

The Myth of American Meritocracy

The most destructive and pervasive myth in America today is that we live in a meritocracy. Our elites, so the myth goes, earned their places at Yale and Harvard, on Wall Street and in Washington—not because of the accident of their birth, but because they are better, stronger, and smarter than the rest of us. Therefore, they think, they've “earned” their places in the halls of power and “deserve” to lead.

The fervor with which so many believe this enables elites to lord over those worse off than they are. On we slumber, believing that we live in a country that values justice, instead of working towards a more equitable and authentically meritocratic society.

Take the Operation Varsity Blues scandal. On Tuesday, the FBI and federal prosecutors announced that 50 people had been charged in, [as Sports Illustrated put it](#), “a nationwide college admissions scheme that used bribes to help potential students cheat on college entrance exams or to pose as potential athletic recruits to get admitted to high-profile universities.” Thirty-three parents, nine collegiate coaches, two SAT/ACT exam administrators, an exam proctor, [and a college athletics administrator](#) were among those charged. The man who allegedly ran the scheme, William Rick Singer, pled guilty to four charges of racketeering conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy, conspiracy to defraud the U.S., and obstruction of justice.

As part of the scam, parents would “donate” money to a fake charity run by Singer. The funds would then be laundered to either pay off an SAT or ACT administrator to take the exams or bribe an employee in college athletics to name the rich, non-athlete children as recruits. Virtually every scenario

relied on multiple layers of corruption, all of which eventually allowed wealthy students to masquerade as “deserving” of the merit-based college slots they paid up to half a million dollars to “qualify” for.

Cheating. Bribery. Lying. The wealthy and privileged buying what was reserved for the deserving. It’s all there on vivid display. Modern American society has [become increasingly](#) and [banally corrupt](#), both in the ways in which “justice” is meted out and in who is allowed to access elite education and the power that comes with it.

The U.S. is [now a country where corruption is rampant](#) and money buys both access and outcomes. We pretend to be better than Russia and other oligarchies, but [we too are dominated by a rich and powerful elite](#).

The average American citizen has very little power, as a 2014 [study](#) by Princeton University found. The research reviewed 1,779 public policy questions asked between 1981 and 2002 and the responses by different income levels and interest groups; then calculated the likelihood that certain policies would be adopted.

What they found came as no surprise:

A proposed policy change with low support among economically elite Americans (one-out-of-five in favor) is adopted only about 18 percent of the time, while a proposed change with high support (four-out-of-five in favor) is adopted about 45% of the time.

That’s in stark contrast with policies favored by average Americans:

When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organised interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the US political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.

The conclusion of the study? We live in an oligarchy:

...our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. ...[T]he preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.

The belief in the myth of merit hurts the smart kid with great grades who aced his SATs but was still rejected from Yale and Harvard. It hurts talented athletes who have worked their tails off for so many years. It hurts parents who have committed hundreds of school nights and weekends to their children. It hurts HR departments that believe degrees from Ivy League schools mean that graduates are qualified. It hurts all of us who buy into the great myth that America is a democratic meritocracy and that we can achieve whatever we want if only we're willing to expend blood, toil, sweat, and tears.

At least in an outright class system like the British Houses of Lords and Commons, there is not this farcical playacting of equal opportunity. The elites, with their privilege and titles, know the reason they are there and feel some sense of obligation to those less well off than they are. At the very least, they do not engage in the ritual pretense of "deserving" what they "earned"—quite unlike those who descend on Washington, D.C. believing that they really are better than their compatriots in flyover country.

All societies engage in myth-making about themselves. But the myth of meritocracy may be our most pervasive and destructive belief—and it mirrors the myth that anything like "justice" is served up in our courts.

Remember the Dupont heir who received [no prison time after being convicted for raping his three-year-old](#) daughter because the judge ruled that six-foot-four Robert Richards "wouldn't

fare well in prison”? Or the more recent case of [billionaire Jeffrey Epstein, who had connections to both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump](#) and [faced a 53-page federal indictment for sex-trafficking over two dozens underage girls](#)? He received instead a sweetheart [deal that concealed the extent of his crimes](#). Rather than the federal life imprisonment term he was facing, Epstein is currently on house arrest after receiving only 13 months in county jail. The lead prosecutor in that case had previously been reprimanded by a federal judge in another underage sex crimes case for concealing victim information, the *Miami Herald* [reports](#).

While the rich are able to [escape consequences for even the most horrific of crimes](#), the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Approximately 7 million people were under some form of correctional control by the end of 2011, including 2.2 million who were detained in federal, state, and local prisons and jails. [One in every 10 black men in his thirties is in prison](#) or jail, and [one out of three black men born in 2001 can expect to go to prison in their lifetimes](#).

While black people make up only 13 percent of the population, they make up 42 percent of death row and [35 percent of those who are executed](#). There are big racial disparities in charging, sentencing, plea bargaining, and executions, Department of Justice [reviews](#) have concluded, and black and brown people are [disproportionately found to be innocent after landing on death row](#). The [poor and disadvantaged thereby become grist for a system](#) that cares nothing for them.

Despite all this evidence, most Americans embrace a version of the Calvinist beliefs promulgated by their forebears, believing that the elect deserve their status. We remain confident that when our children apply to college or are [questioned by police](#), they will receive just and fair outcomes. If our neighbors' and friends' kids do not, then we assure ourselves that it is they who are at fault, not the

system.

The result has been a gaping chasm through our society. Lives are destroyed because, rather than working for real merit-based systems and justice, we worship at the altar of false promises offered by our institutions. Instead we should be rolling up our sleeves and seeing Operation Varsity Blues for what it is: a call to action.

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