

## Should Political Leaders be Highly Educated?

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*The is the penultimate draft of this paper. For citations, please use the published version*

*Abstract: Many liberal philosophers view elite education as a virtue of political leaders and, in addition, hold that an important role of a just education system is to create better elites. A compelling and influential articulation of this view has been offered by Elizabeth Anderson. However, this view is in conflict with a commitment to substantive democracy, given the background conditions of the US today. This paper will argue, contra-Anderson, that having the highly educated disproportionately represented in political leadership is incompatible with egalitarian principles of democracy. The key reason for this is that it systematically shuts out the working class from full political participation. Therefore, in order to satisfy the constraints of democracy, we must sever the connection between elite education and political office.*

### **Introduction**

One aspect of Plato's political philosophy that still enjoys widespread support is the importance of educating leaders. In the Republic, a key aspect of the just state was an education system with an advanced branch dedicated to selecting and training future elites: indeed, Plato stipulated that political leaders must be the most educated members of society. Though most of Plato's paternalistic account of justice has been rejected by mainstream political philosophy, this vision for education remains popular. Many liberal philosophers view elite education as a virtue of political leaders and agree with Plato that an important role of a just education system is to create better elites. Most notably, influential work by Elizabeth Anderson provides a detailed vision for how providing an appropriate elite education for future political leaders can be a driving force for justice.

However, although a highly educated elite naturally complements Plato's broader political philosophy, it is a much less comfortable fit with Anderson's liberal egalitarianism. This paper will argue that having the highly educated disproportionately represented in elite political positions is incompatible with egalitarian principles of justice within the political structure of the US today – in particular, it's incompatible with a robust conception of democracy.

To be clear, many egalitarians recognize a problem with the current US education system's role in producing elites. However, the problem is seen as contingent and indirect: namely, that there are certain groups who are under-represented in elite educational institutions, for example racial minorities and those growing up in poverty, who as a result are under-represented in the political elite. The solution, though, is taken to involve making the intake of the educational institutions more representative of the general population, which will in turn lead to a more representative elite. It is not thought to be *intrinsically* problematic for a disproportionate number of the highly educated to be among the political elite.

In what follows, we will see how this line of argument is unsatisfactory. The central reason is that, within current political structures in the US, receiving a sufficiently elite education virtually guarantees one will not be a member of the working class in adulthood. This means that an over-representation of the highly educated among elites entails an under-representation of the working class.

A natural response to this is that an appropriate higher-education admission system can ensure an adequate number of people from working class *backgrounds* receive an elite education and go on to positions of political leadership, so as to satisfy the relevant representation requirements for justice. We will see, however, that only having political representatives drawn from the working class themselves is sufficient to satisfy the robust conception of democracy that egalitarians such as Anderson are committed to.

### **Educationalism Defined**

Liberal egalitarianism, in the tradition of Rawls<sup>1</sup>, rejects the rigid hierarchical picture of justice presented in Plato's Republic. As well as believing in the importance of an equitable distribution of material resources, such philosophers are committed to equitable access to political freedoms and political power. Most importantly for our purposes, they are committed to a substantive version of democracy, which views it as intrinsically valuable and as imposing significant constraints on a just society, beyond merely holding elections for political leaders. The key question, for our purposes, is how *education* fits into this picture.

Education is typically taken to be part of the solution to meeting the demands of democracy, not part of the problem. There are two aspects to this: first, education is seen as the means by which all members of society are able to achieve active citizenship;<sup>2</sup> second, education

is seen as the means by which appropriate members of society are given the opportunity to reach positions of political leadership (along with other desirable social positions) and given the training to lead responsibly. It is the second issue we are concerned with here.

Who makes up the political leadership in a well-functioning democracy is a crucial issue. First, it's important for leaders to be sufficiently qualified and competent to run the state effectively. Second, though, the political elite must be representative of the population as a whole – if certain groups are under-represented amongst political leadership, it seems they are being shut out of the political process.

In the US today, education fails to provide an appropriately representative political elite. A disproportionate number of political leaders are alumni of a handful of elite higher educational institutions – the Ivy Leagues and their equivalents – but the student bodies of these institutions are not representative of the country as a whole. Hence, the political elite is not appropriately representative either.

Elizabeth Anderson<sup>3</sup> makes a compelling argument that the best response to this situation is to reform these elite educational institutions so they are capable of producing a competent and representative elite. As the most detailed and well thought out defense of this pro-education position, her work will be the focus of criticism in what follows. We'll refer to her viewpoint as *educationalism*. Anderson describes her view as follows:

In a democratic society, elites must be so constituted that they will effectively serve all sectors of society, not just themselves. They must perform in their offices so that the inequalities in power, autonomy, responsibility, and reward they enjoy in virtue of their position redound to the benefit of all, including the least advantaged. This requires that elites be so constituted as to be systematically responsive to the interests and concerns of people from all walks of life...

An educational system suitable for a democratic society must cultivate [the relevant] qualifications in its elite and must select individuals for elite education with a view to how effectively an elite so composed will manifest these qualifications as a group.....Its membership must be drawn from all sectors of society, including the less advantaged.<sup>4</sup>

Anderson makes an instrumental case for a representative elite: such an elite will perform their duties more effectively, benefiting, in particular, the most disadvantaged social groups. She also argues that a representative elite is necessary for *democratic equality*.<sup>5</sup> In the second paragraph,

she goes on to argue that the best way to achieve a representative elite is for elite education institutions to contain representative student bodies.

