

Income Inequality & Subaltern America: Thoughts for U.S. Election Day

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, OCT 27 2016

On Tuesday, November 8th, people across the United States will go to the polling booths. Voter turnout in the primaries was high. Turnout in the general election is usually higher than the primaries. We will see what the turnout really is when we have after-election hindsight to guide us more clearly.

Meanwhile, recent reports tell us that 13.5% of Americans live in poverty. Another 18% live just above poverty. That makes for a whopping 31.5% of the American public that lives at, or just above poverty, according to one blogger and correspondent for the Wall Street Journal.

The middle class of the United States is shrinking, according to the Pew Research Center, at both the national level and in a number of metropolitan areas.

And income disparity has reached levels not seen since 1928, that is, since just before the Great Depression, according to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI).

Indeed, the EPI reports (see "Summary" in downloadable PDF of report): 'In fact, the unequal income growth since the late 1970s has pushed the top 1 percent's share of all income above 24 percent (the 1928 national peak share) in five states, 22 metro areas, and 75 counties.'

Income inequality sounds like a nicety that rolls off the tongue smoothly at a nice dinner party, and then passes out the door with the chocolate mousse and strawberries for dessert. So, let us give it some flesh, again from EPI numbers on income levels in counties across the U.S.

The average income of the top 1% in La Salle, Texas is \$6,021,357. Meanwhile, the average income of the bottom 99% in La Salle, Texas — that is, *everyone else in the county* — is \$47,941. The average income of the top 1% in Shackelford, Texas is \$4,585,725; the average income for the bottom 99% is \$39,165. The average income of the top 1% in Franklin, Florida is \$1,842,033; the average income for the bottom 99% is \$25,102. The average income for the top 1% in San Juan, Washington is \$3,072,877; the average income for the bottom 99% is \$44,728. The average income for the top 1% in Indian River, Florida is \$2,519,981; the average income for the bottom 99% is \$39,710. The average income for the top 1% in Palm Beach, Florida is \$2,779,439; the average income for the bottom 99% is \$44,581. The average income for the top 1% in Suffolk, Massachusetts is \$2,351,713; the average income for the bottom 99% is \$46,142. The average income for the top 1% in Throckmorton, Texas is \$1,417,813; the average for the bottom 99% is \$30,617. The average income for the top 1% in Walton, Florida is \$1,829,740; the average for the bottom 99% is \$40,090.

I have only selected a few counties out the EPI's list. The EPI reports that New York and Connecticut are worst in terms of income inequality. Texas and Florida also appear to do particularly poorly on income inequality in their sample. I did not include, above, Westchester, New York (\$4,326,049 to \$80,305), for which it is well known that income inequality is high; nor Teton, Wyoming, where income inequality is off the charts (\$28,163,786 to \$120,884), but the town itself is highly affluent even at the bottom 99%, making it an outlier in the sample. And, says the EPI

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report: '...nine states, 54 metropolitan areas, and 165 counties have gaps wider than the national gap.'

One of the states that does the best for income inequality – and apparently has throughout the 20th century at least since the Great Depression – is Alaska. So, for any frontier types out there seeking an egalitarian life, I can recommend Alaska! Geary, Kansas also does well at \$255,704 and \$43,561.

What does all of this mean?

It means that, whoever is elected, the pied piper has to be paid. These levels of income inequality have not been seen since 1928, and we all know what happened in 1929.

It means that, whether we are talking to Clinton or to Trump, banks can no longer be bailed out and leave the people to rot. The people can no longer be told they will have government mortgages to take care of the problem, and then be told that they have to qualify for a loan to get the government mortgage – which is being paid for out of the people's pocket in any case. People who are bankrupted by the banks who caused the fiscal crisis cannot qualify for loans. It is a no-brainer. They are bankrupt. Bankrupt people do not qualify for loans, at least not in the U.S. So, it is precisely they who are told, 'No,' by the government mortgage programs.

So, did the politicians do it on purpose? Did they tell their children, *Run, get a government mortgage while you can; we have it all set up for you!* Or do they want to claim lack of personal intelligence as an excuse?

Should we institute I.Q. requirements for politicians running for office? Or perhaps a version of the French or Japanese civil service testing systems would be ideal (see Un doc: 'Republic of France: Public Administration Country Profile' and 'Japan's Civil Service System Needs Reform: Human Resource Development in Transition,'). Something along those lines, I think, would actually work wonders.

Politicians can no longer engage in false consciousness. What do I mean by that? I mean that, politicians should no longer fool themselves into thinking that the people are dupes, or that they are dumb, that they do not know better, or that they will not notice.

The people at the bottom of the economic totem pole who I come into contact with in North Florida tend to be quite wise in the old sense of the term. They also tend to be White. African-American. Hispanic. And all- or part-Native American. They know the laws that apply to them – in fact, they know those laws almost to a word; they can almost recite them, like an oral tradition. They know how the laws are supposed to work; some become very involved in their construction as part of the political process, and they are quite aware when those laws are being broken.

Anger at the grassroots level in the U.S. is not unjustified right now. So, whether Clinton or Trump, the next President is going to have a lot of 'splainin' to do to the grassroots, hard-working backbone of the American people.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).