This article proposes an agenda for research on the relation of structural inequality to the study of politics and consumption in the field of communication. The authors review evidence for increasing inequality in the United States and argue that (1) consumption choices and desires are strongly constrained by structural location; (2) political beliefs and attitudes are shaped by location in the income or class structure; and (3) consumption as a form of political self-expression or civic identity, for example, boycotting or “buycotting,” is also constrained by economic structural location. Given these propositions, it becomes critical to analytically situate notions of personalization of politics within the context of increasing economic inequality.

**Keywords:** inequality; consumption; public opinion; mediated communication

The rise of the Occupy movement in 2011 underscored what many Americans have sensed for many years: inequality in the United...
States has been rising consistently since the 1980s. By almost any measure—income, wealth, opportunities, or comparison with other nations—the United States is a more stratified and unequal nation than at any time since just before the Great Depression in 1929.

Inequality has been a largely understudied phenomenon in communication. This is particularly troubling given that it affects fundamental attitudes and beliefs in at least two dimensions. First, inequality has been shown to shape fundamental political beliefs and behavior, which are distributed by income (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Bartels 2008; Page and Jacobs 2009). Second, it would be remarkable if the distribution of income and wealth, and the perception of this distribution, did not affect political attitudes and behavior concerning consumption. Growing inequality, continuing conspicuous consumption by elites, and the growing burden of debt on the middle class are becoming part of mainstream American politics. Because consumption has become a means of communication for many citizens, it is increasingly important that communication scholars take note of this phenomenon.

In this piece, we begin to outline an agenda for a program of research on the relation of growing inequality to political consumption. We contend that political beliefs and political consumption are linked through four closely interrelated propositions. First, as noted, political beliefs are shaped by one’s place in the income or class structure, although the relation of class position and perceptions of consumption and inequality may be heavily distorted. Second, both real consumption choices and imagined consumption desires are strongly constrained by structural location in ways that remain systematically underexplored. Third, consumption as a form of political self-expression or civic identity, for example, boycotting or “buycotting,” is also likely constrained by economic structural location. And fourth, we question whether consumer-driven forms of political expression can and should necessarily be understood as emergent forms of civic identity, at least in the weak form of online participation. We ask whether they might be understood rather as forms of redirected or misdirected civic expression within largely unequal social and economic systems. We question the effects of transferring civic behaviors from the political subsystem with its normative appeals to equality, to consumption behaviors that are more linked to an economic subsystem that is in fact producing increased inequality. More simply, it is plausible that boycotting and boycotting activities displace knowledge or action related to larger structural inequalities, although it is also possible that consumer-driven activities are correlated with larger forms of action (see Willis and Schor, this volume).

In establishing this agenda, this article offers an outline of a program of research that incorporates structural inequality into the study of politics and consumption within the field of communication. Our focus here is on the United States, but we believe there are strong comparative implications worthy of exploration.

The article begins with a review of the findings on the major forms of inequality in the United States as of this writing. We then proceed to consider briefly the
effects of inequality on public opinion formation generally, and the possible
effects of media on public understanding of inequality. We conclude by propos-
ing an agenda for further research on inequality and political consumption.

The Rise of Inequality

The question of whether inequality in the United States is rising has been
largely settled among mainstream researchers in economics, sociology, and pub-
lic policy. The contours of inequality create the structural parameters, the space
of choice and constraint, within which Americans make decisions about politics,
consumption, and the intersection of the two.

The rise of inequality over the past three decades provides the most impor-
tant macro-context structuring political consumerism (even if microbehavior is
not necessarily consonant with individual actors’ positions in the social struc-
ture). The structure of inequality in the United States can be seen through four
standard measures: income inequality, wealth inequality, mobility, and compara-
tive international inequality. Together they tell us where Americans stand year
to year, in terms of what they can and cannot afford to buy (income), the level
of assets that they hold that provide security against the future (wealth), their
chances and those of their children of moving up (or down) in the class structure
(mobility), and where the United States stands in relation to the rest of the
world (comparative international inequality). We also look at two additional
measures that are relevant to how Americans consume. The distribution of risk
measures income volatility and insecurity, and the distribution of opportunity
tells us about American’s life chances. By all of these measures, inequality has
risen substantially over the past three decades.