Anderson makes a couple of moves in the second paragraph that are worth drawing attention to. First, she states that, given that elites should possess certain qualities, it is the role of the education system to “cultivate” such qualities. Second, she goes further and argues that the means by which this is achieved is by the education system “selecting” certain students for a specific “elite education” that trains them appropriately, with a mind for how the cohort as a group will perform the duties discussed in the first paragraph. An implication of this is that in the society Anderson envisages, there is what she refers to as an “elite education” program, alumni of which reliably go on to become elites. If this were not the case, the composition of the admittees would not determine the composition of the elite in the way Anderson requires.

It is worth pausing to consider the nature of the “elite” further. Anderson defines elites as “those who occupy positions of responsibility and leadership in society: managers, consultants, professionals, politicians, policy makers”; she also states that they benefit from “inequalities in power, autonomy, responsibility, and reward”.<sup>6</sup> This group includes not just political leaders, but other members of society with significant wealth and power. We can define an elite education program, in line with Anderson’s use of the term, as a higher education program whose alumni reliably go on to occupy elite positions in society. It’s clear, therefore, that not all higher education programs are elite education programs. Many degrees, such as in education or nursing, prepare people for careers that do not confer elite status. In the US, elite education programs are restricted to those within a small subset of institutions: the Ivy leagues, and their equivalents.<sup>7</sup>

Note that it is a contingent matter whether a society, even one with a well-developed higher education system, contains elite education institutions. On an alternative picture, members of the elite could be alumni of a wider range of institutions, with only a small number of graduates from any given institution going on to become elites. On this view, unlike Anderson’s, the education system would not be tasked with deciding who would and would not go on to elite status through university placement. This kind of system may in fact realized in various Scandinavian states today.

How attached Anderson is to the need for an elite education system is an open question. She notes that “Universities today function as the main gatekeepers to elite status in modern societies” and does not suggest this state of affairs needs to be challenged, but neither does she

endorse it.<sup>8</sup> As a US researcher, it may be that she is simply concerned with finding the most effective way to reform the current system, rather than being committed to this system being the only acceptable option. She does, however, argue that there are some distinctive benefits to an elite education system:

[T]hese diverse members [of the elite] must be educated together, so that they can develop competence in respectful intergroup interaction.<sup>9</sup>

[S]ocial integration dramatically improves elite access to second-person claims made by or on behalf of the disadvantaged and enhances their motivational force... Fellow elites are in a far stronger position to do this than nonelites.<sup>10</sup>

She argues that an elite functions best not just when its membership is reflective of society as a whole, but when its members well are acquainted with each other, so as to be most understanding of the interests of those from other backgrounds, and that educating future elites together is an effective way of achieving this. In addition, Anderson is committed to the idea that it is the role of the education system to produce just elites:

If major social problems are caused by cognitive deficits on the part of... elites, deficits that deprive them of the qualifications they need to do their jobs, we should expect the educational system to remedy these defects.<sup>11</sup>

Though Anderson focuses on the relationship between education and elites generally, we will focus on one specific sub-group of the elites: political leaders. As we will see below, the composition of this group is most intimately tied to the constraints of democracy. From Anderson's arguments, we can draw out three key principles about the relationship between education and political leaders:

1. It is not a problem if a disproportionate number of political leaders are recipients of an elite education.
2. It is part of the role of education in a just society to create elite education programs that select and train future political leaders.
3. Part of the role of a just education system is to admit a representative body of students to elite educational institutions in order to ensure that future cohorts of political leaders meet the representation requirements that justice requires.

Note that the first negative principle is weaker than the positive second, which entails that a disproportionate number of political elites *must* be recipients of a just education system. The

third principle specifies one aspect of *how* an education system must go about producing a just elite; if it is rejected, the first two principles become much less plausible. We can refer to the conjunction of principle 1 and principle 3 as *weak educationalism* and the conjunction of principle 2 and principle 3 as *strong educationalism* – we use the term *educationalism*, when there is no harm in being ambiguous between the two. For ease of readability, we will refer to recipients of an elite education as “highly educated”. It’s crucial to note, though, that receiving a higher education qualification (or even a post-graduate degree) does not necessarily mean that one is “highly educated” on this definition.

Before moving on, we must clarify the scope of the argument that follows. Anderson makes clear that her views on elite education are a form of *non-ideal theory*:

[M]y concern lies with nonideal theory—that is, with constructing workable criteria of justice in educational opportunity for our currently unjust world, rather than for a well-ordered society.<sup>12</sup>

This entails that the normative prescriptions of educationalism are meant to apply to our current education system, while other injustices remain in place. Anderson argues that in a fully just world, social integration would extend beyond elite education and apply to the entire education system along with other aspects of society such as, for example, desegregating housing. Viewing educationalism as non-ideal theory means that satisfying its conditions should push us closer to justice even while broader social integration has not been achieved.

