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## Trump, Sanders and the Populist Anti-Policy Surge

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If there's one thing that unites the populist campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, it's a desire to put the "public" back into "public policy." Many Americans apparently feel that policy is something done to them, rather than with them. They disdain the unknown "experts" in distant Washington, D.C., who devise everything from trade deals to overtime rules.

As the dean of a graduate school in public policy, I've been thinking: Are programs like mine partly responsible for this state of affairs? How should graduates in the Class of 2016 react as they enter a world increasingly skeptical of their expertise?

It's true that government has often failed to engage citizens. During a recent conference on land use at Pepperdine, the planning director of a large California city explained it this way: "The problem is that we always put people up in front of the public who are the least prepared to be there."

Her staff were experts in the technical aspects of their work -- from limits on building heights to requirements for setbacks. But she recognized that when her planners met with citizens, who often had different priorities, they were incapable of facilitating productive dialogue. The public simply concluded that the government couldn't -- or wouldn't -- "listen."

Graduate programs in public policy and public administration have wrestled with this for years. The discipline sends into the field alumni who may be very good at formulating something called "policy," but not so good at understanding the public's role in its creation. "Large segments of mainstream public administration scholarship," Robert F. Durant and Susannah Bruns Ali wrote three years ago in *Public Administration Review*, "privilege bureaucratic expertise and marginalize the deliberative role of unorganized interests and citizens in agency deliberations."

The general tendencies of these academic programs toward quantitative knowledge and standardized solutions has created what we see today: from local planners who don't listen, to White House advisers who believe that ObamaCare passed because of the "stupidity of the American voter."

At Pepperdine, we host a training series titled "Public Engagement: The Vital Leadership Skill." More than 1,000 public officials have taken part, learning the basics of facilitating input from citizens. We developed the program about five years ago after realizing that many midcareer public leaders never learned these skills in college and graduate school.

Are this generation's successors being taught them? The retirement of the baby boomers will effect one of the greatest changes in public leadership in American history. Now is the time to update these programs to ensure that generational change becomes cultural change.

First, we should teach students to think of the public not as a faceless mass, but as actual, individual human beings. "Modern public administration," the great sociologist Robert Nisbet wrote, "has been generally dominated by the nineteenth-century rationalist's conception of society as a vast aggregate of unconnected political particles." That was in 1953.

Public-policy programs should integrate essential quantitative coursework into a liberal-arts approach. Students should read what the Great Books say about the role of a citizen in a democracy, while studying what the latest social-psychology research shows about the myriad biases people bring to "fact based" decision-making. These will help them see that the policy they develop for Rome, Ga., may not work in Rome, N.Y., (or Rome, Italy, for that matter) and that some government services might be better provided by a local nonprofit or through collaboration with the private sector.

Second, schools must teach a set of skills -- how to facilitate public meetings or publicize them to increase participation. The "public comment" process by which local boards and councils usually involve citizens does not succeed at informing either the public or policy makers. In 2013 Pepperdine, working with the League of California Cities, surveyed over 900 public officials. Seventy-six percent said that their public meetings were "typically dominated by people with narrow agendas."

It's the same phenomenon that played out in the conflagrations known as town halls when ObamaCare was being passed. Citizens came out in force against the bill, but Congress passed it anyway. Some argue that these failed public meetings led to the creation of America's last populist movement: the tea party.

Finally, students of public policy should be taught about the role of technology in mediating the relationship between the citizen and his government. A couple of months ago, my hometown of Santa Monica invited me via [Facebook](#) to complete an online survey regarding a downtown building project. Tomorrow's public leaders must be prepared to involve and inform residents in ways the private sector has employed for decades -- engaging them on social media, or posting budget data online to increase transparency.

In the months ahead, thousands of future leaders will be awarded degrees in public policy. Meanwhile, graduate schools should ponder the role they play in American democracy -- and how they can respond to the populist moment that is upending politics (and policy) as usual.

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