'Many of us need what [Sandel] does so well: help us grapple with the unexpected and uncomfortable questions that history delivers us . . . Now's a good time for both sides to sit down for a very serious talk, with *The Tyranny of Merit* required reading for all' Arlie Hochschild, *New York Times Book Review*

'The latest salvo in Sandel's lifelong intellectual struggle against a creeping individualism that, since the Reagan and Thatcher era, has become pervasive in western democracies . . . The implicit claim is that vulnerability and mutual recognition can become the basis of a renewed sense of belonging and community. It is a vision of society that is the very opposite of what came to be known as Thatcherism, with its emphasis on self-reliance as a principal virtue' Julian Coman, *Observer*

'In a much talked-about new book, *The Tyranny of Merit* . . . Sandel argues that the polarized politics of our time, and the resentments that fuel it, arise, paradoxically, from a seemingly attractive ideal – the meritocratic promise that if you work hard and go to college, you will rise' Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times*

'It's the same critique my father made of meritocracy when he coined the word in 1958 and Sandel sees the populist uprisings of 2016, with Brexit and Trump triumphing at the ballot box, as a foretaste of the bloody revolution my father predicted would occur in 2034' Toby Young, *Spectator*

'Sandel shows . . . how the very conception of life as a relentless competitive race unjustly denigrates the losers, produces a cynical and arrogant elite, corrupts institutions of higher education, and replaces democracy with technocracy. Unwittingly, it thereby creates populist backlash' Elizabeth Anderson, *The Nation*

'A brilliant book, *The Tyranny of Merit* . . . gets at this all-important question of humiliation, and its relationship to populism and democracy' Anand Giridharadas, *The.Ink*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael J. Sandel teaches political philosophy at Harvard University. His books *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, and *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* were international best sellers and have been translated into thirty languages. Sandel's legendary course 'Justice' was the first Harvard course to be made freely available online and on television and has been viewed by tens of millions of people. His BBC series *The Global Philosopher* explores the philosophical ideas lying behind the headlines with participants from around the world.

Sandel has been a visiting professor at the Sorbonne, delivered the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Oxford and the Reith Lectures for the BBC, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His lecture tours have taken him across five continents and packed such venues as St Paul's Cathedral (London), the Sydney Opera House (Australia), and an outdoor stadium in Seoul (S. Korea), where 14,000 people came to hear him speak.

THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

What's Become of the Common Good?

MICHAEL J. SANDEL

PENGUIN BOOKS

CONTENTS

THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

PROLOGUE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020, the United States, like many other countries, was unprepared. Despite warnings the previous year from public health experts about the risk of a global viral contagion, and even as China contended with its outbreak in January, the United States lacked the ability to conduct the widespread testing that might have contained the disease. As the contagion spread, the wealthiest country in the world found itself unable to provide even the medical masks and other protective gear that health care providers needed to treat the flood of infected patients.

Beyond its lack of logistical preparedness, the country was not morally prepared for the pandemic. The years leading up to the crisis were a time of deep division—economically, culturally, politically. Decades of rising inequality and cultural resentment had brought an angry populist backlash in 2016, resulting in the election of Donald Trump. The partisan divide persisted as the crisis unfolded. Few Republicans (only 7 percent) trusted the news media to provide reliable information on coronavirus; few Democrats (4 percent) trusted the information Trump provided.[1]

Amid the partisan rancor and mistrust came a plague that demanded the kind of solidarity few societies can summon except in times of war.

People throughout the world were implored, and in many cases required, to observe social distancing, to abandon work, and to stay at home. Those unable to work remotely faced lost wages and disappearing jobs, or else jobs that required them to risk their health and lives by working in places where the virus was hard to avoid.

Morally, the pandemic reminded us of our vulnerability, of our mutual dependence: "We are all in this together." Public officials and advertisers reached instinctively for this slogan. But this upbeat mantra soon rang hollow. It did not describe a sense of community embodied in an ongoing practice of mutual obligation and shared sacrifice. The pandemic made this clear. COVID-19 bore down most heavily on people of color, who disproportionately held jobs that exposed workers to greatest risk. The Latino death rate was 22 percent higher than that of whites; among Black Americans, the COVID death rate was 40 percent higher than among white Americans.[2]

These grim tallies of death reflected pre-existing conditions of privilege and privation. The same market-driven globalization project that had left the United States without access to the domestic production of surgical masks and medications had deepened inequalities and deprived many working people of well-paying jobs and social esteem.

Meanwhile, those who reaped the economic bounty of global markets, supply chains, and capital flows had come to rely less and less on their fellow citizens, as producers or as consumers. Their economic prospects and identities were no longer dependent on local or national communities. As the winners of globalization pulled away from the losers, they practiced their own kind of social distancing.

