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# The Starting Line: Examining Inequality in United States

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## Abstract

A quote from Irving Kristol states: “Democracy does not guarantee equality of conditions - only equality of opportunity.” If Kristol’s quote holds true, do all American citizens have an equal chance of succeeding? This is the question that my project attempts to answer. In studying political science and following current events, I found myself drawn toward the issue of equality in the United States. The idea for my project was sparked by my encounters with research regarding inequality in our nation. I first became aware of the issue after reading Jonathan Kozol’s, *Savage Inequalities*, in which the extreme differences in public education were addressed. The item was again brought to my attention in my American Politics course, where I read that the likelihood of citizens to participate in politics was affected by socioeconomic status. Again, the issue was highlighted by the Occupy Wall Street movement, which protests the extreme wealth gap between the 99 percent of Americans and the wealthy 1 percent that controls a third of the nation’s wealth. The issue I wish to cover in my project is not new, but it is certainly ripe for discussion, especially with the state of our economy.

The main goal of this multi-faceted project is to put a spotlight on the “American Dream.” While many studies and articles focus on the growing wealth gap, it is also pertinent to examine the ability for low-income citizens to climb the socioeconomic ladder. If all the wealth is concentrated at the top, can the average citizen still pull himself/herself up by his/her “bootstraps?” If a citizen of this democratic country is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, one must be given the chance to capitalize on individual abilities. In the United States, this generally requires a sound education, access to post-secondary education, financial support, and a voice in the political system. Utilizing journals, newspaper and magazine articles, government reports, and other informational hubs (e.g. Pew Research Center), I attempt to determine the life span of the American Dream through a series of academic publications. Each publication focuses on one aspect of equality, e.g. socioeconomic status, quality of education, access to political participation, etc. I demonstrate that equality can be thought of in more than just monetary terms.

In exploring the feasibility of the American Dream, I first establish that socioeconomic inequality is prevalent in the United States. The income gap between the highest and lowest economic quartiles has increased substantially in the past decade. Next, I examine the disparity in levels of education across socioeconomic classes among primary and secondary educational institutions. Then, I look at access to political participation and its connection to education, socioeconomic status, etc. I will continue to add additional topics as they are completed. Each installment will be included on the project’s website, which includes an informational section on the Starting Line and adds a multimedia dimension.

Although the Starting Line is a living project, it appears that for the majority of Americans, social mobility is continually declining. Although I find that inequality in the United States is pervasive, I hope that any reader/viewer will draw his/her own conclusions on the matter by expanding upon my research and drawing upon personal experience.

Links: [http://prezi.com/tnrjn6-3hplu/present/?auth\\_key=h77dpny&follow=zoam-j1e4h-j,thestartingline.org](http://prezi.com/tnrjn6-3hplu/present/?auth_key=h77dpny&follow=zoam-j1e4h-j,thestartingline.org)

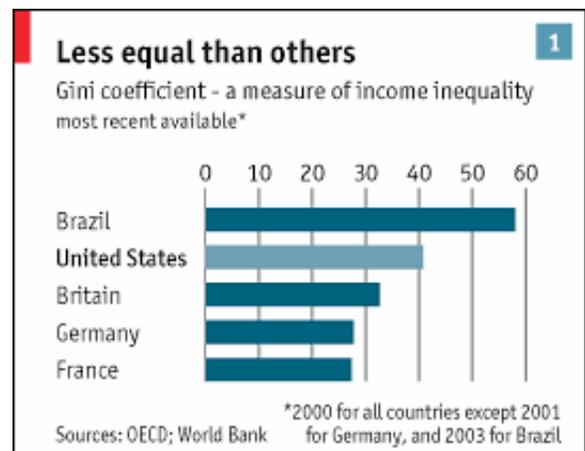
## Inequality in America

Inequality exists. It exists in America. It exists globally. The American Dream tells us that anyone in the United States can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and move to the top of the social ladder. However, in the wake of the great recession the interrogation light is shining down on the American Dream. “Do you deceive the American people?” asks one journalist. “How much inequality is too much?” asks another. So I ask, “Are you still possible?” How pervasive is inequality? And, is it acceptable at its current level? The 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement is the embodiment of the questions I ask above. Protestors object the American Dream as a solution to income inequality. The questions answered in this paper are: (1) How unequal is the United States? (2) How has inequality grown? (3) What are the possible causes of increasing inequality and (4) Who is affected most?

### Global Perspective

In a comparative study that included 10 countries globally, the United States had the highest level of inequality. The other countries were, The United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Germany, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Switzerland, respectively (Kelly, 2009, p. 8). In a 2006 study examining Brandolini and Smeeding examine the size of the gap between the poorest and richest individuals across nations The United States is “an outlier among rich nations” since only Mexico and Russia have higher levels of inequality (Brandolini & Smeeding, 2006, p. 23). Among developed democracies, Americans have the highest level of inequality; the income of a rich American is give and a half times that of a poor American. In other countries the average rich person has four times the income of an average poor person (Brandolini & Smeeding, 2006, p. 23). Additionally, a poor American in 2000 had an income that was only 39% of median income, but a rich American had an income that was 210% of the median. In other developed nations, low-income persons average an income that was 50% of the median, while the rich averaged an income that was 194% of the median (Brandolini & Smeeding, 2006, p. 23). It was also noted that the United States has the most persistent movement toward inequality than any other nation (p. 24).

There are many reasons why the United States is more unequal than other developed nations. One article suggests that while Europeans worry about the way “the economic pie is divided” Americans are more focused on joining the rich (The Economist, 2006). Rather than worry about the large chunks of wealth disappearing into fewer and fewer pockets, Americans are distracted by the musings of how to join the top tier. It is central to the American Dream that citizens believe that you can start poor and end rich; therefore, policy has focused on economic growth rather than redistribution of income (The Economist, 2006).