Income inequality is the measure of differences in income distribution. The
most conservative estimates of income inequality adjust for real income after
government transfers and federal taxes. A major 2011 Congressional Budget
Office (CBO) study of the distribution of incomes in the United States between
1979 and 2007 found that real, inflation-adjusted household income grew 62
percent overall during this period. However, growth for the lowest quintile
(mean 2007 after-tax income of $17,700) was only 18 percent. For the three
middle quintiles (21st through 80th percentiles, mean income for second
$38,000; third $55,300; and fourth $77,700), income growth was just under 40
percent. For those in the upper percentile (81st through 99th), income grew 65
percent. But for those in the upper 1 percent (with a mean income of $1.319
million), income grew 275 percent. The CBO concludes, “As a result of that
uneven growth, the distribution of after-tax household income in the United
States was substantially more unequal in 2007 than in 1979. . . . In fact, between
2005 and 2007 the after-tax income received by the 20 percent of the population
with the highest income exceeded the after-tax income of the remaining 50 per-
cent” (CBO 2011, ix).
Even this pattern masks the true extent of the upward skew. A 2011 study of the decade between 1996 and 2006, by the Congressional Research Service (Hungerford 2011), finds that the poorest 20 percent saw a 6 percent reduction of income, citizens in the middle of the income distribution saw a 10 percent increase, and those in the top tenth of 1 percent (0.1) almost doubled their income. Piketty and Saez (2004), in a widely cited paper, suggest the overall distribution of income in the United States from 1913 to 2002 (before the further upward spike of inequality in the 2000s) followed a U-shaped pattern, with high levels of inequality from 1913 to the Great Depression of 1929, followed by a post–World War II leveling until the 1970s, when inequality began its steep rise to the present. An update by Saez (2010) confirms this trend, adjusting for a brief dip in income for the upper 1 percent due to the 2008 market meltdown.

The pattern of wealth distribution is even more skewed toward the upper layers. Assets include inherited wealth, stock and bond ownership, and property such as homeownership. Homeownership below the upper quintile is heavily mortgaged, and the greatest loss of wealth in the 2008 crash was to minority homeowners who lost all their equity. A review of wealth inequality by Keister and Moller (2000) found that the top 1 percent of wealth owners have owned, on average, 30 percent of the total household sector wealth since the early 1920s. But during the late 1980s and 1990s, this grew significantly. The top 1 percent owned nearly 40 percent of net worth and 50 percent of all financial assets in the United States by the late 1990s, and during this period the top 1 percent gained “two thirds of all increases in top household financial wealth, and movement into the top segments of the distribution were nearly non-existent” (p. 63). Keister and Moller further assert that “by the early 1990s, the United States had surpassed all industrial societies in the extent of inequality of family wealth” (p. 63). Wealth and income have differential relations to consumption. While a minimal income is, obviously, a prerequisite for any level of aspirational consumption, wealth offers the opportunity and security necessary for short- and long-term advancement, status, and social prestige (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). As Hyman (this volume) has demonstrated, the growth of debt among middle-income, working-class, and lower-income groups has been a matter of planned government policy.

Despite this unequal distribution of income and wealth, it has been broadly assumed that the United States has greater mobility than other countries, with movement from the top to bottom and vice versa. However, even this core belief of the “American Dream” no longer holds true. What is more striking is how quickly this revised understanding has moved into the mainstream consensus. Brookings economist Isabel V. Sawhill noted in early 2012, “It’s becoming conventional wisdom that the U.S. does not have as much mobility as most other advanced countries” (cited in DeParle 2012). Perhaps more surprising, conservatives also acknowledge this core pattern (while arguing that it has little practical significance because absolute income is rising) (DeParle 2012). The Economic Mobility Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts (2008) found an
inverse U-shaped distribution of U.S. mobility: those born in the bottom and top quintiles tend to remain there, with some mobility in the middle.

Other large comparative studies have shown that the United States is less mobile than comparable advanced nations. For example, Swedish economist Markus Jäntti (Jäntti et al. 2006), finds that while 42 percent of American men born in the bottom quintile remain there as adults, only 25 percent do so in the Nordic countries and 30 percent in Britain, the latter of which has long been held up as the image of a class-bound immobile society. Corak (2006) finds that at the other end of the spectrum, the inverse is true; that is, in the United States, the children of people in the upper quintiles are less likely to descend quintiles than they are, for example, in Canada.

