

David Brat, the anti-experts' expert

By [Randall Stephens](#)

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Last week college economics professor [David Brat](#) trounced House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the Republican primary for Virginia's seventh congressional district. Prognosticators thought that Brat, a favorite of Tea Party supporters, was a long shot. How could he win? Hadn't the Tea Party [been on the wane](#)? Now, *Washington Post* columnist [Eugene Robinson warns](#), the Tea Party "should no longer be thought of as just a faction of the GOP. It's calling the shots."

What is clear is that Tea Party voters turn out in droves and care passionately about politics. Many of those Teapublicans are also fervent Christians of the evangelical stripe. As Pew [reported several years ago](#) they are "much more likely than registered voters as a whole to say that their religion is the most important factor in determining their opinions on these social issues. And they draw disproportionate support from the ranks of white evangelical Protestants."

Many of these political purists thumb their noses at what passes for mainstream knowledge in science, history, psychology, economics, and more. I'm reminded of [Don McLeroy](#), a dentist and chair of the Texas State Board of Education, who helped revamp public school standards along conservative, anti-intellectual lines. "I disagree with these experts," he proclaimed at a 2009 meeting of the board. "Somebody has got to stand up to experts that are just . . . " He dropped off, exasperated that so many Americans were being duped by nonsense masquerading as science.

Apparently millions of Americans still agree that "these experts" need standing up to. According to the latest [Gallup Poll](#) 42 percent of Americans believe that "God created humans in present form." A similar percentage, 40 percent, say that global warming is not [caused by human activities](#). When it comes to Americans' long [list of concerns](#), shrinking ice caps matter little when compared to joblessness and the economy. Enter Brat, the rising far-right Christian economic authority.

Brat sees capitalism and conservative Christianity as closely connected in ways that would surprise economic historians as well as the [current pope](#). Along with a doctorate, [Brat holds a master of divinity degree](#) from Princeton Theological Seminary. According to Brat, Calvinism linked to capitalism was responsible for much of the progress of the 19th-century West. Ignoring slavery, slums, and industrial servitude, it seems odd to rhapsodize about the moral economy of a system that was contested even by contemporary Christians. But Brat appears unconcerned about the complexities. In an unpublished book written for students, he takes on his field, which he thinks is far too utilitarian, engaging in moral arguments wrapped in what he considers scientific analysis. In Brat's telling, Enlightenment theorist Adam Smith was heavily indebted to Christian moral philosophy. *New York* magazine's [Kevin Roose writes](#) of Brat's newfound popularity with the Christian right that "when a professor comes along who has both impressive secular credentials and a strident religious worldview, they're immediately moved to the front lines of the culture war." The wisdom of such experts rings true for the faithful.

Why is faith-based anti-intellectualism as stubborn as crabgrass, cropping up across the country year after year? That's a question that Karl Giberson and I asked in our 2011 book [The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age](#). In trying to answer that question we looked at the insular culture of evangelicalism (with its bookstores, universities, experts, and parachurch groups), media empires of televangelists and educators, and the straitjacket of biblical literalism. If we were working on this project today we might place more stress on the [increasingly polarized](#) U.S. political context. If the majority of Democrats believe that [global warming is caused by human activity](#), then surely it is not. If secularists on the other side of the political divide champion the teaching of evolution in high school biology classes, then their efforts should be resisted. Put differently, David Brat's economics lessons are on the (Christian) right side of history.

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