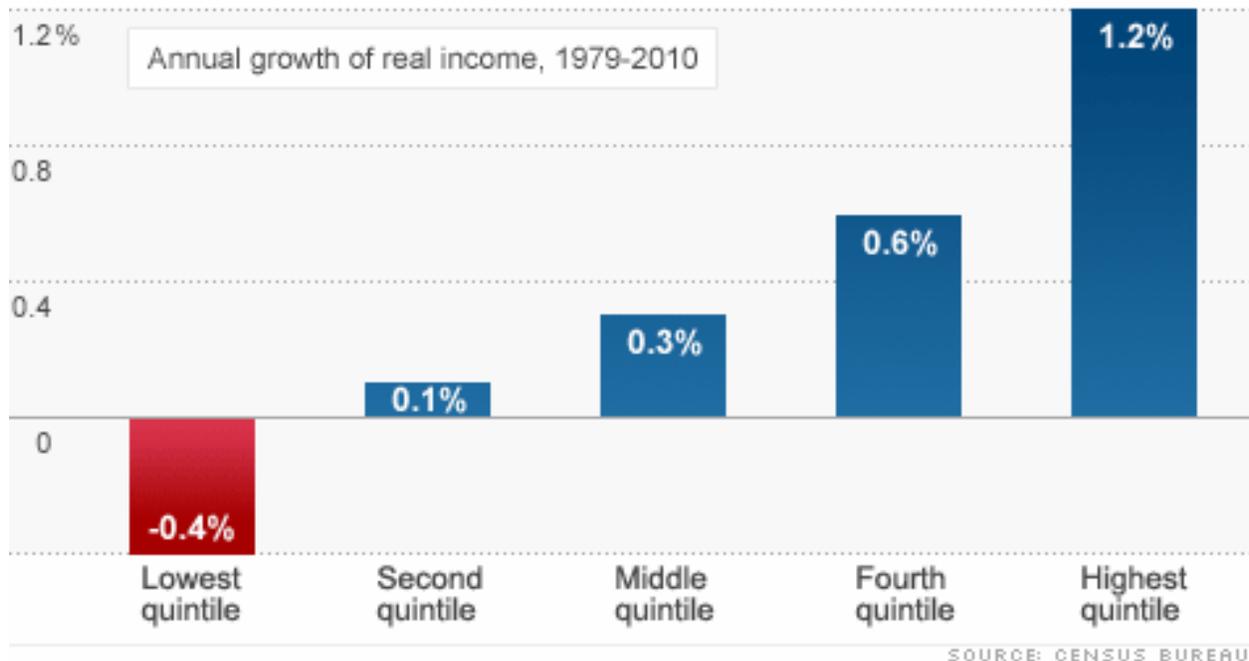


Graph from: *The Economist*. (2006, June 15). The rich, the poor and the growing gap between them.

## The Gap Grows

Rousseau argued that citizens were tricked into the social contract. No one would logically agree to enter a state in which inequality was legitimized (Rosenblatt, 2011, p. 10). Whether or not citizens were “tricked” into entering the social contract, we now live under a government and share a nation with millions of people. One thing is certain; inequality has been consistently rising over the past decades. In 1969, Richard Nixon inherited an economy in which American incomes were more equal than ever before (Kelly, 2009, p. 2). In 1928 the richest 1 percent of Americans received 23.9 percent of the nation's total income (Reich, 2010). After the Great Depression, equality increased over the next several decades, the share going to the richest 1% steadily declined and every four-year period brought new levels of equality to America (Reich, 2010). The industrial era, collective bargaining, and labor demands of war helped shape a moderate economy in which the difference between poor and rich was smaller than today (Kelly, 2009, p. 9). Reich (2010) notes that “New Deal reforms, followed by World War II, the GI Bill and the Great Society expanded the circle of prosperity.” Near the end of the 1970s the top 1% earned 8 to 9 percent of the nation’s income (Reich, 2010). However, since then America has trended toward increased inequality. By 2007 the richest 1% earned 23.5 percent of the nation’s wealth, close to their 1928 number (Reich, 2010). Between 1979 and 2007, the after-tax income of the wealthy climbed 278%. The middle class after-tax income increased only 35% (Luhby, 2012, January 12). While equality increased after the Great Depression, the Great Recession has led to a continued increase in inequality. Reich (2010) contends that the economic crashes of 1929 and 2008 were not mutually exclusive. Both crashes came after the richest 1% received more than 23% of the nation’s total income.

### THE RICH ARE GETTING RICHER



From Luhby (2012, January 12). Democrats step up income inequality battle. *CNN Money*.

# theStartingLine

Recently, a Pew Research Center report cited a 19 percentage increase in those who believe there are strong conflicts between rich and poor in the United States; close to two-thirds of the public (Luhby, 2012, January 12). As the rich absorb increasing amounts of money available in the United States, there is less for the rest of the nation. For example, Corporate Chief Executives (CEOs) have increased their compensation markedly since the 1970s. In the 1970s, CEOs earned 30 times as much as the average worker. At the start of the century, CEOs earned 116 times that of the average worker. Near the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, CEOs earned 300 times that of the average worker (Berner, 2007). Furthermore, close to 1.8 million Americans have a net worth of at least \$2 million, a 12.1% increase over 2001 (Sahadi, 2012).