This paper will follow Anderson in working within the realm of non-ideal theory. An additional clarification is required in terms of specifying the context in which the theory applies. In the world today, different societies suffer from different injustices, and so what turn out to be “workable criteria of justice” in the US might be counter-productive in, for example, Sweden, China or Mali. We will restrict our attention, therefore, to the US – which is Anderson’s primary focus. The central argument that follows is that the prescriptions of educationalism are not workable criteria for justice in the US today as they conflict with the substantive conditions of democracy that liberal egalitarians are committed to.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, to have an adequately representative group of political leaders, it is necessary not just to reform the policies and practices of elite education institutions, but to reduce the number of political leaders coming from them at all.

## Education and Class

The key problem with the educationalist's position is that principle 3 does not work when it comes to the issue of class. Graduating from an elite education institution virtually guarantees one will not be a member the working class by the time one obtains political office – this follows from the definition of an elite education program as one whose alumni reliably go on to be members of the elite. Therefore, elite education admittance cannot be the mechanism used to insert a proportionate sample of the working-class into the political elite.

Though such educational institutions may admit students who come from working class backgrounds, by the time they take political office they will almost certainly be working class no longer. People are not, in general, elected to political office straight after graduating college, and instead work for a number of years in another profession. With few exceptions, graduates of elite education institutions in the US, especially future politicians, will work in elite fields and not in working-class occupations.

A natural response to this objection by the educationalist is that it is sufficient for representation requirements if a proportional number of political elites come from working class *backgrounds*. In line with this, Anderson only refers to the “class origins” of elites, rather than their class, as a relevant social marker. One might argue that coming from such a background is sufficient to provide a political leader with privileged first-personal knowledge of the group's interests, and to *identify* with them – therefore, making them fit to satisfy the relevant representation requirements.

In general, though, background alone is insufficient for matters of representation. In other cases where a person's social class can change – for example, their gender identity or sexuality – we base representation requirements on present identity, not their “background”. Consider a trans man who once identified as a woman (note that many transmen would not describe their identity history in such terms): such a person would not be an adequate representative of women despite his experiential background. The educationalist must argue that this workaround is uniquely necessary in the case of class, given the benefits brought about by highly educated politicians.

Before moving on, we should clarify what is meant by *class* in the current context and why is a relevant social group for democratic representation. Though this paper will not attempt to offer a complete definition of class, some key points are worth mentioning. The “working class” refers to a group of people in the US who are on the lower end of the income distribution;

they are contrasted with “elites” already discussed, who are a group at the upper end of the income distribution.

As social scientist Eric Olin Wright observes, the grouping depends on more than simply income level, but also “whether or not one has the power to tell other people what to do in the labor process, whether or not one owns large amounts of capital, whether or not one possesses a legally-certified valuable credential, etc.”<sup>14</sup> Members of the working class, as we will be understanding the term, answer “not” to all these questions, while members of the elite satisfy one or more of them. It is also worth noting that members of the elite tend to have a great deal of freedom in what they do at work and how they do it, while members of the working class lack it. Further, the lack of financial cushion and alternative options for earning income for the working class plausibly restricts their freedom more generally.<sup>15</sup>

This grouping also corresponds to distinctive social conditions. Members of the working class and elites tend to live in separate neighborhoods, attend different schools and social venues, while accessing different parts of the country’s infrastructure. Moreover, there is a marked difference in quality, with the resources of the elites being generally better funded and of better quality than those of the working class.

It’s not the goal of this paper to determine precisely who belongs to the working class in this sense. The group clearly includes people employed in the kinds of manual labor most typically associated with the working class, but also a range of service workers. Plausibly, given the criteria above, in the U.S. today it includes a range of people typically thought of as outside the working class, possessing higher education qualifications, such as teachers and nurses. The criteria also apply to many excluded from traditional economic structures, such as undocumented workers and sex workers.

The working class are a social group that require political representation for two key reasons. First, group members have significant common political interests: they would benefit from, for example, expanding welfare programs, increased taxes on the wealthy, better labor protections and improved infrastructure in low-income neighborhoods. Second, because of the social insularity of the working class, members of the group tend to have privileged knowledge of the group’s interest, and motivation to pursue those interests.

That this is the case should not be controversial to egalitarians sympathetic to educationalism. Indeed, Anderson effectively assumes members of the working class have a

claim to representation, though she phrases it in terms of income level, rather than class. The disagreement is that the educationalist claims that working class representation can be achieved by having children from a working-class background being selected for elite education and going on to hold political office. We will argue that to meet the requirements of substantive democracy, it must be members of the working class themselves who hold political office, and thus these representatives cannot be highly educated.<sup>16</sup>

### **Empirical Considerations**

Before looking at the relationship between educationalism and substantive democracy from a theoretical perspective, it's important to consider a pragmatic objection: that it is necessary to have educated politicians, whatever the drawbacks with regard to representation, in order for them to be sufficiently qualified and competent to carry out their duties. Anderson claims that a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for effective elites is possession of the "technical knowledge" required to serve the interests of their constituents effectively, and that "More highly educated people are better able to serve others in demanding jobs".<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, it is an empirical question whether highly educated politicians are in fact more effective legislators than their less educated counterparts. However, it is one that has received less attention than one might expect, perhaps because the answer is considered so obvious it is not thought to merit investigation. Indeed, many researchers take the connection between education and competency as sufficiently self-evident that they use the former as a proxy measure for the latter.<sup>18</sup> One important exception to this is the recent work of Nicolas Carnes, who has studied a range of questions related to the representation of the working class in political office. In addressing the question of education directly, he finds no evidence in favor of the conventional wisdom that more education leads to better politicians:

Do people with more formal education make better political leaders?... Across a wide range of outcomes, we consistently find that college-educated leaders perform about the same as or worse than leaders with less formal education. Politicians with college degrees do not tend to govern over more prosperous nations, do not pass more bills, do not tend to do better at the polls, and are no less likely to be corrupt.<sup>19</sup>

In other work, Carnes looks at the more general question of how working-class politicians fare compared to the very wealthy.<sup>20</sup> Again, he finds here that working class politicians seem to be no worse at their jobs than their wealthy counterparts.

