

Trump supporters' resistance to social justice efforts is driven by their meritocratic ideology, not bias.



Trump supporters are more resistant to social justice efforts than other Americans, but not because of bias. Rather, many Trump supporters are “rugged meritocratists”- those who resist social justice efforts because they believe that American society is already fair. [Erin Cech](#) argues that if rugged meritocratists are to heed calls for social justice, they must first be convinced that inequality actually exists.

Social justice concerns have shot to the top of public attention in the current political atmosphere. Conservatives in general, and Trump supporters in particular, [seem opposed](#) to social action that advances equality for disadvantaged groups. From the [travel ban](#), to the [proposed health care bill](#), to the [cancellation of antidiscrimination compliance programs](#), the social justice and equal rights advancements of the last decades appear to be stalling, if not reversing.

If equality advocates are to advance their cause, they must understand what drives this opposition to social justice efforts. A prevailing media narrative explaining Trump supporters' resistance to social justice efforts is that Trump supporters are simply more biased—they are more openly racist, sexist, and classist than other Americans.

But is this accurate?

In a [recent survey](#) of 1,150 Americans, I analysed the difference between Trump supporters' and non-supporters' understanding of US society. The survey launched three weeks after the 2016 elections and the sample is proportionally representative of US adults.

Three differences emerged:

- (1) Trump supporters are indeed more opposed to social justice efforts than other Americans. They are more likely to believe, for example, that too much money is spent on homeless shelters and that women, racial or ethnic minorities, and the poor are too demanding in their push for equality.
- (2) Trump supporters express more overt bias against blacks, Hispanics, women and the poor. For example, they often see blacks and Hispanics as less intelligent and hardworking than whites.
- (3) Trump supporters are more likely to believe in the “meritocratic ideology,” a popular belief that frames American society as generally fair and explains lack of success in life as the result of individual deficiencies in effort and talent.

Believers of this meritocratic ideology are more likely to think that “U.S. society is equitable and fair,” that “society has reached a point where racial minorities and whites have equal opportunities for achievement” and that “individuals are personally responsible for their position in society.”

So, are Trump supporters more opposed to social justice efforts because of greater overt bias, or is the meritocratic ideology in play as well?

It turns out that adherence to the meritocratic ideology, not overt bias, is the key factor behind Trump supporters' opposition to social justice efforts. While Trump supporters do show greater overt bias against the poor, racial/ethnic minorities, and women, these biases are not the main drivers of their opposition to social justice. Rather, Trump supporters tend to be “rugged meritocratists”—their resistance to social justice efforts is explained in large part by their belief that the social world is already fair and just. Rugged meritocratists frame social justice efforts as demands for [“extra” rights](#).



What to do about rugged meritocrats? Implications for activism

So what are equality advocates to do? Trump supporters do tend to express more overt bias than non-supporters. It's easy to focus on this, given the [rise](#) in hate speech, vandalism, and violence after the 2016 presidential election.

But advocates should not assume that such bias is the only—or the greatest—barricade to social justice efforts. The meritocratic ideology is a bigger source of resistance.

Convincing rugged meritocrats that structural inequalities exist is no simple task. A century of social science research demonstrates the endurance of inequality in the U.S., but formalized academic research isn't often the most effective way to challenge deeply held beliefs. [Emotionally compelling anecdotes](#) that illustrate broader patterns of inequality may be more successful at reshaping people's perceptions of U.S. society than aggregated trends or statistics. Pointing out the ways that the American Dream is not necessarily available to their neighbours and friends can help people change their views of social justice efforts—seeing them not as fights for “special rights” but for *equal* rights.

Resistance to social justice efforts are driven less by overt social bias than by a particular framing of the social world—one that denies structural inequality and blames victims of that inequality for their own circumstances. Rugged meritocrats—whatever their political affiliation—put up substantial resistance to social justice efforts because such efforts don't mesh with their understanding of American society. Inequality activists and scholars must keep this in mind, or rugged meritocrats will remain unconvinced by demands for social justice.

This article is based on the paper '[Rugged Meritocrats: The Role of Overt Bias and the Meritocratic Ideology in Trump Supporters](#)' Opposition to Social Justice Efforts' in *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*.

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