanks. The Right successfully repositioned itself politically in the early 2000s.

This resulted in two straight election victories for the Right, victories won on a platform of significant tax cuts and reductions in entitlements. In part as a result of these developments, Swedish policy has shifted to the Right in recent decades, while American policy has shifted to the Left. According to statistics from the International Monetary Fund and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in 1990, government expenditure as a share of GDP was 58 percent in Sweden and 37 percent in the United States. By 2011, the figure had declined to 49 percent in Sweden while it had increased to 41 percent in the United States as the two countries converged.

The key to these successes for the Swedish Right lies in honestly identifying what the voters didn't like about the Right and then amending these policies. In Sweden's case — having a long tradition of class-based voting — it was particularly important for the Right to disassociate from the traditional upper classes.

The American Right needs to identify the battlegrounds it is currently losing as well. With a proper map of the battlefield, these key locations then have to be either abandoned in an orderly fashion or properly reinforced.

The difference between Sweden and the United States in terms of how high-IQ voters vote appears to be caused by social issues. In the Swedish data, IQ correlates positively and in a statistically significant way with wanting to reduce the size of the public sector, wanting to privatize publically owned companies, with free trade, and with supporting the U.S war on terror. At the same time, high IQ correlates *negatively* with supporting bans on pornography, abortion, and homosexual adoption.

Why do high-IQ voters lean liberal in social politics? The fact that smart people tend to believe something does not prove that they are right, as evident in the fact that high-IQ people in different countries and in different periods hold mutually exclusive views. Those with the highest IQs tended to (for instance) disproportionately support socialism and central planning during the first half of the 20th century.

An important explanation lies in the articulation of the underlying rationale for policy. Conservative policy is often based on tradition. If we believe that culture develops in an evolutionary way, traditions may embed valuable knowledge, the “wisdom of the ages,” which should be followed regardless of if we are currently able to articulate explicit rationales for them. Edmund Burke's and Friedrich Hayek's insights were that traditional institutions tended to work better than social engineering rooted in liberal social science.

The problem for American conservatives is that today's educated voters have been trained to demand a stated intellectual foundation for a given position. Hayek's and Burke's views are not well understood by most academics, perhaps because they are too subtle. It appears counterintuitive to today's scientifically trained academics that institutions that no one designed and which arose through a spontaneous order would function better than those designed by clever social scientists.

A century ago, the economic Right was confronted by a vigorous challenge from socialists. Using new academic theories, "scientific" socialists had "proved" that central planning was more efficient than free markets. The initial response of the Right was to appeal to tradition. Our current economic system had functioned well for a long time and was compatible with the American ideal of self-determination and individual liberty. The traditionalists were right, but their arguments fell on deaf ears.

In economic policy, the Right was forced to create a theoretical and empirical foundation for its belief in traditional American capitalism before socialist arguments could be combatted successfully. If our traditional institutions are indeed advantageous and worth preserving, we should typically be able to demonstrate this using the "scientific" language of social science. In the modern world, valuable traditions need not necessarily be abandoned, but must be articulated first in order to be defended from liberal assault. Economists in the Chicago School and elsewhere ultimately pushed back the Left by articulating the empirical case for traditional free enterprise. Of course, the case for free enterprise was always there, but needed to be formalized first in order to be accepted by the elites.

Conservatives have not been willing or able to do the same in social policy, relying on the strength of traditional beliefs already in existence among a Christian majority. But those beliefs have eroded as a result of the spread of secularism and higher education, with the result that the Right now finds itself in the minority on many social issues. Liberals, by contrast, almost always formulate their critique against current institutions in clear theoretical fashion. These theories are more often than not erroneous, but almost always appear to be intellectually powerful before they are explicitly proven wrong (see, for instance, "Scientific Marxism").

Central elements of social conservatism remain highly popular and intellectually defensible, including family, community, individual responsibility, patriotism, and faith. Other social issues, in particular abortion, are controversial but fundamentally easy to justify even to secular, educated voters. If you accept that an unborn life is indeed life, you understand why social conservatives believe it is wrong to kill it. On questions such as same-sex marriage or creationism however, the Right should either formulate more systematically thought-out arguments, or abandon positions it is unable to defend.

The entire brand suffers every time social conservatives stake out a position that they cannot defend intellectually. Senator Marco Rubio did not do the conservative movement any favors when he equivocated between science and the theory that earth is 6,000 years old in a GQ interview.

There are a growing number of social conservative intellectuals who are comfortable with social-science reasoning. Princeton University professor Robert P. George, together with Sherif Girgis and Ryan T. Anderson, wrote the book *What Is Marriage?*, which has been described as "a vigorous intellectual critique of the case for same-sex civil marriage." Their argument is rooted in psychology, biology, and anthropology as much as it is rooted in a religious view of the world. Opinion has likely already shifted on this issue in

particular, but this kind of approach offers the best potential for social conservatives to make inroads among highly educated voters.

Some commentators have argued that instead of fighting historical trends, the GOP should work with them, and abandon college graduates on the coasts in favor of more socially conservative and less evidence-driven working class voters. Unlike the college educated, working class whites are trending Republican (but also shrinking as a share of voters, from 61 percent in 1984 to 39 percent in 2008).

As importantly, the educated elites have a disproportional influence on politics and the general culture through the media, the education system, leadership jobs, and their typically elevated positions in the community. Because of this, each voter among the educated elite influences others through a social “multiplier,” making their support more valuable than that of other groups.

If the Left is able to maintain and fortify its position on the commanding heights of the elite-making institutions, especially in the top-tier universities and the media, they will continue to have the upper hand in formulating the political and cultural agenda.

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***FURTHER READING:*** Sanandaji also writes “The American Left’s Two Europes Problem” and “Why Keynesianism Works Better in Theory Than in Practice.” Joel Kotkin discusses “Demography vs. Geography: Understanding the Political Future.” Jonah Goldberg asks “What is the Future of Conservatism?”

## References

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