The standard measure of income inequality is the Gini index, which standardizes the relationship between shares of income and shares of the population, ranging from 0 (complete equality) to 1 (complete inequality [e.g., one household holding all income]). The Gini index for the United States has risen consistently over the past 40 years, from 0.340 in 1967 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000) to 0.468 in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Comparative studies show that the Gini index for the United States now more closely resembles the highly skewed, formerly authoritarian economic and social structures of Latin America than that of other OECD nations (despite that income inequality has also grown in other advanced economies, though not to the extent it has in the United States).

Political scientist Jacob Hacker argues that the cumulative effects of rising inequality, decreased mobility, and decreased support for welfare policies have led to a “great risk shift,” in which those in the bottom and middle-income quintiles are finding themselves with less income, fewer assets, and decreased mobility in which “more economic risk has been offloaded by government and corporations onto the increasingly fragile balance sheets of workers and their families” (Hacker 2006, ix). He argues that the volatility of American family incomes has risen dramatically in the 1990s, creating greater economic instability that has actually risen much faster than economic inequality (see also Hacker and Pierson 2010). With the increase in instability has come the gradual but real privatization of risk. The safety net for the poor has been shredded, but the core assets through which Americans rose into the middle class and stayed there also have been suddenly and radically devaluated: retirement funding (in the collapse of pensions in the private and, increasingly, the public sectors), education (through rapidly rising costs and decreasing family aid and state support), and homeownership (see Hyman, this volume).

More recently, some attention is being shifted from inequality in the distribution of resources and risks, to the distribution of opportunity (see for example Molinas et al. 2010). The underlying idea is to quantify the impact of personal circumstances over which individuals have no control or responsibility (e.g., gender, race, and wealth of parents) on their probability of accessing services that are critical for success in life. “It is not only rewards that are unequal; it is also chances” (Molinas et al. 2010, 10). Opportunities in the United States are not
equally distributed across race, gender, ethnicity, and even geography (with southern states typically providing less equal opportunities than, say, midwestern states). When differential opportunities are considered, Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2010) estimate that a baby born in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. can expect to live a decade longer than a baby born in rural parts of West Virginia.

This thumbnail sketch of inequality in multiple dimensions shows the extraordinary and rapid rise of inequality in the United States over the past 35 years. This is the structural context in which political consumerism has arisen. We argue it is highly unlikely that a society that has grown this unequal in so short a time would not be affected in both the structure of consumption and the politics of consumption, including the beliefs and actions of actors at all levels of the income structure.

Inequality and Consumption

The sheer magnitude of rising inequality calls into question the meaning of political consumption, which leading scholars in this volume have theorized as a shift from traditional politics toward expressive consumption behavior or personalized politics (see Bennett, this volume). In part because scholars have examined emergent forms of political expression, there has been a tendency to focus on behavior more than social context. It seems likely that aspirational behavior is shaped not only by exposure to consumption opportunities through traditional media and the Web but also by the real life chances that shape and constrain the possibilities of realizing imagined consumption behavior.

The second major claim of emerging political consumption research is that civic behavior is now inextricably linked to consumption. And while empirically this might be true, one has to wonder about the larger effects of transferring civic behaviors from the political subsystem, with its normative appeals to equality, to consumption behaviors that are linked to an economic subsystem that is in fact producing increased inequality.

More pointedly, what happens to both the politics of inequality and the politics of consumption when they meet? Several outcomes are possible. The Occupy movement in the United States may be the beginning of a shift away from consumer-driven politics, toward a politics of wealth distribution. To the extent that a more explicit politics of wealth distribution may be emerging as a central trope in America, the assumption that politics is increasingly intertwined with consumption may also have to be modified. The rise of consumer-driven politics may prompt the 80-plus percent that experience decreased income, wealth, and mobility to question the system of consumption itself, including expressive consumption behaviors and their opportunities to use consumption as means to express their political will.

On the other hand, it is also quite possible that consumer-driven politics could exist concurrently with a politics of wealth distribution. Indeed, perhaps the
politics of inequality and the politics of consumption are mutually reinforcing. However, one has to wonder if increasing inequality does not highlight the limits of the market as an action coordination mechanism if the outcomes of “normal” effort result not in jobs, income, and security, but continuing income volatility and increasing risk affecting everyone below the most privileged 5 percent. It is plausible that under conditions of increased economic equality, the personalization of politics could serve to increase the authenticity and morality of behavior; but under conditions of increasing economic inequality, this personalization might erode the civic institutions and interpersonal solidarities that are necessary to solve common problems.