Now, one author has deemed the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a step back for the American middle class. A census report from 2011 revealed that the poverty rate reached a 17-year high; 46.2 million people (15.1% of the population) live in poverty (Censky, 2011). An even larger number, 49.9 million, live without health insurance (Censky, 2011). Additionally, although the Great Recession forced the entire country to take a step backward some citizens were forced farther back than others. Census data shows that the lowest 60% of American lost wealth, while the richest 40% gained wealth (Censky, 2011). Indeed, the median household income in the United States fell from \$53,164 in 2000 to \$49,445 in 2010. While prices rise, middle-class Americans have less purchasing power than before. As a result, the lives of lower-income Americans are being affected. Fourteen percent of young Americans ages 25-34 still live with their parents, compared to 11.8% prior to the recession (Censky, 2011).

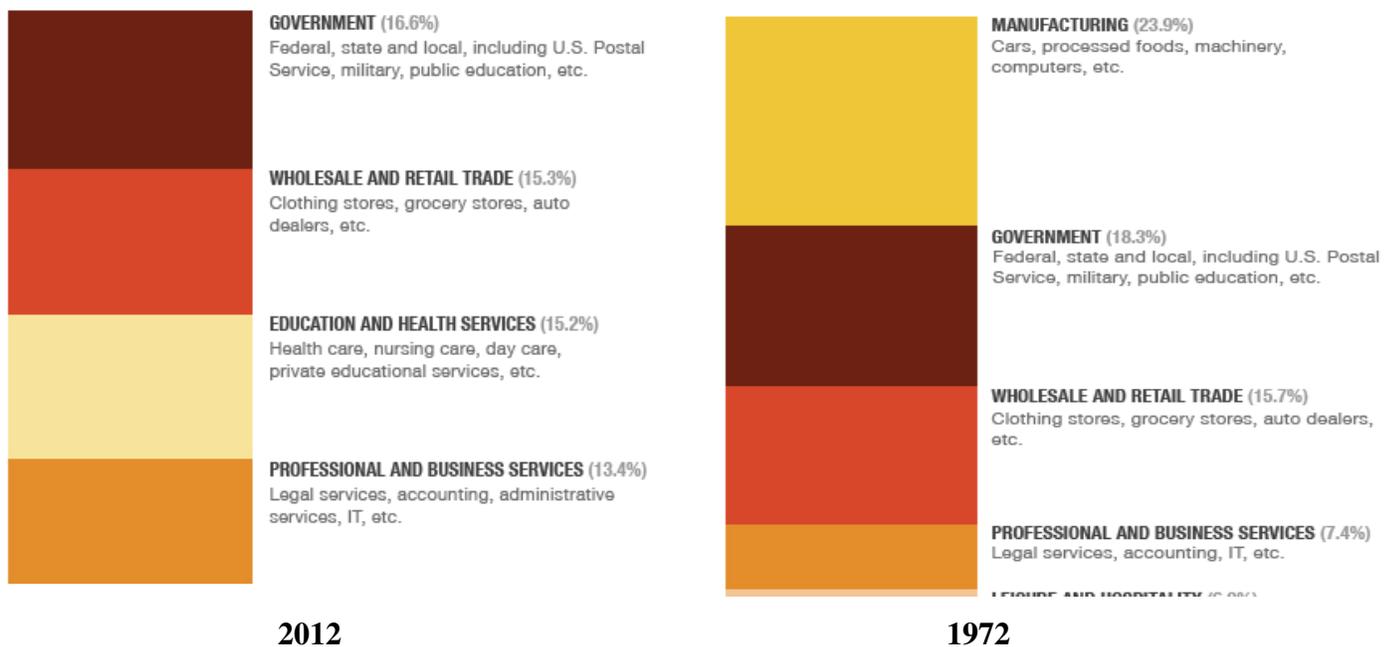


(Middle-class income fell 7% in the last decade, adjusted for inflation.)  
From Censky (2011, October 14). A rough 10 years for the middle class. *CNN Money*.

## Causes

Technological changes have often been cited as one cause for the increase in inequality. New technology has made past jobs obsolete while increasing opportunities to gain vast wealth in other areas such as finance (Ydstie, 2007). Reich (2010) notes that the problems began in the 1970s when new technologies like air cargo, container ships, and satellite communication made outsourcing cheaper than the alternative. Some technologies took over jobs altogether, e.g. automated machinery, computers, ATMs, etc. Through the 1980s and beyond, technology increased the demand for skilled workers and free trade exacerbated the issue (The Economist, 2006). Additionally, as pay dropped for most workers, “skilled” workers graduating from college and heading to Wall Street saw soaring wages (Reich, 2010).

The United States no longer needed to produce goods since it could easily obtain them from other countries. Rather, jobs shifted toward services. In 2012, government, wholesale and retail trade, education and health services, and professional and business services constituted 60% of jobs in the United States (Goldstein & Thuy Vo, 2012). In 1972, manufacturing constituted 23.9% of jobs alone, with government, wholesale and retail trade, and professional and business services rounding out the top 65% (Goldstein & Thuy Vo, 2012).