The evidence here is far from decisive. Notably, the research focuses on the difference in performance between college educated and non-college educated politicians rather than those who are or are not *highly* educated – though it’s plausible that if there’s no difference in the former case, there will not be in the latter one. It is clear, however, that there isn’t empirical evidence *supporting* educationalism. In the following sections we will show there is a theoretical case against educationalism, so all we need to establish here is that there are not decisive empirical considerations its favor.

The evidence on politicians’ ability fits into more general research on the nature of expertise, which tells us that there is no such thing as the kind of all-purpose decision-making expertise that an elite education is sometimes presumed to bestow.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, when looking at how to arrive at reliable judgements in the face of uncertainty, it is generally better to aggregate the beliefs of a large diverse group of people, rather than relying on expert consensus.<sup>22</sup> This research suggests that a political body will make better group decisions if comprised of as wide a variety of people as possible, rather than those sharing a specific kind of training.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, working class politicians better serve the interests of working-class people than elite politicians. Carnes shows that working class politicians tend to back pro-worker policies such as more generous social safety net programs, stronger worker protections and more progressive tax policies while politicians from an elite background tend to do the opposite.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, politicians (merely) from working class backgrounds are not as pro-worker as politicians who are themselves working class.<sup>25</sup> This provides some initial reason to think that politicians from working class backgrounds are not adequate representatives of the working class. In the next section we will look at this issue in more depth based on the requirements of democracy.

### **Substantive Democracy**

Democracy has intrinsic as well as instrumental value. We value democracy not just because it delivers goods to citizens more effectively than other forms of government, but because being part of a democracy is intrinsically valuable. The source of this value goes beyond the simple

ability to vote but also depends on the structure of the political system. Therefore, democracy places substantive constraints upon a society, including the representational make-up of political elites. We will argue that having a disproportionate share of highly educated elites violates the relevant conditions by preventing the working class from receiving the intrinsic benefits of democracy.

The idea of democracy being a demanding ideal of intrinsic value was famously advocated by Amartya Sen, who puts it as follows:

Democracy has complex demands, which certainly include voting and respect for election results, but it also requires the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements, and the guaranteeing of free discussion and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment. Even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists...political freedom is a part of human freedom in general, and exercising civil and political rights is a crucial part of good lives of individuals as social beings.<sup>26</sup>

The latter part of this quote emphasizes the intrinsic value of democracy, as a component of *human freedom*. The former part articulates the demanding criteria required for a state to qualify as democratic: alongside universal suffrage, this includes a range of political freedoms, such as freedom of speech. This point is echoed by Anderson, who describes democracy as a culture “defined by equality of membership, reciprocal cooperation, and mutual respect... [which] consists in the freewheeling cooperative interaction of citizens from all walks of life on terms of equality in civil society.”<sup>27</sup>

Anderson’s key idea of democracy as constituting “equality of membership” and “mutual respect” is intriguing, but somewhat elusive. A compelling elaboration is offered by Nico Kolodny who writes:

[D]emocracy is one constituent, and a particularly important constituent, of a society in which people are related to one another as social equals, as opposed to social inferiors or superiors. The concern for democracy is rooted in a concern not to have anyone else “above”—or, for that matter, “below”—us: in the aspiration for a society in which none rules over any other.<sup>28</sup>

Social inequality has to do... with ongoing social relations marked by asymmetries in power, de facto authority, and “consideration”: roughly, certain kinds of responses toward one’s person such as courtesy and regard.<sup>29</sup>

Kolodny argues that we have an intrinsic interest in securing relations of social equality – society without a hierarchy such that some “rule over” others. It would obviously be against our interests to belong to one of the lower rungs of a hierarchical society, even if our material needs were well provided for. Kolodny further suggests that it is even against our interests to belong to one of the higher rungs of such a society, as it dehumanizes us.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, a hierarchical society is *unjust*.

Kolodny makes the further argument that a key component of a socially equitable society is democracy, in Sen’s substantive sense. In a large state, a small number of political leaders are granted outsized decision-making authority, including distribution of resources and legal use of coercive force. Without substantive democracy, such political leaders will rule over the rest of the populace in a problematic sense. With democracy properly realized, such leaders are instead appointed by the populace and held accountable by them, so that they have certain crucial tasks *delegated* to them while remaining social equals. In what follows, we will assume this explanation of the value of democracy is correct and look at whether the educationalist position is compatible with its conditions.

In the US currently, elite education enables greater access to some of the fundamental aspects of the democratic apparatus – particularly, the ability to hold office. Just like with the right to vote, it is not acceptable to deny people the right to participate in the political process if they lack the appropriate education. It would be unacceptable to allow only the sufficiently educated to, for example, participate in political town halls or canvass for votes – pointing to the fact that everyone had equal opportunity to partake in such an education is not an adequate response.

