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Them vs. U.S.

The Two Americas and How the Nation's Elite Is
Out of Touch with Average Americans

Prepared by the Committee to Unleash Prosperity Staff

Executive Summary

“Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are. They are different.”

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

The people who run America, or at least think they do, live in a bubble of their own construction. They’ve isolated themselves from everyday America’s realities to such a degree their views about what is and what should be happening in this country differ widely from the average American’s.

An analysis of their thinking, conducted for the Committee to Unleash Prosperity, finds that on a variety of economic, social, and political issues, there exists a wide gap between how the top 1% – the Elites – think things should be and how the rest of America looks at them.

Elite thinking, as it’s termed, is under attack – and rightly so – for being out of step with the rest of the country. Below, we highlight some of the profound attitudinal differences between elites and average Americans:

- In a time when most Americans have suffered a loss of real take-home pay, 74% of elites say they are financially better off today than in the past versus 20% of all Americans.
- Nearly six in ten say there is too much individual freedom in America – double the rate of all Americans.
- More than two-thirds (67%) favor rationing of vital energy and food sources to combat the threat of climate change.
- In stark contrast to the rest of America, 70% of the Elites trust the government to “do the right thing most of the time.”
- Two-thirds (67%) say teachers and other educational professionals should decide what children are taught rather than letting parents decide.
- Somewhere between half and two-thirds favor banning things like SUVs, gas stoves, air conditioning, and non-essential air travel to protect the environment.
- About six of ten elites have a favorable opinion of the so-called talking professions—lawyers, lobbyists, politicians, and journalists.
- President Joe Biden enjoys an 84% job approval rating from this group – roughly twice as high as the general public.

The survey is a first-of-its-kind look at the views of the American Elite – defined as people having at least one post-graduate degree, earning at least \$150,000 annually, and living in high-population density areas (more than 10,000 people per square mile in their zip code) – and compares them to what the average American thinks. The Elites represent 1% of the U.S. population but have an outsized voice on public policy in the United States, with their views seeming somehow to dominate the national conversation.

This may be because it is the Elites themselves who determine what that conversation will be about on campus, in the legacy media, and corporate board rooms. Not surprisingly, these people talk about politics far more than most Americans. The data show that nearly a third of them (30%) talk about politics daily or almost every day. Just 9% of the voting public do. It is worth noting that members of the Elites who talk about politics daily have views that are even further removed from the opinions of the voting public.

This is true even when the Elites self-identify as Republicans. They typically may be more conservative than Elite Democrats but they still have attitudes and opinions that are far removed from those of the typical American voter. The Elite class – regardless of party – is an exclusive club that sees and experiences America through a different lens than ordinary Americans.

These results confirm what people have long suspected: today, there are two Americas. One is wealthier, more highly educated, and attended the best schools. They put much more trust in big government “to do the right thing” and, by their own admission, benefit from more expansive government policies. They have also been hurt far less by the high inflation of the Biden presidency than those who live from paycheck to paycheck and are in the lower and middle classes.

This Grand Canyon-sized chasm between where every day Americans stand on the state of the country, expanding government power, draconian climate change solutions, and Joe Biden’s job performance may partly explain the Donald Trump phenomenon and his high approval ratings among working-class voters, who feel wholly connected with the rebellion against the arrogance of the ruling class Elites.

Survey Methodology

This report is based upon two separate surveys of 1,000 Members of the Elites. They were conducted online by Scott Rasmussen on September 11-26, 2023, and September 14-29, 2023. RMG Research, Inc. conducted fieldwork for the survey.

The Elites are defined as those having a postgraduate degree, a household income of more than \$150,000 annually, and living in a zip code with more than 10,000 people per square mile. Approximately 1% of the total U.S. population meets these criteria.

These parameters were determined after observing numerous surveys indicating that these elite segments of the population consistently exhibited views that were distinct from the general population. The sample was lightly weighted by gender, age, and race to reflect the demographic profile established through surveys of Registered Voters.

Seventy-three percent (73%) of the Elites were Democrats, and 14% were Republicans. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 3.1 percentage points.

The study also examined a sub-sample of elites, adults who attended Ivy League schools or other elite private schools, including Northwestern, Duke, Stanford, and the University of Chicago. Roughly half of those we classify as “elites” attended one of these schools. For the purpose of this study, we label those who attended one of these schools as “Ivy League Graduates.”