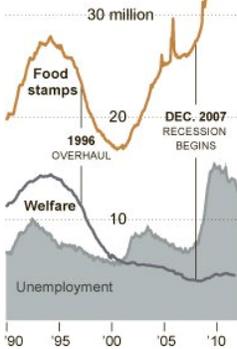
From Goldstein & Thuy Vo (2012, March 21). What America does for a living. *NPR*. Data from Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Other cited causes are declines in real wages and the marriage rate. In 1996, the top 1% of taxpayers gained 34.4% of their income from wages; however, in 2006 wages account for only 25% of the same group’s income. Income from capital gains and dividends, however, grew to total 38.2% of income for the top 1% (Luhby, 2012, January 4). The other cited cause is the formation of families at both ends of the income spectrum. While the marriage rate has declined, high-income women are also marrying high-income men. So the decline in the marriage rate may result in fewer marriages and more single-parent households struggling to survive, while high-power marriages combine large amounts of income in some households (Arnold, 2007). The

change in the behavior and make-up of married couples over the past two to three decades has increased income inequality over time. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wives of high-earning husbands are also more likely to work than wives of low-earning husbands of the 35% of married men with a college education, 68% of those had college-educated wives (Blank, 2003, p. 79-80). In 1979, wives of high-income husbands were less likely to work, and of the 22% of married men with a college education 44% of those were married to college-educated wives (Blank, 2003, p. 80). Thus, married couples have shifted to high earning, double-income households over time. Indeed, data suggests that married couples have become better off over time than their single-family counterparts. Persons in married-couple family units saw an increase in median per person income of almost \$12,000 between 1979 and 2007, from \$32,300 to \$44,200 (Blank, 2003, p. 81, 84). While inequality has increased due to a number of causes, government and citizens have failed to respond to the issue (Reich, 2010).

### Fewer Receiving Welfare, But Food Stamps Soaring

The number of Americans receiving cash welfare has fallen since the 1990s, while the number receiving food stamps has risen sharply.



Sources: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (welfare); U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (food stamps); Bureau of Labor Statistics

THE NEW YORK TIMES

### Effects:

As mentioned previously, the Great Recession has disproportionately affected the middle class. Additionally some racial groups, and genders have felt the recession more acutely than others.

Aid to the poor has also decreased. After Clinton's welfare reform in 1996, cash benefit welfare rolls are down 70 percent; yet, 18 million Americans have had to apply for food stamps since the Great Recession began (NPR Staff, 2012). Those who can't qualify for welfare are turning to food stamps, and of the nation's 46.2 million living in poverty 6 million of those rely on food stamps as their sole source of income (NPR Staff, 2012). The amount of aid from states has only decreased during the recession. Eleven states have cut their welfare rolls by at least 10 percent; Arizona cut benefits by 20 percent and shorted time limits from five years to two years (DeParle, 2012).

From DeParle (2012, April 7). Welfare limits left poor adrift as recession hit. *New York Times*.

### Conclusion

Inequality in America has steadily increased over the past few decades and the Great Recession has hit the lower classes much harder than the upper classes. While this examination demonstrates the economic disparities in the United States, it is the aim of the Starting Line project to explore other facets of inequality in the nation. Yes, economic inequality exists in America. Yes, it disproportionately affects the middle and lower classes. Further modules will examine the quality of education, access to political participation, and more among socioeconomic classes in the United States.

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## Education

In the United States, public education is provided to students from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Although federal and state regulations set requirements for standardized education testing and curriculum, it does not follow that all children in America receive an equal education and school experience. Family background, pre-school, conditions of schools, budgets, and other factors unevenly affect some groups of students more than others. Those who start with disadvantages should receive increased attention in the public school system in order to have a truly equal educational experience; however, this is far from reality. In truth, disadvantaged students will fall farther behind without increased economic, social, and educational support. Students lucky enough to enroll in an institution of higher learning are also more limited in their options since they are constrained by lack of support in many areas.

## Pre-primary Education

In the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, children from different income levels had their cognitive skills periodically assessed. Nine-month-olds in poverty had lower proficiency levels and only 29% of 2-year-olds in poverty demonstrated proficiency in listening comprehension, compared to 39 percent of those above poverty (NCES, 2009). At 4-years-old, children in poverty were still disadvantaged. Twenty percent of 4-year-olds in poverty were proficient in letter recognition, compared with 37% of peers above poverty. Additionally, 45% of 4-year-olds in poverty were proficient in numbers and shapes, compared with 72% for their peers above poverty (NCES, 2009). One has to ask, why is there a gap between the skills of children in poverty and all others?

Low-income students tend to start elementary school with fewer skills and abilities than their higher-income peers. Studies have shown that children's academic skills are affected by the socioeconomic status and education level of the adults in their household. Children from economically disadvantaged families start school with fewer academic skills and cognitive and academic disadvantages that go beyond kindergarten (Stipek & Ryan, 1997). Additionally, children whose parents receive welfare have vocabularies half the size of their peers (Hart & Risley, 1995). The reasons for the gap in cognitive skills are numerous. Low-income families cannot afford to invest in educational materials or programs to teach their young children in the same manner that higher-income families can (Dearing & Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, parents under economic pressure may be less able to devote time to teaching their children and encounter more barriers to demonstrating consistent educational support (Dearing, Taylor, & McCartney, 2004). Thus, children in poverty are not provided the same pre-primary experience as their peers; a fact that is further exacerbated by differences in pre-school attendance.

