

Point of View:

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Ignore the poor no more

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CHAPEL HILL - We have completed the most inspiring and path-breaking election in our history. Millions upon millions of intensely engaged citizens -- young and old, black and white, Latino and Native American, rich and poor, religious and nonreligious, gay and straight, hopeful and terrified -- took a huge step forward to narrow the gap between our words and our deeds.

You know you've accomplished something when both Russia and al-Qaida rush forward to bad-mouth your performance. Nov. 4 may well have been this democracy's best day. So far.

But there was at least one way in which this election was utterly traditional.

We were again blessed, or perhaps laden, with relentless discussions of "Wall Street" versus "Main Street."

The unfolding cycles of crisis and bailout, of course, were the immediate backdrop for the proffered dichotomy. But the terms have also, for us, become a sort of shorthand -- distinguishing between the interests of the preposterously wealthy and the rock-solid, long-beleaguered, worthy and foundational middle class.

There is much that can be said of such a line of demarcation. My point, though, is a different one. Even in this revolutionary election, hardly a word was spoken about the poor.

No real discussion was had of the fact that, in the richest nation in human history, one in five of our children lives in stark, unrelenting poverty. And that the numbers are a good deal worse for black, Latino and Native American kids. Or that our major industrial competitors manage to easily outpace us on this front. We talk more about equality. They do more.

I heard no mention that the top 1 percent of Americans possess over 40 percent of the nation's wealth. Or that, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the share of income "flowing to the top 1 percent of households [has] reached its highest level since 1928."

Or that, as the massive, 30-nation, 20-year study of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently documented, the gap between the rich and the poor in the world's wealthiest countries is soaring -- particularly in the United States. We can now boast, if that's the right word, the greatest economic inequality in the industrial world. And our lead has markedly improved since 2000.

Harvard's Elizabeth Gudrais has shown that in "per capita gross domestic product" our peers are happy comparisons -- such as "Sweden and Switzerland." But on the principal scale of economic disparity, "our neighbors" are "Sri Lanka, Mali and Russia."

We produce, in other words, like the best of the first world. We leave our fellows behind like much of the third.

And these bleak figures trail decades of potent economic expansion. If a rising tide left so many boats tethered to the bottom, how will they fare now that waters recede?

Given such a record, the rest of the world must have been bemused to see John McCain, Sarah Palin and Joe the Plumber fret so feverishly that someone might have offhandedly used the phrase "spread the wealth." In the nation that most profoundly favors the rich, socialism is not just around the corner. And Huey Long died over 70 years ago.

Here, those who demand government rescue from their stubborn and radically consequential incompetence fly to Washington to testify in their private jets.

It is true that our new president largely avoided the challenges of poverty in a bold and brilliant campaign. But he did perhaps touch sentiments that, once uncorked, will sweep more broadly. He repeatedly urged a rejection of "the smallness of our politics" -- teaching "that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change."

He overtly sought to "summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other." In this country "we rise or fall as one nation, as one people," he put it. "E pluribus unum."

It is not possible to embrace such a calling and to continue to turn our gaze away from those locked at the bottom of American life.

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