The political divide that mattered, the winners explained, was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. In an open world, success depends on education, on equipping yourself to compete and win in a global economy. This means that national governments must ensure that everyone has an equal chance to get the education on which success depends. But it also means that those who land on top come to believe they deserve their success. And, if opportunities are truly equal, it means that those who are left behind deserve their fate as well.

This way of thinking about success makes it hard to believe that "we are all in this together." It invites credentialed elites to consider their success their own doing, and many working people to feel that those on top look down with disdain. It helps explain why those left behind by globalization would become angry and resentful, and why they would be drawn to authoritarian populists who rail against elites and promise to reassert national borders with a vengeance.

When Joe Biden won the Democratic nomination in 2020, he became the first Democratic nominee for president in thirty-six years without a degree from an Ivy League university. This may have helped him connect with the blue-collar workers his party has struggled to attract in recent years. But this novel aspect of his candidacy should prompt us to reflect on the credentialist prejudice we have come to take for granted in our public life. This prejudice not only constrains the choice of candidates for national office. It also shapes the way mainstream politicians across the political spectrum have responded to the inequality and wage stagnation of recent decades—by telling workers to get a college degree.

The bluntest critique of the credentialist impulse in contemporary politics was offered by Representative James Clyburn of South Carolina, the highest-ranking African American in Congress. Clyburn, whose endorsement of Biden in the South Carolina primary rescued Biden's struggling candidacy and set him on the road to the nomination, saw Biden as representing an alternative to the relentless credentialism that had alienated working people from the Democratic party. "Our problem," Clyburn said, "is too many candidates spend time trying to let people know how smart they are, rather than trying to connect with people." He thought Democrats had put too much emphasis on college education. What does it mean "when a candidate says, you need to be able to send your kids to college? Now how many times have you heard that? I hate to hear that . . . I don't need to hear that. Because we've got people who want to be electricians, they want to be plumbers, they want to be barbers."[3] Although he did not put it quite this way, Clyburn was pushing back against the meritocratic political project that had unwittingly disparaged working-class voters and opened the way to Trump.

Assuming office after a violent siege of the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters hoping to overturn the election result, Biden promised to bring the country together. It would not be easy. Trump had been defeated but not repudiated. Even after watching him bungle the pandemic, inflame racial tensions, and flout constitutional norms, 74 million Americans had voted for him. Some were traditional, well-off Republicans who liked his tax cuts. But many rural and working-class voters were drawn to his politics of grievance. His animus against political and cultural elites spoke to their resentment, their sense of humiliation. His policies did little to help them, but they felt he was on their side. To be sure, Trump's animus was entangled with racism, and white supremacists heeded his call. But his politics of grievance resonated for reasons beyond race. For decades, the divide between winners and losers had been deepening, poisoning our politics, pulling us apart.

As Biden took office, the country was polarized in ways that a restoration presidency would not heal. To dissipate the rancor, the mainstream parties, like their counterparts around the world, would need to rethink their mission and purpose. They would need to see how the market-driven, meritocratic ethic they championed had fueled resentment and prompted the backlash. Any hope of renewing our moral and civic life depends on understanding how, over the past four decades, our social bonds and respect for one another came unraveled. This book seeks to explain how this happened, and to consider how we might find our way to a politics of the common good.

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INTRODUCTION:
GETTING IN

In March 2019, as high school students awaited the results of their college applications, federal prosecutors made a stunning announcement. They charged thirty-three wealthy parents with engaging in an elaborate cheating scheme to get their children admitted to elite universities, including Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, and the University of Southern California.[1]

At the heart of the scam was an unscrupulous college-counseling consultant named William Singer, who ran a business that catered to anxious, affluent parents. Singer's company specialized in gaming the intensely competitive college admissions system that had in recent decades become the primary gateway to prosperity and prestige. For students lacking the stellar academic credentials top colleges required, Singer devised corrupt workarounds—paying proctors of standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT to boost students' scores by correcting their answer sheets, and bribing coaches to designate applicants as recruited athletes, even if the students did not play the sport. He even provided fake athletic credentials, photoshopping applicants' faces onto action photos of real athletes.

Singer's illicit admissions service did not come cheap. The chairman of a prestigious law firm paid $75,000 for his daughter to take a college entrance exam at a test center supervised by a proctor paid by Singer to

ensure the student received the score she needed. One family paid Singer $1.2 million to get their daughter admitted to Yale as a soccer recruit, despite the fact that she did not play soccer. Singer used $400,000 of the payment to bribe the obliging Yale soccer coach, who was also indicted. A television actress and her husband, a fashion designer, paid Singer $500,000 to get their two daughters admitted to USC as bogus recruits to the crew team. Another celebrity, the actress Felicity Huffman, known for her role in the television series *Desperate Housewives*, somehow got a bargain rate; for only $15,000, Singer put in the fix for her daughter's SAT.[2]

In all, Singer took in $25 million over eight years running his college admissions scam.