Holding political office is very different from the right to general political participation since it would be impossible for everyone to hold such a position, and some people are unfit to do so. We welcome having a political system which favors competent candidates for office and is biased against the incompetent as opposed to, say, one that assigns representatives at random. Kolodny suggests that in a fair system everyone should have an equal chance of holding office “given a certain level of native aptitude, in competition with others (as with other careers).”<sup>31</sup>

We've seen, though, that the current situation gives greater chances to those with an elite education, and, further, that such education is not necessarily associated with a greater level of aptitude in the requirements of political office. This suggests the current system is flawed. We might question how serious of a problem this flaw is, though. There are many careers which have education requirements that are not necessary for competence in a particular job but serve as a more-or-less arbitrary way of narrowing a field of candidates. These cases certainly suggest inefficiencies and perhaps unfairness in various areas of the employment system. The question is whether the situation is uniquely problematic in the case of opportunity to hold political office.

### **Democratic Participation**

The key argument we will make is that the under-representation of the working class among political representatives undermines the ability of the class *as a whole* to participate in the political process. This violates their democratic rights, as they are ruled over by the highly educated elites who fully participate politically. For this reason, the under-representation of the working class in this field is uniquely problematic, compared to potential under-representation in other spheres of work.

Kolodny claims that "it is not immediately obvious why someone who is denied the chance to serve as a representative, but retains equal influence over who the representative will be, is thereby threatened with social inferiority". Strictly speaking he is correct, if we restrict our attention to the individual: no one person can be socially inferior simply due to their failing to obtain political office, since this is an inevitable outcome for the majority of citizens in a democracy. However, our issue isn't with an individual's right to acquire political office but with a given social group's right to *nominate one of their own* as a viable candidate. If a group cannot do this, their ability to participate politically will be curtailed – at least within the non-ideal context of the US today.

Why would this condition hold? Kolodny suggests that in order for an individual denied the chance to hold political office to retain a position of social equality, they must possess "equal influence over who the representative will be". However, the working class do not have equal influence over who becomes their representative. In addition, Kolodny's remark does not tell the whole story: it is at least as important to have influence over what a politician does once they are elected, as over the outcome of the election itself.

With regard to the first point, one might think that being able to vote in the appropriate kind of election secures equal influence over one's political representative. However, a big part of who becomes a representative is who stands in the election in the first place – not just who wins out of the nominees on the ballot. Who is nominated is not something all voters have an equal part in shaping; party insiders of various kinds have an outsized role in the nomination process while the working class are systematically shut out.

With regard to the second point, a politician's actions are far from determined by factors evident prior to their election. Kolodny is working on an idealized assumption according to which political representatives are analogous to legal representatives, with the constituents as their clients.<sup>32</sup> This would make the election results fully determine the terms according to which the politician was to govern, such that only corruption or malpractice would lead them to deviate from this plan. In other words, the actions of the state would be entirely controlled by the outcomes of its elections.

However, this is not the case in the any existing political system. Further, it is not a problem that is even theoretically fixable, given the conflicting and shifting decisions a politician must make over the course of their time in office. This collection of decision-making responsibilities is not kind of thing for which a comprehensive set of contingencies could be worked out in advance. In carrying out their responsibilities, representatives let their own character and beliefs influence their decisions; they are not purely shaped by voter preferences. There is also, of course, the well-known role money has in politics in the US, through political donations and lobbying. In addition, political platforms and campaign promises influence the actions of politicians – so who crafts these is significant, as is who creates the specific policy language that interprets these promises and puts them into practice. Further, there is the issue of government staffing beyond elected positions – such staff are known to wield huge influence. Finally, there is the matter of politicians' informal networks who give them advice and feedback, and who are likely to be their professional and social peers after they leave office. All of these are areas which are controlled almost entirely by the highly educated and thus from which the working class are effectively shut out.

Key influential groups include thinktanks, corporate boards, professional organizations, and the administrators of political parties. In addition, as our analysis has uncovered, elite university administrators, faculty and stakeholders play an underappreciated though indirect role

in shaping the political process. They determine what types of people get to become leaders by deciding what kinds of students to admit to their institutions, and by shaping what they are taught while they are there.<sup>33</sup>

All of these groups require, in general, an elite education for admittance. The factor we'll focus on is the political party, as looking at what this could be allows us to sketch an alternative picture. As Seth Ackerman writes:

In a genuinely democratic party, the organization's membership, program, and leadership are bound together tightly by a powerful, mutually reinforcing connection. The party's *members* are its sovereign power; they come together through a sense of shared interest or principle. Through deliberation, the members establish a *program* to advance those interests. The party educates the public around the program, and it serves, in effect, as the lodestar by which the party is guided. Finally, the members choose a *party leadership* — including electoral candidates — who are accountable to the membership and bound by the program.<sup>34</sup>

In some European democracies, especially in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, this vision of a democratic party was reasonably approximated by various Social Democrat and Labor parties. One could be a dues-paying member of, for example, the British Labour party and have a vote on the party's platform and leader; one could take part in the debates that actually shaped the party platform — rather than attending town halls that politicians endured and then ignored. In addition, the party was formally answerable to British labor unions, which, again, the working class had an ability to shape and lead.

