

David Brooks and the "statistical byproduct" of inequality

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January 23, 2014

[Last Thursday's David Brooks column](#) is a classic of the genre: moderate in rhetoric, conventionally conservative in substance, a presenting interest in policy behind which lurks a fixation on politics and the grail of bipartisanship.

The column's thesis is that while income inequality may be a problem, it's not really helpful to *talk* about it as such, cause it's complicated. Brooks makes his argument in four points, and for the first three I'll just link to [Dean Baker's learned and snappy analysis](#). (In response to Brooks trying to separate the issue of the superrich and their wildly superrich superrichness from the lack of mobility for others: "Fans of arithmetic everywhere know that if the rich get more, and the economy is not growing faster, then everyone else gets less.")

It's in point #4 that Brooks really out-Brooks himself. There's so much here that I'll just comment inline **(in parenthetical bold)**:

Fourth, *the income inequality frame needlessly polarizes the debate*. There is a growing consensus that government should be doing more to help increase social mobility for the less affluent. **(There is? Wow, that sounds great. Tell me more!)** Even conservative Republicans are signing on to this. **(Um, who? Not Marco Rubio; [he wants to change how the government does this, not have it do more. Not the House Republicans; \[their budget does the opposite\]\(#\).](#))** The income inequality language introduces a class conflict element to this discussion. **(When there's a war being waged on the poor, saying so doesn't make you the one who's responsible for class conflict, any more than talking about racism makes you guilty of "playing the race card.")**

Democrats often see low wages as both a human capital problem and a problem caused by unequal economic power. Republicans are more likely to see them just as a human capital problem. If we're going to pass bipartisan legislation, we're going to have to start with the human capital piece, where there is some

agreement, not the class conflict piece, where there is none. (**Translation: Republicans see this as a simpler problem than Democrats do; Democrats agree with a lot of the Republican analysis but don't think it's the whole story. Democrats should know they can't get everything they want in divided government, so Brooks would like them to just give Republicans everything *they* want instead.**)

Some on the left have always tried to introduce a more class-conscious style of politics. (**Yes, especially back when there was more of a left in this country!**) These efforts never pan out. (**Well, there was the New Deal and the Great Society and the way they greatly improved tons of lower-income Americans' lives. Does that count as panning out?**) America has always done better, liberals have always done better, when we are all focused on opportunity and mobility, not inequality, on individual and family aspiration, not class-consciousness. (**America and liberals have always done better when they let conservatives frame the economic conversation? Sure, if by "America" you mean "polite conversation in Washington" and if by "liberals" you mean "corporate-funded Democrats running for office."**)

"If we're going to mobilize a policy revolution," Brooks concludes, we should be focusing on the (conservative-friendly) issues that contribute to inequality, not the "secondary issue and statistical byproduct" of inequality itself. But does anyone really believe that someone this dismissive of inequality has any interest in mobilizing to reverse it?

(Also, in the credit-where-it's-due department: [Monday's Brooks column](#) is quite good. It's mostly just a link to [this remarkable piece by Catherine Woodiwiss](#), but kudos to Brooks for giving it wider play.)