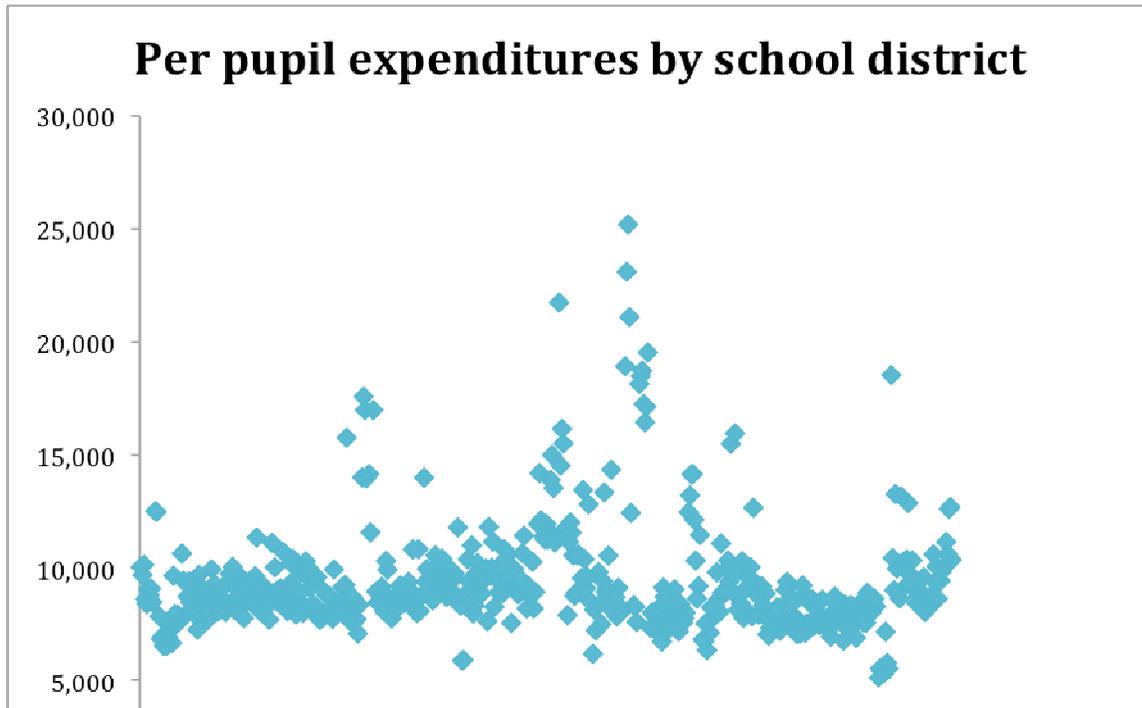
In addition to lacking cognitive skills upon entering school, children from disadvantaged families attend preschool in lower numbers. This is significant since preschool attendance has been shown to increase and enhance children's early school readiness (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2009). In 2001, 66 percent of all 4-year-olds attended preschool, a 43 percent increase from 30 years prior (NCES, 2003). Children may spend 1 to 3 years in preschool programs; in 2009, 63 percent of 3 to 5-year-olds were enrolled in a preprimary program. Even as total enrollment in preschool/preprimary programs has increased, children attend the programs for unequal amounts of time, i.e. part-time or full-time programs. 61 percent of the children enrolled in a preprimary program were in a full-day program, compared with 53 percent in 2000 (NCES, 2011).

Again, children from low-income, low-education households are less likely to attend preschool and gain valuable skills. Children whose mothers are college educated were twice as likely to attend preschool than those whose mothers lacked a high school diploma (NCES, 2003). One federal solution to providing an early education opportunity for disadvantaged children is Head Start, which began in 1965 (Manguson et al., 2004). Manguson et al. (2004) suggest that policies to promote preschool attendance for children from disadvantaged families can be especially beneficial, given the fact that the children are less likely to have a home environment that facilitates learning. Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor (2009) also find that higher quality early childcare can contribute to increasing early school readiness skills in low-income children.

## Primary and Secondary Education

As shown previously, students of lower socioeconomic status start school with an academic disadvantage. In following the logic of the American Dream, it is assumed that if a student perseveres, he/she can overcome all or any obstacles. However, lower socioeconomic students face an increasing number of obstacles, including the quality of the schools they attend. Jonathan Kozol writes extensively on the extreme differences in the public schools of America. Kozol (1991, p. 207) notes that “Americans abhor the notion of a social order in which economic privilege and political power are determined by hereditary class...By this standard, education offered to poor children should be at least as good as that which is provided to the children of the upper-middle class.” However, this is not reality. The funding system for public education is off-kilter. The “foundation program” of the early 1920s is still in use in many states today and was originally designed remedy disparities between per pupil expenditures. A local property tax raises initial funds for local public schools, and schools in less affluent districts are taxed at the same rate as those in affluent areas (Kozol, 1991, p. 208). However, because property is worth less in the poor neighborhoods schools in these areas have less money to educate students with. The state is bound to provide the extra funds for the poor districts to match the funding in the most affluent districts, i.e. “the foundation” (Kozol, 1991, p. 208). However, “the foundation” is often set at a lower rate than that of the richest district; it is set at a level to enable poorer districts to provide a minimum education. Kozol (1991, p. 209) says it best, “The notion of a ‘minimum’ foundation represents a very special definition of the idea of equality...it guarantees that every child has a building called ‘a school’ but not that what is found within one school will bear much similarity, if any, to that which is found within another.”

In examining equality of public schools, it is pertinent to note how expenditures per pupil vary among higher and lower socioeconomic areas. Indeed, one of the poorest American cities, Brownsville, TX, with a poverty rate of 36.3 percent, has a per pupil expenditure of \$8,659; for those ages 5-17, the poverty rate is 45.2 percent (Kurtzleben, 2011; NCES, 2010). On the flipside, Arlington, VA, one of the richest American cities has a poverty rate of 8.4 percent and spends \$18,539 per pupil; for those ages 5-17, the poverty rate is 8.1 percent (Kurtzleben, 2011; NCES, 2010).

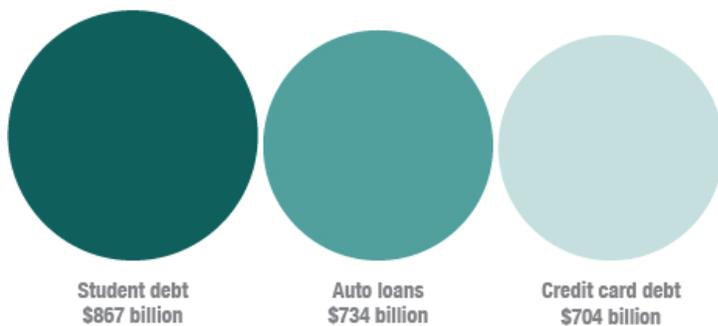


From National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). Digest of education statistics.