An additional aspect of a well-functioning worker's party is the ability it provides to ordinary party members to regulate politicians once they are in office, and to discipline them if they deviate from the mandate the party members provided them with. When the politicians are themselves working class, living in working class neighborhoods, the toll of repudiation by party members is real. In contrast, highly educated politicians have little need to interact with members of the working class who voted for them either during or after their term in office. Therefore, the costs of being reviled by them are much lower — it does not materially impact their social life or employment after leaving politics.

In the US, this kind of worker's party has never been a serious political force. It seems clear that the potential for democratic participation for a working-class person is significantly

less than it would be if there were one. Moreover, workers' opportunities for democratic participation are significantly less than for the highly educated who are connected to the insider aspects of the political process. Because of this shortfall in democratic participation, the working class are *ruled over* by the highly educated.

A crucial part of how a worker's party democratically empowers workers is the chains of connection and accountability running from members of the working-class community through the various levels of the party administration up to the political leaders themselves. For this to occur, there must be members of the working class represented at all levels of the party – not least the very top. The central issue here is not the attitudes and beliefs of working-class politicians as compared to the highly educated, but their social and material ties to ordinary members of the working class.<sup>35</sup> It is the presence of these ties that democratically empowers the working class. Therefore, a central part of rectifying the current democratic deficiencies in the US is producing more working-class politicians and, as a consequence, reducing the proportion of those who are highly educated.

### **Non-Ideal Considerations**

At this point, though, we run into some delicate considerations regarding the requirements of justice in non-ideal situations. The educationalist might, for the most part, agree with us as to the democratic deficiencies in the current situation (in the US), and as to what an ideal democracy should look like, but disagree as to the normative requirements that should push us from the latter to the former – in Anderson's terms, the “workable criteria of justice... for our currently unjust world”.

To evaluate this, we must examine both the current injustices, and the competing paths towards an ideal society that we might take. It's clear that the ways in which the working class are currently shut out of the democratic process, as described in the previous section, conflict with Anderson's ideal for democracy. They certainly do not allow for “freewheeling cooperation” between all citizens in political decision making. Though the integrated elite education system she advocates would not fix this, her eventual ideal of a fully integrated *society* plausibly would. Anderson notes that providing full political opportunity to the currently oppressed would require a thorough integration of schooling and housing at all ages and across

all social classes. This would do much to dismantle the networks that currently shut the working class out of the political process.

It's worth noting that a likely necessary condition for a fully integrated society would be a fully integrated higher education system. On this model, future political leaders would be drawn from a much wider range of higher education institutions rather than an elite few. Achieving this goal, though, would require a fundamental restructuring of both the education system and the prospects of graduates. Resources would have to be more equitably distributed across universities, and the careers of graduates would be more diverse, with future elites being distributed across a much greater range of institutions.<sup>36</sup>

If we ascribe this ideal to the educationalist, we can still see how their view of the way forward might differ. A fully integrated education system is far removed from the current US system, and it would not be straightforward to realize in its entirety. This paper has argued that an important intermediate step is finding ways to push those without an elite education into positions of political leadership. The educationalist, however, might offer an alternative intermediate step: integrating the education of the elite in order to create a more representative and responsible ruling class that would be well placed to bring about the necessary integration across the rest of society. Indeed, this is precisely the argument I interpret Anderson as making. We see evidence for this in her vision of democracy as a cooperative *deliberative* activity.

Democracy requires that citizens from different walks of life talk to one another about matters of common interest, to determine what issues warrant collective action, what kinds of action might make sense, and who is most trusted to hold political office...

[D]eliberative democrats reject "majority rule" as a definition of democracy [as] it fails to make central a role for intelligence and learning in democratic decision-making... to make intelligent decisions and learn from their mistakes, decision-makers must be able to think and deliberate together.<sup>37</sup>

On this view, in a non-ideal democracy, the natural path forward is to find ways to improve the quality of debate rather than pushing to change the balance of power through, for example, class struggle. Anderson strongly opposes the formation of identity blocks, in which social groups form a political unit, and discipline their representatives to make sure they always act in the group's interest. This is counter-productive to the kind of "free-wheeling" debate she advocates and would potentially undermine efforts to improve democracy rather than moving it forward.

This approach, however, fails to fully appreciate the challenges facing the current non-ideal situation. Though ideal democratic processes may be fully deliberative and collaborative, this does not mean such processes are optimal in all non-ideal contexts. A point Estlund makes forcefully is that in a non-ideal situation, the best course of action is not always to attempt to approximate the ideal in all ways within one's power.<sup>38</sup> He gives as an example a situation in which one political party violates the democratic ideal by using violence to pursue its political priorities. In this circumstance, it would not be right for the other party to stick to ideal democratic norms of fair play in limiting how far they pushed back against their rival's activities (which is not to say they should imitate all their rival's abuses).

One key aspect of our current situation is that its deviations from the democratic ideal are fundamentally asymmetrical. It's not simply that democratic equality has not been achieved but that some groups are socially superior while others are socially inferior – i.e., the highly educated rule over the working class. The kinds of actions possible and permissible for the working class as they aim to attain the status of social equal must be understood in this light. Those who are currently socially superior have a number of tools available to pursue their goals that others lack. They have extensive wealth they can employ to influence the political process, along with access to the internal levers of power discussed above. The non-elite lack the resources or contacts to influence the process behind the scenes, and so they must draw on their contrasting political assets to stand a chance – for example, their strength in numbers and the moral imperative of their cause.