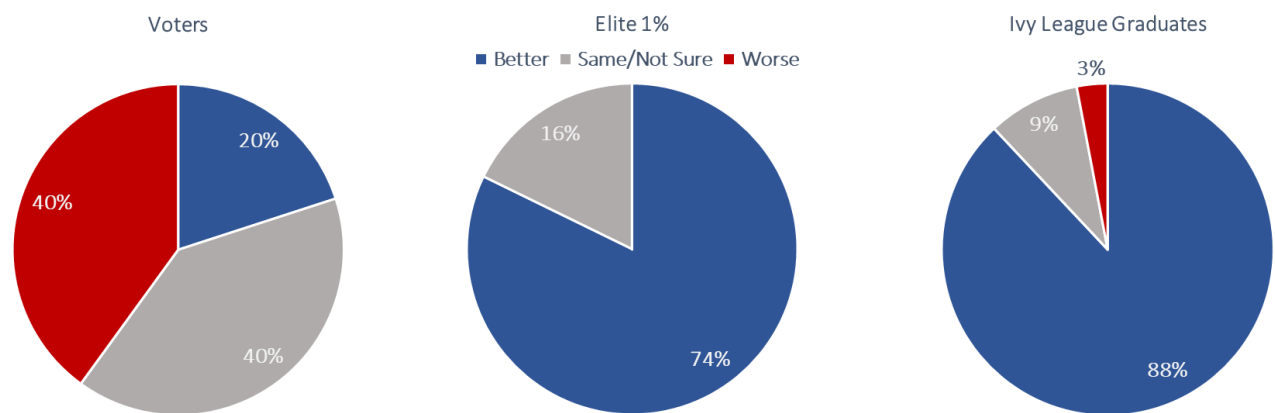
Comparison results shown for all voters were asked in independent surveys of 1,000 Registered Voters, each conducted between May and September 2023.

Analysis

Personal Finances

Only about 20% of all Americans say they believe their finances are getting better now. But among the Elite, that number more than triples to 74% who say they are better off. And among the Ivy League school graduates, 88% say they are better off. This may explain why the media, academics, and high-income Americans tend to rate the economy as good while most Americans say the economy is bad.

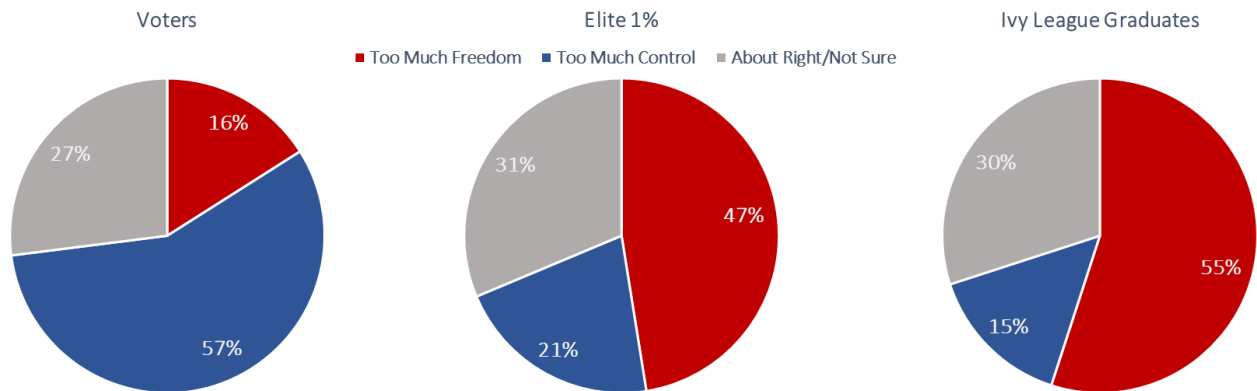
Are your personal finances getting better or worse these days?



Individual Freedom

When Americans are asked if there is too much or too little freedom, Elites are three times more likely to say that there is too much individual freedom in America than all Americans. Almost six out of ten of the graduates from Elite colleges think there is too much freedom.

