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# Why the Intellectual Elite Can't Learn Its Lesson



By [Quy Huy](#) , INSEAD Professor of Strategic Management

**Even after failing to predict Brexit and Trump, elites haven't reckoned with their own limitations.**

History may show that the single biggest casualty of 2016 was the credibility of elites. The one-two punch of Brexit and Trump has left establishment media and politicians reeling, their prestige cast into doubt. Their obliviousness to the right-wing populist surge exposed the bubble that most elites live in. It's clear that they've been speaking and listening to one another within that bubble for far too long.

So what now? Since Donald J. Trump's victory, we've seen a bevy of ostensibly soul-searching think pieces from elites attempting to pinpoint how they got it wrong. But even amid this seeming display of humility, a streak of superiority shows through.

In [\*The Washington Post\*](#), for example: "We wanted to believe... America was better than that. I can fault journalists for a lot of things, but I can't fault us for that."

A British professor of politics was quoted in *The New York Times*, “It’s no longer ‘the economy, stupid’, it’s ‘identity, stupid’... Identity and cultural politics are even bigger determinants of people’s politics than we thought possible.”

This hardly qualifies as soul-searching – it’s closer to blame-shifting or rationalised self-righteousness. It neglects patterns of history wherein identity and culture-based grievances flare up at times of increased economic insecurity (Nazi Germany being an extreme example). If this is the best elites can do in terms of learning from their failures, we have cause to worry, considering that upcoming elections in Europe may determine whether the rising populist tide will submerge more of the continent.

### **The trap of professionalism**

To understand the intellectual elite’s current trouble, look no further than Hillary Clinton – widely predicted to win even a few days before the election and overwhelmingly supported by elites. Her campaign website bulged with detailed, rational plans to address issues from substance abuse and education to terrorism and climate change. The trees were all well-groomed, but the forest did not inspire. Her attempts to show voters a softer, more relatable side appeared “forced” and were roundly mocked on television. Still, the Clinton camp believed that carefully calibrated policy fixes would compensate for insufficient inspiration at the core of the candidacy. They’d succumbed to what I call *the trap of professionalism*, an epidemic among elites in which analytical thinking – focus on intellectual details – is exalted, while emotion – more intuitive, holistic consideration of human social-psychological needs – is automatically disdained.

Trump’s mind-set was the polar opposite: holistic rather than analytical, focused on the forest instead of the trees. To use President Obama’s words, Trump may not be a “plans guy” or a “facts guy”, but he was much better at reading the emotional undercurrent of the times. Moreover, unlike the elites, he correctly diagnosed the holistic root cause: perceived increasing income inequality – and made good use of it. Trump’s antics on the campaign trail were very effective at projecting sympathy for Americans who (rightly or wrongly) felt shut out of the halting economic recovery. His raucous rallies gave financially insecure Americans an outlet for their anger as well as a gallery of scapegoats (illegal immigrants, Muslims, etc.). Despite not being an “intellectual”, Trump had apparently learned from history that wherever a

once-dominant group feels threatened by systemic change, you'll find a wellspring of negative **collective emotions** that can be leveraged to gain political power. The emotional bond he formed with his followers was so strong that it easily withstood scandals on an almost daily basis.

Conversely, Clinton's emotion-averse, analytic mind-set gave rise to her disastrous "basket of deplorables" comment. In the space of a few sentences, she revealed a total lack of empathy for millions of non-elite Americans which Trump's campaign brilliantly capitalised upon. Had she not been a typical elite caught in the trap of professionalism, she might have been able to perceive, and sympathise with, the feelings of economic vulnerability, fear of the future, and anger at perceived social injustice that underlie the xenophobia of many Trump supporters. Instead, she condemned them as dyed-in-the-wool bigots unworthy of sympathy.

### **"Build that wall"**

Meanwhile, elites intensified their attention on the trees rather than the forest, pouring their energy into proving that Trump was inaccurate on hundreds of points. Consider Trump's pledge to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, with the promise that Mexico would foot the bill. The media reported all the reasons the wall was a pipe dream (prohibitive costs, etc.), but Trump's followers could not have cared less: "Build the wall!" remained a popular refrain at Trump rallies throughout the campaign.

As Peter Thiel pointed out in **his much-quoted remarks**, the wall was never meant to be taken literally. Trump voters understood it as a metaphor for the protections that would preserve their imperilled social and economic standing (a more holistic consideration). Whether or not their anxieties were well-founded, the holistic metaphor of a wall allowed them to fix their imaginations on the hope of a better life, just as did the pie-in-the-sky promises of the Leave campaign in the U.K. Even after Brexit and Trump, the intellectual elite has no answer to the emotional appeal of right-wing populism, except a dismissive, "basket of deplorables"-style rejoinder. If elites keep flaunting their analytic and (supposed) moral superiority, they'll continue acting as convenient punching bags for populist demagogues.

### **Reforming our educational curriculum**

In the longer term, solving the leadership deficiency begins with reforming the curriculum of prestigious schools that most elites attend. Few people are

born with the compulsion to suppress their emotional side; it's socialised into us. As we grow into adulthood, the current educational system rewards us for our mastery of difficult intellectual concepts. The curriculum is heavily tilted towards analytic training. Balance is urgently needed for future leaders to avoid falling into the trap of professionalism. Analytic thinking is necessary for writing a business plan or doing scientific work, but motivating people requires a holistic and sympathetic mind-set as well.

**Quy Huy** is Professor of Strategic Management at INSEAD. He is also Programme Director of the **Strategy Execution Programme**, part of INSEAD's suite of Executive Development Programmes.

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#### About the author(s)

**Quy Huy** is the Solvay Chaired Professor of Technological Innovation and a Professor of Strategic Management at INSEAD. He is also a director of the **Strategy Execution Programme**, part of INSEAD's suite of Executive Education programmes.