Relevant here is the idea of political action in a non-ideal situation as *negotiation*. Negotiation is a middle ground between deliberation and majority rule in terms of how disagreements are resolved. It occurs in situations where different groups have limited (but non-zero) trust and mutual concern. The groups have certain conflicting goals (e.g., competition over scarce resources for group members), but also have the common goal of reaching an *agreement* of some sort, and they may be open to accepting additional common goals. They all prefer to agree to *some* system of governance that all are bound by over having a crisis of legitimate political authority, but they have different preferences as to the specifics of the system.<sup>39</sup> However, given the limited common goals, there is room for the different groups to compromise: this is not the situation of brute majority rule that Anderson envisages.<sup>40</sup>

Effective negotiation requires applying pressure to opposing groups to accept one's preferred goals, without alienating them so much that they decide to reject any agreement at all (as this would be mutually disastrous). This may involve *action* as well as discussion. Members of a group must demonstrate the value they ascribe to certain goals, showing a willingness to sacrifice in order to achieve them. In democratic negotiations, there may be incentive to bluff and mislead other groups as to one's values and intentions, so often proof is required. A notable example of this is acts of civil disobedience, in which group members take on substantial personal risk while potentially inconveniencing others in order to demonstrate their commitment to a particular goal. This both convinces other negotiating parties that they are serious in their stated aims, as well as changing public opinion. In a non-ideal situation, actions may convince members of one group of the legitimacy of another's goals in a way that simply stating them is unable to. The negotiating tactics available are significantly influenced by the non-ideal asymmetry in power mentioned above. For example, civil disobedience draws on strength in numbers and moral commitment.

One might worry, though, that endorsing this kind of negotiation is counterproductive to realizing democratic ideals, through entrenching intolerant attitudes between competing social groups. Anderson cautions that such approaches to politics may lead to the formation of harmful stereotypes that undermine people's ability to engage in productive inter-group deliberation.<sup>41</sup> The educationalist might argue that criteria for justice focused on improving the elite, rather than empowering working-class negotiation, are best suited to preserve democratic norms.

For this to work, it is the elite themselves who have to be moved by these considerations of justice, taking measures to improve themselves and then go on to divest their power so as to expand democratic rights. Meanwhile the working class have little agency in the process. Historical considerations undermine the plausibility of this strategy. As Geoff Eley argues, in his comprehensive history of European democracy:

Let there be no mistake: democracy is not "given" or "granted." It requires conflict, namely, courageous challenges to authority, risk-taking and reckless exemplary acts, ethical witnessing, violent confrontations, and general crises in which the given sociopolitical order breaks down. In Europe, democracy did not result from natural evolution or economic prosperity. It certainly did not emerge as an inevitable byproduct

of individualism or the market. It developed because masses of people organized collectively to demand it.<sup>42</sup>

Imperfection in democracy has never been ahistorical – old ruling elites retain more than their fair share of power after granting limited democratic rights to the broader populace. Throughout modern history, there has been a repeated process of elites granting limited democratic rights to attempt to stave off revolution, or citizens taking the rights when such staving failed. Crucially, time and again, people have used the limited democratic rights they have been granted as a wedge to open the door for more – using a free press to argue for suffrage or using a supposedly advisory representative body to organize a self-appointed ruling body.

What we want from norms of justice in conditions of non-ideal democracy should be measures that encourage this process of further democratization. These should push towards encouraging the kind of hardball negotiating tactics that allow the currently oppressed to empower themselves. Note that for such negotiating tactics to be effective, there must be group discipline and organization, and strong connections between group members and organizers.

There is no evidence that avoiding class conflict reduces stereotypes – a lack of class movement in the U.S. does not preclude the adoption of vitriolic and harmful anti-elite stereotypes by some members of the working class, or anti-working-class sentiment in the elite. It is much easier to breakdown stereotypes when power has been equalized, so that the members of the different groups regard each other on an equal footing – Anderson, in effect, concedes this point when claiming that elites will be more responsive to the second-person concerns of fellow elites. This is not to say, of course, that those pushing for equality shouldn't be responsible in their rhetoric and strategy.

Anderson's approach is also in tension with normative commitments to substantive democracy, according to which being treated a social inferior is a significant harm, whether other ideals of justice have been achieved or not – so rectifying it should be a moral priority, not something to be put on hold. Morally speaking, social inferiors' demand for social equality takes priority over the requirement that they renounce stereotypes that hamper optimal deliberation – the elite cannot justify making the latter a pre-condition of the former. Given these concerns, the appropriate path forward should be one that finds ways for those currently shut out of the democratic process to gain access to it.

## Conclusion

Tying political power to an elite education, only received by a small subsection of the population, is an impediment to justice. In particular, it is an injustice to the working class who are systematically not recipients of such an education. Having the highly educated disproportionately represented in politics leads to policies that the working class do not support and that materially harm them. In addition, this situation deprives the working class of their democratic rights, limiting their ability to participate in the democratic process such that they are ruled over by the highly educated elites who more fully shape political decision making.