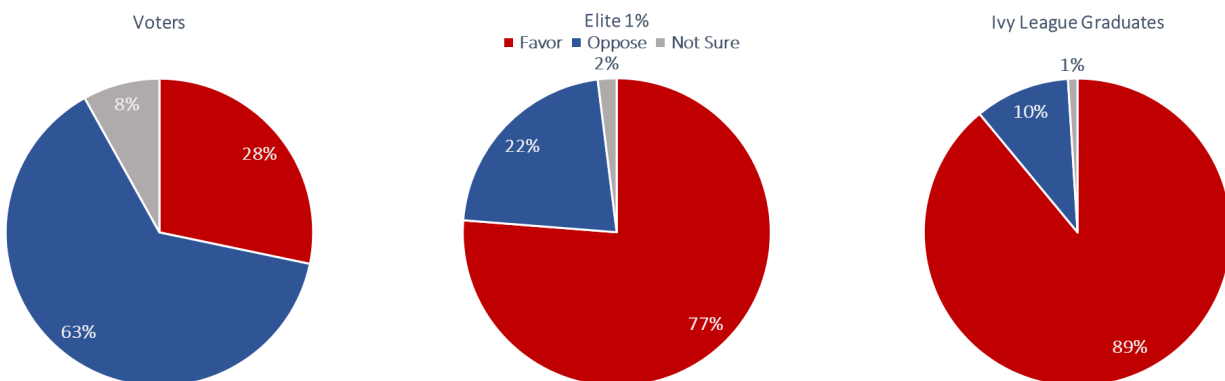
Does the United States provide too much individual freedom, too much government control, or is the balance about right?



Rationing

Climate change is clearly an obsession of the very rich and highly educated. An astonishing 77% of the Elites – including nearly 90% of the Elites who graduated from the top universities – favor rationing of energy, gas, and meat to combat climate change. Among all Americans, 63% oppose this policy.

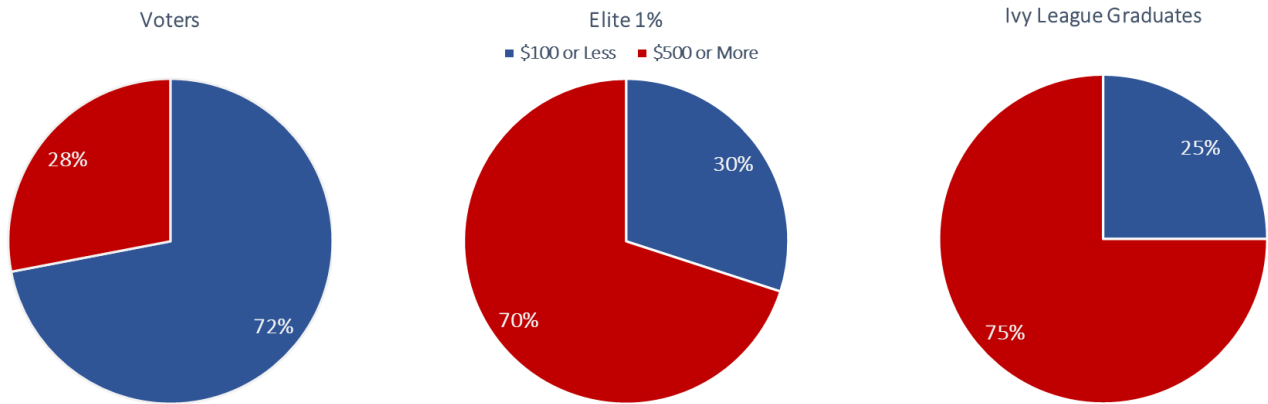
To fight climate change, would you favor or oppose the strict rationing of gas, meat, and electricity?



Climate Change

Almost two-thirds of Elites (70%) said they would pay \$500 or more each year in taxes and higher costs to reduce climate change, while nearly as many average Americans (72%) said they would only be willing to pay \$100 or less a year.

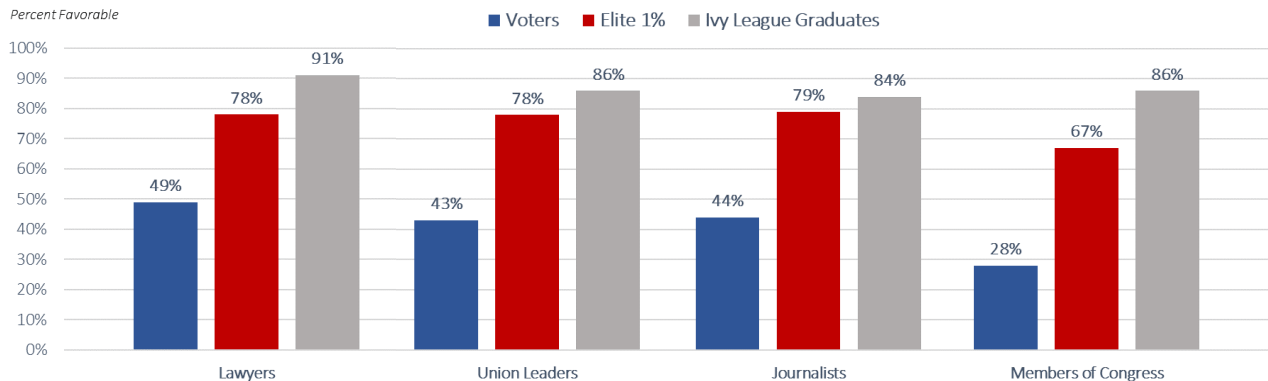
How much would you personally be willing to pay each year in terms of taxes and higher costs to reduce climate change?