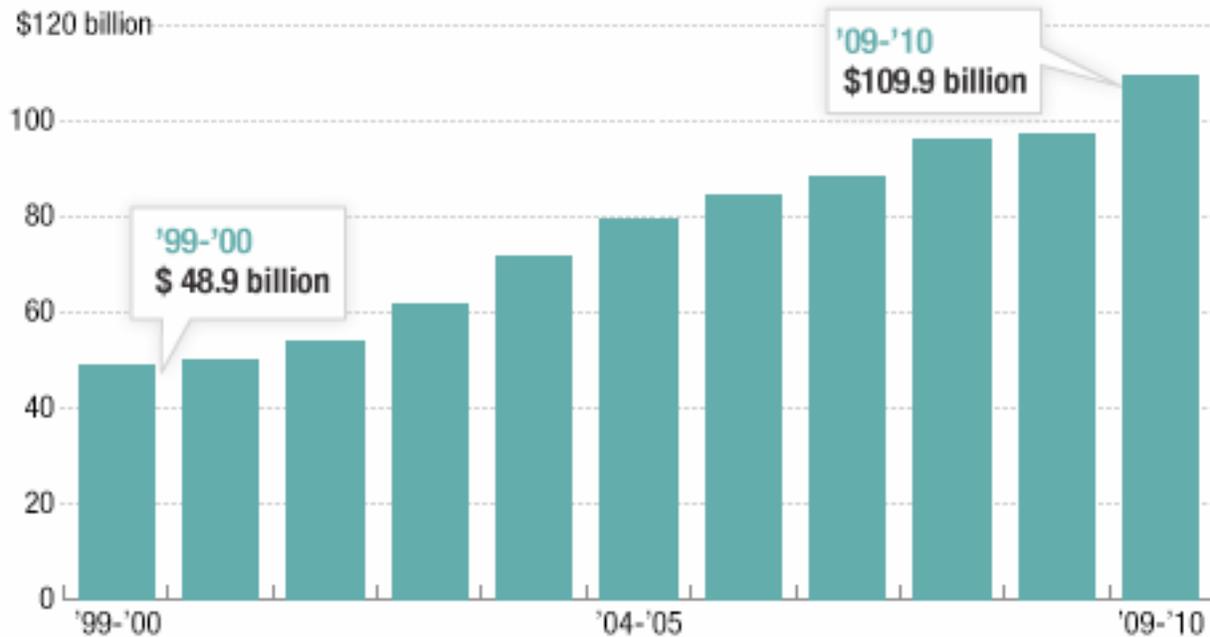
Aside from basic per pupil expenditures schools in more affluent areas also benefit from additional donations and financial support from parents, usually via tax-exempt foundations (Kozol, 1991, p. 221). Wealthier families also have the option to send their children to private school since they are more able to afford the tuition (Kozol, 1991, p. 222). For example, in 2007, 3.7 percent of K-12 students below the poverty level attended private schools, compared to 20.9 percent of student at or above the poverty level (NCES, 2011b). Lack of resources may also drive students from low-income families to leave school altogether. In 2009, 15.9 percent of high school dropouts ages 16 to 24 came from the lowest quartile of family income (NCES, 2011c). Indeed, at the end of 2001 high school students from low-income families dropped out of schools at six times the rate of their high-income peers (NCES, 2003).

## Postsecondary Education

“Since World War II, owning a house and getting a college degree was the American Dream, a sign that you had truly made it. In 2009, more than 70 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college — nearly twice as many as in 1960.” (NPR, 2011). While it seems encouraging that so many high school students are entering college, Americans now owe more on student loans than on credit cards. \$163 billion more is owed in student debt than in credit card debt. The rise in student debt has been steep over the past decade. Indeed, the amount of



student debt taken on every year rose to \$109.9 billion for school year 2009-2010. More than double the amount at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, \$48.9 billion. *From Thuy Vo (2012, April 23). What America owes in student loans. NPR. Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York*



*From Thuy Vo (2012, April 23). What America owes in student loans. NPR. Source: College Board*

The increasing amount of debt is credited to an increase in college attendance, not an increase in per person debt. The average debt for college graduates who graduate from a public university with a bachelor's degree hovers around \$50,000, up from \$42,800 ten years prior (Thuy Vo, 2012). For students graduating from private schools that number increases to \$73,200, up from \$56,800 ten years prior (Thuy Vo, 2012). Despite the steep difference between public and private universities, the data seems encouraging at first since per person debt has not risen as steeply at overall student debt; however, there is still reason to worry that inequality is perpetuated by the higher education system.

Although the average per person loan debt has stayed steady, it does not follow that students are receiving the same amount of bang for their buck. Like primary and secondary public schools, not all schools are created equal. The qualitative and quantitative range and quality of postsecondary education is broad and uneven. Mullen (2010, p. 4-5) points out that the United States' postsecondary education operates under a "steep prestige hierarchy." At the top are a few revered, selective, and deeply expensive colleges like Ivy League schools Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, etc. On the next tier are private, elite liberal arts colleges. Under those lie flagship public universities, then less known state and private institutions, and finally a large number of two-year community colleges with broad acceptance requirements. In today's job market, it is not simply enough to graduate with a college degree. Where the degree comes from matters. Graduates of top tier universities are more likely to graduate, obtain prestigious jobs and earn more money (Mullen, 2010).