Increased reliance on consumption-related expression disproportionately benefits those with more consumption capacity, thus amplifying traditional problems of an unequal distribution of voice (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). It is important, then, to consider whether increased inequality results from the political preferences of citizens, or if, on the contrary, it is happening despite those preferences, and potentially as a result of this individualization of politics and the transfer of decision-making processes from the political subsystem to the market. It is also possible that citizens sense that because political institutions have already abandoned the interests of ordinary citizens in favor of market solutions, the only way to intervene is to get “the market” to “listen” through its own language of market share and consumer support.

Inequality and Public Opinion

Is the U.S. public aware of growing inequality, and, if so, is it perceived as a problem that needs to be redressed? American public opinion with regard to inequality has been well researched by a number of leading scholars. The public tends to be somewhat aware of rising inequality in America over the past several decades as outlined above, but not of its extent. When asked, people as a whole tend to prefer lower levels of inequality, albeit not absolute equality (Norton and Ariely 2011; McCall and Kenworthy 2009). Moreover, this understanding of existing and growing inequality is now manifesting in perceived conflict between the rich and the poor among a majority of Americans (Pew 2011). Less is known regarding Americans’ public policy preferences for how to address the issue of growing inequality, with the little research that has been done indicating that preferences are mixed (Bartels 2008) and that the public favors policies that address equality of opportunity rather than income or wealth redistribution (McCall and Kenworthy 2009).

Moreover, the quality of information on which understandings of inequality and reparative policy preferences are based is even less well understood. In 2003, for instance, most voters were in favor of the Bush tax cuts and seemingly did not know that other considerations directly related to the tax cuts were important factors in the debate (Bartels 2005). Questions regarding wastefulness
of government spending and preferences related to spending on government programs played a very small role in the decision to support the tax cuts. This suggests that opinions formed in relation to inequality and related policy provisions are underinformed at best. Moreover, the primary predictive consideration for determining opinions with regard to tax policy was perception of one’s own tax burden (Bartels 2005). This is similar to opinions on income inequality in general, which tend to be driven more than anything by one’s own place within the structure of income and wealth inequality (Bartels 2008).

Public opinion related to inequality (and inequality itself) is particularly important for political considerations. Inequality influences a wealth of political outcomes, but we highlight two: (1) political polarization and (2) reduced political influence of the poor. Research suggests that in times of heightened inequality, polarization is heightened in representative bodies. Thus, not surprisingly, the period of increasing inequality that we document roughly coincides with a process of elite polarization in the United States Congress that started in the 1970s (as measured by analyzing roll-call voting; see for example Garand 2010; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1984). Additionally, and not surprisingly, income inequality is reflected in policy preferences in different domains, such as taxation, economic policy, foreign aid, the national deficit, and public spending, that are determined in large part by one’s place in the income distribution (Bartels 2008). However, inequality is also related to increased misrepresentation within legislative bodies: when Americans with different wealth and income levels differ in policy preferences, the actual policy outcomes strongly resemble the preferences of the wealthy (Gilens 2005). As inequality increases, such misrepresentation is also bound to grow, suggesting that both the middle class’s and the poor’s influence in a representative democracy continues to diminish.

It remains to be seen whether a political consumerism is less bound to inequality than the policy outcomes of a representative body, but bearing in mind that precisely this inequality in wealth and income generates radically different consumption opportunities, we remain somewhat skeptical that, through a personalized politics that revolves around consumption, the underlying inequality can be addressed.

Finally, we think it is important to emphasize one particular means of affecting public opinion with regard to inequality. All the relationships highlighted above—between public opinion, inequality, policy, and the information on which all those are based—have the potential to move. Particularly because most Americans are not terribly well informed with regard to inequality, the inputs (and thus outputs) of public opinion are likely to be quite malleable. As mentioned above, Norton and Ariely (2011) show that despite a sense of increasing inequality and a preference for greater levels of equality, Americans dramatically ignore the magnitude of the inequality in which they live their daily lives. Public opinion polls routinely show that 62 percent of Americans think the economic system is fair to them, and a majority feel that they belong to the middle class.
The normality of these public opinion distributions is at stark contrast with the power law distributions of wealth, income, and opportunity. Thus, it is legitimate to wonder about the causes of this perceived “equality.”