Favorable Opinion of the Members of the Talking Professions

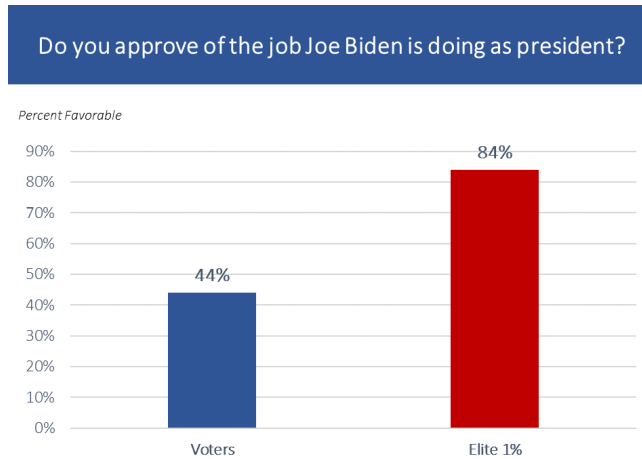
At most, half of Americans have a favorable opinion of lawyers, lobbyists, union leaders, or journalists. However, almost 80% of the elites hold a favorable opinion of this group of professionals, and nearly 90% of the elite college attendees do. As for members of Congress, 28% have a favorable opinion versus 67% of Elites.

Do you have a favorable or an unfavorable opinion of each of the following?



Biden Approval Rating

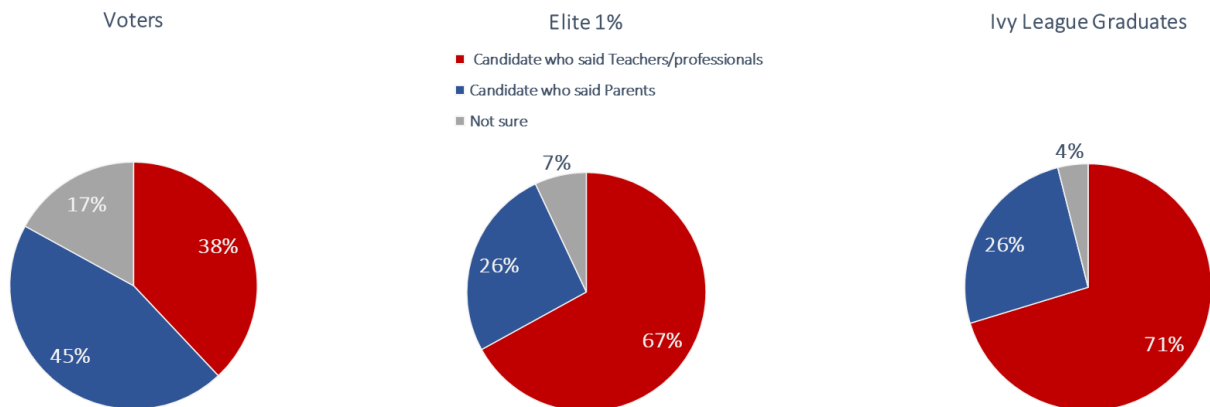
Perhaps not surprisingly, at a time when President Biden's approval rating among voters was in the low 40s, his performance earned approval from 84% of the Elites. That's a 40% swing.