Socioeconomic status of entering classes by institutional tiers (in percentages)				
Socioeconomic Quartiles	Tier One	Tier Two	Tier Three	Tier Four
Top	74	46	35	35
Upper middle	17	6	3	28
Lower middle	6	18	19	21
Bottom	3	7	10	16
Total	100	100	100	100

From Mullen (2010). Degrees of inequality. Source: Based on Carnevale and Rose (2004)

The data support the conclusion that postsecondary education is merely a mirror of socioeconomic class. Students from lower socioeconomic classes do not have an equal chance of attending a top tier university. Students are limited by their financial and social circumstances. Berg (2010, p. 16) says it best, “schools are social elevators going to different floors based on the political structure.” Low-income students can not realistically pursue the same higher education institutions as their more affluent peers since they are limited in resources and the schools they attend poorly prepare them to perform on standardized tests like the SAT. Additionally, high-income students in wealthier school districts have greater access to SAT preparation and valuable Advanced Placement courses that can earn high school students college credit (Berg, 2010). Additionally, low-income students tend to start their postsecondary career at community colleges, but also discontinue their studies at a higher rate than other students.

## Conclusion

The ways in which primary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions are set up only encourage the continuation of class segregation and inequality. Low socioeconomic students are less likely to perform well and attend prestigious higher education institutions. The data show that students are not equally prepared to start school, provided equal public education experiences, or equal resources to pursue college degrees. Additionally, college degrees are weighted in value by their origin; this creates yet another class hierarchy in which the degrees of high-income graduates are valued more than the degrees of low-income graduates.

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## Access to Political Participation

“It is important to remember that Americans accept economic inequalities only when they are sure that everyone has an equal chance to get ahead—to make the best of life for the individual and his or her family” (APSA, 2004, p. 4). One way in which Americans can attempt to change their life for the better is by participating in the political process. Federal and local policies affect the lives of citizens on a daily basis; thus, it is vital that the people have an opportunity to participate in the creation or alteration of the laws and ordinances that concern them. Democracy defines the United States as a nation. Every citizen, no matter race, gender, or income level has a fundamental right to participate in the democratic processes via voting, campaigning, donating, contacting a political officeholder, expressing personal opinions, and more. However, inequality exists within the political system just as it does in the economic system since some voices are much louder than others.

### Who Votes and Why

It is apparent that not all Americans fully exercise their rights to political participation. Voter turnout declined in the 1960s and has never fully rebounded, even though the Voting Rights Act of 1965 increased the amount of eligible voters (APSA, 2004, p. 6). The higher the income and education level of an American citizen, the greater the chance that he/she will be politically active; thus, there is a correlation between socioeconomic status (SES), income, education level and the probability of voting. College graduates vote more than high school graduates; white-collar workers vote more than blue-collar workers; and the rich vote more than the poor (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 13). Data consistently supports this conclusion. Only 38% of respondents with fewer than five years of school went to the polls, compared to 69% of those who stopped with a high school diploma, 86% of college grads, and 91% of those with at least a year of graduate school (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 17-18). Professional and technical workers voted at a rate of 86%, while blue-collar workers voted at 64% or lower (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 22). Furthermore, 9 out of 10 individuals from families with incomes over \$75,000 voted in presidential elections, but only 5 out of 10 individuals from families with incomes under \$15,000 voted (APSA, 2004, p. 6).

Theories as to why those with higher SES are more likely to participate in politics are numerous. Scott and Acock (1979) argue that low-income Americans vote less than higher-income citizens because they lack the necessary skills and motivation gained from higher education and occupational atmospheres. Low SES citizens in general have fewer political interests, and any periods of unemployment only decrease the chance that they will be politically active. It is important to note that any periods of unemployment for higher SES citizens does not have the same effect; their desire to vote or be politically involved is not affected (Scott & Acock, 1979, p. 377). Additionally, low-income citizens are more likely to become unemployed, which only exacerbates the participation gap between economic classes of society (Scott & Acock, 1979, p. 366).

Verba, Burns, and Scholzman (2003) add to the theory that citizens are unequal at the start of the “race.” They argue that differences in education, income, occupation that affect political participation are passed from parents to children. This only ensures that SES stratification remains the same or increases. Citizens who feel a political presence at home during their childhood are more politically active as adults (Verba, Burns, & Scholzman, 2003, p. 50). The likelihood of political presence in the household is determined by parents’ education attainment, which in turn is connected to household income level. However, there is reason to believe that education affects voter turnout more than income level or occupation. Educational experience increases the likelihood of voting at all income levels since it improves reading skills and

comprehension of abstract subjects like politics. Additionally, the more educated person is better able to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles to voting, more likely to follow politics in the media, and find more gratification from being politically active due to a stronger sense of civic duty (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, pp. 18-19, 24, 35-36).

While those with higher incomes vote in greater numbers, it is possible that this is due more in part to their levels of education. Income has a much smaller effect on participation than education does (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 25). Indeed, those with low SES and levels of education are more likely to be moved to political participation when exposed to education via formal schooling or occupation. Occupations that require employees to learn and practice the kinds of skills and norms experience in formal education are more influential on those with lower levels of education. College graduates and others are least likely to be politically affected by occupation (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 27). Although education, income, and occupation are interconnected, education is the greatest catalyst to voting. Income affects turnout up to a point, since the top SES tier is no more likely to vote than the middle one; additionally, skills learned on the job affect turnout more than status (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980, p. 34-35).