**Inequality and the Media**

It is possible that perceptions of equality are deeply rooted in the basic homogeneity of social structure: we tend to associate with those who are similar on the fundamental parameters of income, race, and place (see Blau and Schwartz 1984; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Given this homogeneity, we think a particularly important influence on inequality-related public opinion is likely to be the media, given that news media are the primary source of information with regard to income inequality in general, as well as potential reparative policies in different domains, including education spending, income redistribution, taxation, and poverty alleviation. The relative homogeneity of interpersonal social ties suggests that the media might be a critical avenue for understanding the plights and opportunities of those around us, in part because it is unlikely that homogenous social networks will provide us with much information about general equality in a complex society (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001).

However, despite the centrality that the media has in terms of (1) providing citizens with information about the distribution of resources and opportunities; (2) priming, thus making more or less accessible certain values or exemplars that would be associated with evaluations of equality and inequality; and (3) framing debates regarding different realms of equality, the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of inequality is virtually unaddressed in the extant literature (Hacket 2001).

The lack of empirical research in the political communication field that directly addresses issues of equality and inequality puts us at a disadvantage in trying to relate political consumerism to increased inequality. Nevertheless, certain strands of the communication literature are applicable to our current problem. In particular, cultivation analyses and aspects of the framing literature seem relevant.

Cultivation theory emphasizes the salience of media, in particular television, as the central “storyteller” of contemporary societies. In this storytelling process certain examples of the world around us are emphasized, while others are deemphasized, mostly through market mechanisms (Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2009). According to this theory, the relative emphasis, or prevalence in the media world, results in a biased estimation by viewers of the occurrence of certain phenomena in their everyday lives. Findings within this line of inquiry have revealed the virtual inexistence of poor people on television and a heavy emphasis on middle-class professional characters. Not surprisingly, heavy television viewers tend to overestimate the number of professionals in society and underestimate poverty levels.
Working under this notion of biased exemplars (Zillmann 2002) and overcoming certain limitations of the original cultivation program, it would appear that examining the relationships between entertainment media consumption and perceptions/orientations toward equality is a critical endeavor for political communication researchers, that is, if they are to successfully link life-world experiences, policy preferences, and consumption orientations.

Turning our attention to news, it seems clear that several factors will affect the likelihood that news media consumption has strong influences on public opinion regarding inequality. First, different citizens will consume different amounts and types of news (income levels have traditionally been related to news consumption). Depending on these consumption patterns, and particularly given the reemergence of partisan news content, different citizens are likely receiving very different information with regard to inequality. Moreover, different news media likely employ various frames with respect to inequality, priming different considerations for their audiences.

Framing studies of poverty seem particularly relevant to develop a research program on the framing of equality (and inequality) in media, and how these frames relate to the understanding, policy preferences, and consumer politics related to inequality in a given society. Shanto Iyengar's (1991) framing research showed how the news on poverty is typically framed in an episodic, rather than a thematic, way, depicting concrete cases that illustrate the plight of poor people, instead of presenting poverty in its general context. What is critical about this research for our own purposes is that it relates episodic frames to individual responsibility for being poor, while thematic frames tend to shift the responsibility attributions to society at large.

In other words, if news coverage of poverty is of specific instances, people tend to blame the individual depicted in the coverage as responsible for his or her situation and minimize the social causes connected to poverty (such as the reduced mobility that we referred to at the beginning of this article). Extrapolating from this line of research, we envision a research agenda that considers how equality and inequality are framed by news media and how these frames affect our attributions of responsibility for success and failure in a context of increasing inequality.

It is plausible that portrayals of a middle-class society that seeks to emulate consumption patterns of the upper classes (Kendall 2005), coupled with episodic coverage of the poor and the rich that suggests individuals are responsible for being on the margins (that is, the poor should be poor, but also the rich should be rich, because both groups “deserve” it), could result in a public opinion that “feels” middle class, despite actual power law distributions, and that favors more equality in the abstract, yet tends to favor specific policies that reduce the redistributive power of the state. These of course are empirical questions, ones that political communication research could and should be tackling.