Education

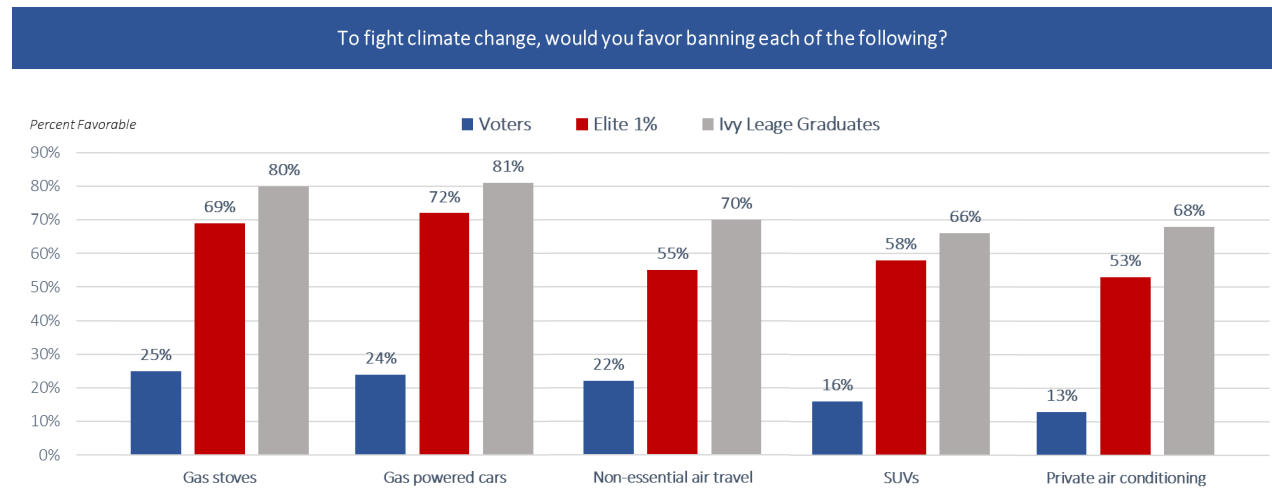
On the question of who should decide what children are taught, there is a massive divide: Two-thirds (67%) of the Elites would prefer a candidate who said teachers and other educational professionals should decide—only 38% of the voting public shares that view.

If you had a choice between a candidate who said that teachers and other education professionals should decide what students are taught and a candidate who said that parents need more control over what their children are taught. For whom would you vote?



Banning Cars and Household Appliances

Between half and two-thirds of Elites favor a BAN on a list of modern conveniences – gas stoves, gas-powered cars, air conditioning, SUVs, and “non-essential air travel” – meaning no relaxing vacation flights to Hawaii, Bermuda, or Miami Beach. More than two-thirds of the Ivy Elite school college grads would ban each of these. For the average American, less than one in four of these voters favor any of these bans.



Trust in Government

At a time when the government’s credibility is called into question regularly, the Elites are far more likely to trust the government. The data show that 70% of the Elites trust the government to do the right thing most of the time – more than twice the nationwide average. Among the most politically active members of the Elite, that figure rises to a stunning 89%.

Conclusion

The Elites, a group with extraordinary political and societal power, have views and attitudes that are wildly out of touch with the American people. At the center of the gap is a difference of opinion over individual freedom. Most Americans think there is too little freedom in our nation today, a view shared by only 21% of the Elites.

There are subsets of this elite world with even more extreme views. Roughly a third of these Elites talk politics daily. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of this politically active segment believe there is too much individual freedom. Only 12% share the public's view that there is not enough individual freedom in America today.

These un-American views are not the result of a conspiracy. They arise from what might be better described as a fraternity culture. Just over half of the Elites have a degree from one of the twelve Elite universities. These schools play a crucial role in defining the Elite culture and perspectives.

Elites who attended one of these schools are more likely to talk about politics, and have more extreme views than Elites who attended other schools. Among those who attended one of the 12 schools and talked about politics daily, 73% believe there is too much individual freedom in America today, and 95% trust the government to do the right thing most of the time.

Another significant demographic divide among the Elites is a notable generation gap. Among members of the Elites who are 55 or older, just 10% think there is too much individual freedom—a majority (54%) of Elites under 35 hold that view.

Other attitudes in the survey flow naturally from the difference of opinion concerning individual freedom. To fight climate change, members of the Elites strongly support remaking American society by banning things that are part of the fabric of life in America. Outside of the Elite bubble, such bans are not a part of serious conversation.

Supporting the lack of Elites' concern about freedom is an extraordinary level of Elite trust in the government. Seventy percent (70%) of the Elites trust the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. That level of trust likely comes from the fact that leading government officials are drawn from the same cultural background as the Elites. Additionally, unlike most voters, Elites can easily access and influence government officials on issues of concern.

It is important to note that not all members of the Elites are elitists. Some don't think about politics all that much, and others actively support traditional American values such as individual freedom. Still, given the influence they yield, the overall views of the Elites represent an existential threat to America's founding ideals of freedom, equality, and self-governance.