The admissions scandal provoked universal outrage. In a polarized time, when Americans could scarcely agree on anything, it drew massive coverage and condemnation across the political spectrum—on Fox News and MSNBC, in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. Everyone agreed that bribing and cheating to gain admission to elite colleges was reprehensible. But the outrage expressed something deeper than anger at privileged parents using illicit means to help their kids get into prestigious colleges. In ways that people struggled to articulate, it was an emblematic scandal, one that raised larger questions about who gets ahead, and why.

Inevitably, the expressions of outrage were politically inflected. Surrogates for President Trump took to Twitter and Fox News to taunt the Hollywood liberals ensnared in the scam. "Look at who these people are," Lara Trump, the president's daughter-in-law, said on Fox. "The Hollywood elites, the liberal elites who were always talking about equality for all, and everyone should get a fair shot, when here is the biggest hypocrisy of all: That they're writing checks to cheat and get their kids into these schools—when the spots really should've gone to kids that were actually deserving of them."[3]

For their part, liberals agreed that the scam deprived qualified kids of the places they deserved. But they saw the scandal as a blatant instance of a more pervasive injustice: the role of wealth and privilege in college admission, even where no illegality was involved. In announcing the indictment, the U.S. Attorney declared what he took to be the principle at stake:

"There can be no separate college admissions system for the wealthy."[4] But editorial and opinion writers were quick to point out that money routinely plays a role in admissions, most explicitly in the special consideration many American universities accord children of alumni and generous donors.

Responding to Trump supporters' attempts to blame liberal elites for the admissions scandal, liberals cited published reports that Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, had been admitted to Harvard despite a modest academic record after his father, a wealthy real estate developer, had donated $2.5 million to the university. Trump himself reportedly gave $1.5 million to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania around the time his children Donald Jr. and Ivanka attended the school.[5]

THE ETHICS OF ADMISSION

Singer, the mastermind of the admissions scam, acknowledged that a big gift sometimes gets marginally qualified applicants admitted through the "back door." But he pitched his own technique, which he called the "side door," as a cost-effective alternative. He told clients that the standard "back door" approach was "ten times as much money" as his cheating scheme, and less certain. A major gift to the college offered no guarantee of admission, while his "side door" of bribes and fake test scores did. "My families want a guarantee," he explained.[6]

Although money buys access in both "back door" and "side door" admissions, these modes of entry are not morally identical. For one thing, the back door is legal, while the side door is not. The U.S. Attorney made this clear: "We are not talking about donating a building so that a school is more likely to take your son or daughter. We are talking about deception and fraud, fake test scores, fake athletic credentials, fake photographs, bribed college officials."[7]

In prosecuting Singer, his clients, and the bribe-taking coaches, the feds were not telling colleges they could not sell seats in the freshman class; they were simply cracking down on a fraudulent scheme. Legality aside, the back door and the side door differ in this respect: When parents buy

their child's admission through a big donation, the money goes to the college, which can use it to improve the education it offers all students. With Singer's scheme, the money goes to third parties, and so does little or nothing to help the college itself. (At least one of the coaches Singer bribed, the sailing coach at Stanford, apparently used the bribe to support the sailing program. Others pocketed the money.)

From the standpoint of fairness, however, it is hard to distinguish between the "back door" and the "side door." Both give an edge to children of wealthy parents who are admitted instead of better-qualified applicants. Both allow money to override merit.

Admission based on merit defines entry through the "front door." As Singer put it, the front door "means you get in on your own." This mode of entry is what most people consider fair; applicants should be admitted based on their own merit, not their parents' money.

In practice, of course, it is not that simple. Money hovers over the front door as well as the back. Measures of merit are hard to disentangle from economic advantage. Standardized tests such as the SAT purport to measure merit on its own, so that students from modest backgrounds can demonstrate intellectual promise. In practice, however, SAT scores closely track family income. The richer a student's family, the higher the score he or she is likely to receive.[8]

Not only do wealthy parents enroll their children in SAT prep courses; they hire private admissions counselors to burnish their college applications, enroll them in dance and music lessons, and train them in elite sports such as fencing, squash, golf, tennis, crew, lacrosse, and sailing, the better to qualify for recruitment to college teams. These are among the costly means by which affluent, striving parents equip their progeny to compete for admission.

And then there is tuition. At all but the handful of colleges wealthy enough to admit students without regard for their ability to pay, those who do not need financial aid are more likely than their needy counterparts to get in.[9]

Given all this, it is not surprising that more than two-thirds of students at Ivy League schools come from the top 20 percent of the income scale; at

Princeton and Yale, more students come from the top 1 percent than from the entire bottom 60 percent of the country.[10] This staggering inequality of access is due partly to legacy admissions and donor appreciation (the back door), but also to advantages that propel children from well-off families through the front door.