## Other Forms of Political Participation

Those with higher levels of income, education, and success are also more likely to have their voice heard in the political realm via nontraditional forms of political participation. High SES individuals are more likely to “make their needs and values known to government officials” (APSA, 2004, p. 5). For example, 56% of individuals with incomes of \$75,000 or higher reported making some form of campaign contribution, as opposed to 6 percent of individuals with incomes under \$15,000. In 2000, 95% of substantially contributing donors came from the 12% of households with incomes over \$100,000 (APSA, 2004, p. 7). Beyond voting, Americans can make their voice louder in Washington via campaign contributions, donations, protesting, contacting political officials, and supporting or being part of an interest or advocacy group. In every way, more affluent Americans are more involved in politics, “even protesting is more prevalent among the affluent” (APSA, 2004, p. 8).

## Political Attention

Not only are the more affluent more likely to seek out political involvement, they are more likely to be sought out by political entities. Both the Democrat and Republican parties spend the majority of their resources on courting affluent and politically involved citizens. Both parties are depend on campaign contributions to be successful, and compete “for just over half of a shrinking universe of voters; additionally, they ignore some parts of the electorate altogether (APSA, 2004, p. 10). Voters above some economic thresholds are generally targeted for party mobilization.

Party Mobilization for Political Activity: Who is Asked?		
Average family income of respondents: \$40,300	Republicans	Democrats
Party identifiers	\$45,400	\$36,900
Registered voters	\$48,000	\$38,500

Those asked to work for a campaign by fellow partisan	\$51,700	\$49,800
Those asked to contribute to a campaign by fellow partisan	\$56,700	\$54,700
Source: 1990 Citizen Participation Study. See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady, "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem," in <i>Civic Engagement in American Politics</i> , eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina (Washington D.C. and New York: Brookings Institution and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999) p. 452.		

From *APSA (2004)*. American democracy in an age of rising inequality.

Indeed, “government officials today hear more clearly and more often from privileged and highly active citizens” (*APSA*, 2004, p. 12). A *This American Life* episode provides eerie insight into the beast that is campaign fundraising. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois states that he believes most Americans would be shocked if they knew how much time a political officeholders spend raising money, talking about raising money, thinking about raising money, and planning to raise money (Glass, 2012). Nancy Pelosi attended almost 400 fundraisers in nearly 40 cities in 2011 alone, and officeholders spend hours in separate offices used for campaigning to call those with a “history of giving” (Glass, 2012). There are further tales of lobbyists dodging phone calls from officeholders who need them to host a fundraiser. At the fundraisers, congressional members sit at tables or events surrounded by lobbyists and others willing to pay to be there; consequently, each attendee has an opportunity to tell the congressperson their political beliefs, viewpoints, or opinions. Thus, it is easy to see how money talks in the political system. The more affluent are more likely to have their voice heard, while the voices of those from the lower income quartiles are heard in a whisper or not at all.

## Obstacles to voting

A myriad of laws also prevent lower-income demographics from voting. Congress passed the Help America Vote Act in 2002, which requires new voters to show identity upon registration; however, some states are still passing laws that they claim combat voter fraud. Such claims of voter fraud appear fraudulent themselves. A five-year investigation by the Justice Department led to zero prosecutions for impersonating an eligible voter. Even though 300 million votes were cast during the five-year period, only 86 people were convicted for voter fraud (Berman, 2011). In Wisconsin, a voter fraud investigation resulted in .0007% of voters being prosecuted (Berman, 2011). One Brennan Center report states that an individual is more likely to be struck by lightning than impersonate another voter at the polls (Berman, 2011).

Recent voting laws have only increased barriers to voting for low SES citizens and minority demographics. Organizations that usually run voter registration drives have been discouraged from doing so by new laws in several states. In Florida, a law passed in May 2011 significantly restricts the efforts of groups like Rock the Vote and League of Women Voters by requiring all new registration forms to be submitted within 48 hours; the law was passed as an emergency statute and took immediate effect (Berman, 2011). Such laws make it nearly impossible for organizations to conduct the large registration drives that lower voting costs for low-income citizens by bringing the forms and information to prospective voters.

Additionally, early voting windows are being cut short in states like Florida and Ohio. Although early voting used to have bipartisan support and even increased the number of voters in some states, Florida cut their early voting period by six days, and Ohio by 24 days (Berman, 2011). Furthermore, Ohio limited voting hours on weekends, and both states banned voting on the Sunday before the election (Berman, 2011). Cutting short early voting periods only decrease the number of opportunities for low-income citizens to vote since they are less likely to have free

time to vote during designated hours or have a convenient method of transportation to get to voting locations. Laws requiring a government-issued photo ID were passed in Indiana, Kansas, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin were passed (Berman, 2011). In Wisconsin the new ID requirements may disqualify 242,000 students who may not have an acceptable form of identification to needed vote, since student IDs are no longer accepted (Berman, 2011). In South Carolina, the new ID law means that 178,000 state residents must pay to acquire a passport or birth certificate in order to be given the free state voting ID; additionally, the DMV locations that distribute such IDs tend to be unaccommodating and time consuming (Berman, 2011).

It must be remembered that voting laws intended to prevent voter fraud affect low SES population much more than high SES populations. Low-income citizens have fewer opportunities and resources, this combination makes it more difficult for them to take time from work or family to register to vote, obtain any state-required voter identification, and travel to the polls.

## Conclusion

“Americans are much more comfortable with inequalities of result when it comes to economics than when it comes to politics. According the American Dream, so long as we are equal at the starting line, we expect and accept the inequalities of income and wealth that result from individual differences in talent and industry. In contrast, we expect not only that citizens possess equal rights on the level playing field of democracy but that public officials will respond equally to all” (Verba, Berns, & Scholzman, 2003, p. 45). Indeed, the foundations of the Constitution and the United States call for equality in democracy. However, citizens lower on the socioeconomic spectrum often face more obstacles to voting, less attention from their political representatives, and are less likely to vote. This combination contributes to political inequality in the United States.

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