Crucially, the solution here cannot be to change the admittance practices of educational institutions. Admittees to elite colleges are not, except in exceptional circumstances, working class when they assume political office, regardless of their background. They are less likely to pursue pro-working-class policies, and they do not boost the democratic participation of the working-class as a group. Instead, the goal must be to promote working class candidates to office and build organizations that hold the candidates answerable to working class priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (1971).

<sup>2</sup> For an argument that part of the role of education is to give people the skills to be active citizens, see Satz, Debra. "Equality, adequacy, and education for citizenship." *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 623-648.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, Elizabeth. "Rethinking equality of opportunity: Comment on Adam Swift's how not to be a hypocrite." *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 2 (2004): 99-110.; Anderson, E. (2007). Fair opportunity in education: A democratic equality perspective. *Ethics*, 117(4), 595-622.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 596-597

<sup>5</sup> See Anderson 2004, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 596

<sup>7</sup> Note that, according to this definition, some institutions may have some programs that are elite (e.g., a law degree or MBA) while other programs are not.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson 2004, op. cit. 108

<sup>9</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 597

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 611

<sup>11</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 606

<sup>12</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 621

<sup>13</sup> Since the conclusion is that educationalism is incompatible with substantive democracy, it is open a theorist to retract their support of the latter rather than the former, at least as a matter of non-ideal theory. However, commitment to substantive democracy is non-negotiable.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, Erik Olin. "Foundations of class analysis: A Marxist perspective." In *annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago*. 1999. 8

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, Gerald, Allen. *History, labour, and freedom: Themes from Marx*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 1988

<sup>16</sup> We will remain neutral on whether there is, alongside the working class and elite class, a distinctive *middle class* also requiring political representation.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 596

<sup>18</sup> Atkinson, Michael M., and Dustin Rogers. "Better Politicians: If We Pay, Will They Come?." In *Annual Meeting of the CPSA, Edmonton*. 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Carnes, Nicholas, and Noam Lupu. "Rethinking the comparative perspective on class and representation: Evidence from Latin America." *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (2015): 1-18.

<sup>20</sup> Carnes, Nicholas. *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office--and What We Can Do About It*. Vol. 16. Princeton University Press, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Ericsson, Anders, and Robert Pool. *Peak: Secrets from the new science of expertise*. Random House, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Surowiecki, James. *The wisdom of crowds*. Anchor, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Landemore, Hélène. *Democratic Reason*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Carnes 2020, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Carnes, Nicholas. "Does the numerical underrepresentation of the working class in Congress matter?." *Legislative studies quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2012): 5-34.; Carnes, Nicholas, and Meredith L. Sadin. "The "Mill Worker's Son" heuristic: How voters perceive politicians from working-class families—and how they really behave in office." *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 1 (2015): 285-298.

<sup>26</sup> Sen, Amartya. "Democracy as a Universal Value." *Journal of Democracy* 10 (1999): 9-10

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, Elizabeth. "Democracy: instrumental vs. non-instrumental value." *Contemporary debates in political philosophy* (2009): 214

<sup>28</sup> Kolodny, Niko. "Rule over none I: What justifies democracy?." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014): 196

<sup>29</sup> Kolodny, op. cit. 226

<sup>30</sup> Though members of such a group might well not recognize the harm or be willing to give up their position, nonetheless, they would, in fact be better off in a socially equitable society This is similar to familiar feminist arguments that despite the many privileges men enjoy in a patriarchal society, the system overall harms them too.

<sup>31</sup> Kolodny, op. cit. 213

<sup>32</sup> The idea of politicians as akin to legal representatives is described at length in Beerbohm, Eric. "In our name." In *In Our Name*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this last group out.

<sup>34</sup> Ackerman, Seth. A Blueprint for a New Party. *Jacobin Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/bernie-sanders-democratic-labor-party-ackerman>. 2016

<sup>35</sup> It should be emphasized that the connections between class, education, and social and material relations that are necessary for this argument are *contingent* features of the US. Therefore, our conclusions only apply in this context.

<sup>36</sup> I'll leave it an open question whether Anderson would include an integrated higher education system as part of an ideal society. Though I find it the more plausible position, Anderson seems strongly attached to the perceived benefits of educating future elites together. As I read her, though, nothing she says addresses the ideal situation directly.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson 2009, op. cit. 215-216

<sup>38</sup> Estlund, David. *Democracy*, Malden, MA. 2002

<sup>39</sup> For the mechanics of negotiation, see Brams, Steven, Ronald J. Quarles, David H. McElreath, Michelle E. Waldron, and David Ethan Milstein. *Negotiation games*. Routledge, 2002; for negotiation in democracy, see Mansbridge, Jane Jebb, James Bohman, Simone Chambers, David Estlund, Andreas Føllesdal, Archon Fung, Cristina Lafont, Bernard Manin, and José Luis Martí. "The place of self-interest and the role of power in deliberative democracy." *Raisons politiques* 42, no. 2 (2011): 47-82.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed explanation of this kind of pattern of attitudes, see Gibbard, Allan. *Wise choices, apt feelings: A theory of normative judgment*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

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<sup>41</sup> Anderson 2007, op. cit. 605

<sup>42</sup> Eley, Geoff. *Forging democracy: the history of the left in Europe, 1850-2000*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Note that the views expressed in the article are the author's own, and do not reflect those of Financial Life Cycle Education.