This already-challenging research agenda is further complicated by the increasing salience of personalized politics and political consumerism that is
An Agenda on Inequality and Consumption

A research agenda on inequality and the politics of consumption would focus on the three broad areas that we have outlined here. First, it will be necessary to develop an understanding of how growing and systematic structural inequality changes the macro-context of consumption. The work of Juliet Schor has put and kept this issue on the agenda, and Louis Hyman’s contribution to this volume places the growth and politics of debt in historical perspective. But there have been few formal sociological analyses of the effects of stratification on both the real constraints on consumption and the imagined consumption. Translating the macro-framework of inequality from the work of economists and sociologists into one that can be used in political communication is a first step. This presents a larger challenge to the field of political communication, which remains decidedly oriented toward the individual as a unit of analysis both substantively and methodologically. As McLeod and colleagues (2001) have argued, the structure of controls as applied in communication research tends to eliminate much of the structural variation of interest (for a similar but broader argument, see Lieberson 1985). More simply, class disappears in controlling for the effects of socioeconomic status on individuals.

Second, we have suggested that the media is a central institution through which these broader understandings of inequality and the market are instantiated in public opinion. The media (traditional and new) constitutes the framework through which citizens come to understand the possible range of consumption opportunities; to define who is “above” and who is “below” in the status hierarchy; and further, as we have suggested, to render the poor and unemployed invisible or to cultivate an image of them as unworthy. More systematic research would allow us to connect public understandings of inequality with a broad range of media use and effects, questions that, as we have indicated, have barely been posed to date.

Third, research on public opinion and inequality should, similarly, begin to take the effects of stratification more seriously. Current research suggests that there are clear (if uneven) public preferences for decreased inequality, but in the United States these take the form of a desire for increased equality of opportunity rather than redistribution. One line of work in public opinion would be to explore the relation between understandings of political inequality rooted in culture and values (the preference for opportunity) compared to those that are
the effect of the systematic (and successful) efforts of conservatives and the Republican Party to redefine all solutions in relation to the market. The follow-on effects of both are to increase political polarization and to reduce the political influence of the poor. We have suggested, above, that one broader consequence of the shift to a market-only paradigm for understanding equality and consumption is the broader delegitimizing of politics and valorization of the economic system as the primary or even the only legitimate system for problem solving, which is, by definition, individual and private. Sandel (2012) has made this argument in the political-moral dimension.

The current empirically demonstrable tendencies to prefer individually based forms of political consumerism, demonstrated in many articles in this volume, are not incompatible with the broader closing off of the public sphere as a legitimate arena. Bennett's individualized collective action and Michelleti and Stolle's sustainable citizenship point to new paradigms of democratic and civic action that challenge the idea of a core contradiction between privatized consumption and the public realm through powerful and convincing research programs. Holt's argument differs substantially from the personal citizenship argument, in effect arguing that market structures themselves are the best force for changing individual behavior (although individual behavior in the marketplace drives market change). These two standpoints—personal citizenship and market change—are quite compatible with an individualized, market-oriented understanding of the public good. Political consumerism may empirically describe real shifts in individual and collective behavior, and in any case, this should be the starting point for any realistic analysis of the possibilities for social change. But the fact that individuals appear to increasingly make individualized choices about consumption that reflect both political orientations and weak-tie structures of collective action can coexist with the continued delegitimizing of the public realm. Whether they are compatible or at odds, and under what conditions, is one of the most important questions for the next phase of research.

In closing, we would like to remember Robert Lane’s (1959, 50) admonition: “The more emphasis a society places upon consumption through advertising, development of new products, and easy installment buying, the more will social dissatisfaction be channeled into intra-class consumption rivalry instead of inter-class resentment and conflict.” Lane moves us to ask whether a politics of consumption can actually serve to resolve interclass conflict in a society that is increasingly divided.

Note

1. The CBO calculations are complex. Mean income figures are from the U.S. Census calculated by Tax Policy Center, Brookings Institution; see http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxfacts/displayafact.cfm?Docid=458. More generally, the numbers that we discuss in this section vary considerably, depending on time frame, variables, and assumptions. We do not have the space here to justify and systematically compare these calculations, but the documents we refer to are all readily available. Our goal here is simply to indicate trends in broad categories. And for reasons unclear, the CBO study does not list the mean income for the upper quintile that includes the 81st through 99th percentile, and we cannot reliably compute it or transfer it from other studies.
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