



Column: A class-ridden America

By Richard Florida

[Mitt Romney](#) is a "multimillionaire elitist" who is out of touch with the common man. [Barack Obama](#) is a "closet socialist" who wants to suffocate the American economy with big government.



While both presidential candidates are quick to accuse the other of stooping to class warfare, neither will admit how class-ridden America has become. It's ironic because this widening class divide represents one of the nation's gravest dangers.

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America during the presidential term of [Andrew Jackson](#), he took astonished note of the nation's general equality. "The more I advanced in the study of American society," he wrote in

By Spencer Platt,, Getty Images

Discount nation: The likelihood that a person will remain in the same income bracket as his parents is greater here than in Europe, Australia, Canada, Singapore and Pakistan.

Democracy in America, "the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived."

A century and three quarters later, the fundamental fact about America is its gaping inequality. The likelihood that a person will remain in the same income bracket as his or her parents is greater in the [U.S.](#) than in France, as well as Denmark, Australia, Norway, Finland, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Singapore —[and even Pakistan](#).

Record numbers of Americans remain poor. Wednesday, the [Census Bureau](#) reported that 15% of Americans, 46.2 million people, live below the poverty line.

Nobel Prize-winning economist [Joseph Stiglitz](#) lays it out in *The Price of Inequality*: "The American dream is a myth. The American dream is dead." And it's not just equity-obsessed liberals who have been sounding this theme. Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* anatomizes the mores of "a new upper class with advanced educations, often obtained at elite schools, sharing tastes and preferences that set them apart from mainstream America," and a "new lower class, characterized not by poverty but by withdrawal from America's core cultural institutions."

Influence of Marx

We're used to thinking of class as [Karl Marx](#) laid it out, as the divide between the capitalists and the working class. But the class structure has changed since his day. Where Marx identified two main classes, our post-industrial society now has three:

- The blue-collar "working class" is about 26 million, 20.5% of the workforce — down from more than 50% in the 1950s.
- The 60 million-plus members of the "service class," who prepare and serve food, perform janitorial functions, take care of children and old people, and perform routine clerical and administrative functions. The service class accounts for 47% of the workforce and is the largest class in numbers and the worst paid.
- There are the 40 million-plus members of the "creative class." Though a third of the workforce, the creative class earns 50% of wages/salaries in the U.S. and controls nearly 70% of discretionary income.

The divide between the classes shapes almost every facet of daily life in America.

Red vs. blue: When my research team examined the economic and demographic factors underpinning red and blue states (looking at Obama vs. [John McCain](#) voters, Democrats vs. Republicans, and liberals vs. conservatives) we found the strong influence of class. Paradoxically, Republican affiliation and conservative identification were [most pronounced](#) in America's poorest and least-educated states.

Religious differences

Secular vs. faith-based America: Religion also bears the imprint of class. Those who are most likely to characterize themselves as "very religious," according to Gallup surveys, tend to live in poorer, working class states. People in states where the creative class forms a larger share of the population are much more likely to espouse secular values.

This class divide shapes our health and well-being as well. Smoking and obesity are two of the most significant health problems we face, and both turn on class. Their rates are [higher](#) in [places](#) where the working class predominates and lower where the creative class does. There are similar basic patterns in overall fitness and [dental care](#): The states whose residents were least fit and least likely to visit a dentist were those with working-class economies.

Then there is gun violence, something which tragic recent mass shootings have again imprinted on our national consciousness. [Higher rates of gun deaths](#) were significantly more likely in states that voted for McCain than Obama. Firearm deaths were also [higher](#) in states with higher levels of poverty and older blue-collar economies and far less likely to occur in states with higher levels of college grads and the creative class.

America's deepening class divide has an inescapable influence on every facet of our lives, not just on how much money we make or how healthy we are but also on what we think and believe.

Our politicians have been quick to exploit class for partisan advantage but slow to deal with it. The fixes required are more complex than any bumper sticker, and they are not going to be cheap. We need a new economic and jobs policy to upgrade the more than 60 million low-wage service jobs. This new social compact would invest in and cultivate the full talents of all workers as the source of higher wages, improved competitiveness and greater growth. We're running out of time.

[Richard Florida](#) is author of The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited, to be published this month. He is a professor at the [University of Toronto](#) and [New York University](#), and senior editor of The Atlantic.