Critics point to this inequality as evidence that higher education is not the meritocracy it claims to be. From this point of view, the college admissions scandal is an egregious instance of the broader, pervasive unfairness that prevents higher education from living up to the meritocratic principle it professes.

Despite their disagreements, those who consider the cheating scandal a shocking departure from standard admissions practices and those who consider it an extreme example of tendencies already prevalent in college admissions share a common premise: Students should be admitted to college based on their own abilities and talents, not based on factors beyond their control. They agree, in other words, that admission should be based on merit. They also agree, implicitly at least, that those who get in based on merit have earned their admission and therefore deserve the benefits that flow from it.

If this familiar view is right, then the problem with meritocracy is not with the principle but with our failure to live up to it. Political argument between conservatives and liberals bears this out. Our public debates are not about meritocracy itself but about how to achieve it. Conservatives argue, for example, that affirmative action policies that consider race and ethnicity as factors in admission amount to a betrayal of merit-based admission; liberals defend affirmative action as a way of remedying persisting unfairness and argue that a true meritocracy can be achieved only by leveling the playing field between the privileged and the disadvantaged.

But this debate overlooks the possibility that the problem with meritocracy runs deeper.

Consider again the admissions scandal. Most of the outrage focused on the cheating, and the unfairness of it. Equally troubling, however, are the attitudes that fueled the cheating. Lying in the background of the scandal

was the assumption, now so familiar that it is scarcely noticed, that admission to an elite university is a highly sought prize. The scandal was attention-grabbing not only because it implicated celebrities and private equity moguls but also because the access they tried to buy was so widely desired, the object of fevered striving.

Why is this so? Why has admission to prestigious universities become so fiercely sought that privileged parents commit fraud to get their kids in? Or, short of fraud, spend tens of thousands of dollars on private admissions consultants and test prep courses to boost their children's chances, turning their high school years into a stress-strewn gauntlet of AP classes, résumé building, and pressure-packed striving? Why has admission to elite colleges come to loom so large in our society that the FBI would devote massive law enforcement resources to ferreting out the scam, and that news of the scandal would command headlines and public attention for months, from the indictment to the sentencing of the perpetrators?

The admissions obsession has its origins in the growing inequality of recent decades. It reflects the fact that more is at stake in who gets in where. As the wealthiest 10 percent pulled away from the rest, the stakes of attending a prestigious college increased. Fifty years ago, applying to college was less fraught. Fewer than one in five Americans went to a four-year college, and those who did tended to enroll in places close to home. College rankings mattered less than they do today.[11]

But as inequality increased, and as the earnings gap between those with and those without a college degree widened, college mattered more. So did college choice. Today, students commonly seek out the most selective college that will admit them.[12] Parenting styles have also changed, especially among the professional classes. As the income gap grows, so does the fear of falling. Seeking to avert this danger, parents became intensely involved with their children's lives—managing their time, monitoring their grades, directing their activities, curating their college qualifications.[13]

This epidemic of overbearing, helicopter parenting did not come from nowhere. It is an anxious but understandable response to rising inequality and the desire of affluent parents to spare their progeny the precarity of

middle-class life. A degree from a name-brand university has come to be seen as the primary vehicle of upward mobility for those seeking to rise and the surest bulwark against downward mobility for those hoping to remain ensconced in the comfortable classes. This is the mentality that led panicky, privileged parents to sign up for the college admissions scam.

But economic anxiety is not the whole story. More than a hedge against downward mobility, Singer's clients were buying something else, something less tangible but more valuable. In securing a place for their kids in prestigious universities, they were buying the borrowed luster of merit.

BIDDING FOR MERIT

In an unequal society, those who land on top want to believe their success is morally justified. In a meritocratic society, this means the winners must believe they have earned their success through their own talent and hard work.

Paradoxically, this is the gift the cheating parents wanted to give their kids. If all they really cared about was enabling their children to live in affluence, they could have given them trust funds. But they wanted something else—the meritocratic cachet that admission to elite colleges confers.

Singer understood this when he explained that the front door means "you get in on your own." His cheating scheme was the next best thing. Of course, being admitted on the basis of a rigged SAT or phony athletic credentials is not making it on your own. This is why most of the parents hid their machinations from their kids. Admission through the side door carries the same meritocratic honor as admission through the front door only if the illicit mode of entry is concealed. No one takes pride in announcing, "I've been admitted to Stanford because my parents bribed the sailing coach."

The contrast with admission based on merit seems obvious. Those admitted with sparkling, legitimate credentials take pride in their achievement, and consider that they got in on their own. But this is, in a way, misleading. While it is true that their admission reflects dedication and hard