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**Amber Arellano: American dream still surpasses class warfare**

Inequality and the hardy American dream

The masses are calling for AIG execs' heads. The majority of Americans support a bill to make it easier for unions to organize. Bashing greedy Wall Street tycoons has become fashionably fun.

There's no doubt Americans are hung-over from the go-go 1990s. As the boom continues to bust, the country's mood is shifting from celebrating the individualistic, ambitious business entrepreneur to the average hard-working guy who's unfairly getting the shaft from the recession and globalization.

But there's hardly a class war afoot as some on the ideological left and right are arguing.

**Upward mobility?**

On the right, conservatives are claiming, laughably, that pro-union Democrats' push for the Employee Free Choice Act -- which would make it easier for people to organize unions -- is the equivalent of "nuclear war" and even "radical Islam."

On the left, union activists are using their own demonization tactics. Check out this You Tube clip from the Service Employees International Union ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOM0AMUqviY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOM0AMUqviY)).

Despite each sides' propoganda, most Americans are uninterested in such class-based fights -- and new research supports that. The PEW Charitable Trust finds most Americans are still relatively upbeat about their potential to reach the American dream but they want to make sure everyone has a fair chance to do that.

PEW has launched the admirable Economic Mobility Project to address that topic at [www.economicmobility.org/](http://www.economicmobility.org/)

"The idea was to try to forge some bipartisan agreement as the facts, figures and trends on economic mobility," says John Morton, managing director of economy policy for the PEW Charitable Trust. "This is an issue that unites the right, left and center."

The team has been exploring the question: "Is the American dream becoming harder to achieve, or not?"

For many Americans, it has. The recent history of the U.S. economy can be roughly divided between two periods: the decades immediately after World War II, when inequality plummeted, and the past three decades, when global economic forces and government policies causes it to soar.

Between 1947 and 1973, the typical family's income roughly doubled. Americans became accustomed to rapid economic growth and plenty of opportunity if they were willing to work hard.



But since 1973, median family income has slowed, increasing about 20 percent.

So Americans who feel like it's tougher for them to work hard to get ahead aren't crazy. That has been the case.

### **Americans still dream**

People not as well positioned to compete against the world's most educated people in global economy appear to face the greatest challenges.

Americans' economic position on the income ladder is heavily influenced by that of their parents today, according to PEW. About one-third of Americans are falling behind the incomes of their parents. About 42 percent of children born to parents in the bottom of the U.S. income range will remain in the bottom range of income a generation later.

Increasingly Americans believe the "rich just get richer and the poor just get poorer," PEW finds.

Still, even during this bleak recession, even Americans of the lowest rungs of the economic are surprisingly upbeat about their chances to win the American dream as defined as equal opportunity and a fair shot at upward mobility.

For a poll released this month, when people were asked "Is it more important to reduce inequality in America or to ensure everyone has a fair chance of improving their economic standing?," 71 percent of people opted for "the fair chance" choice.

Optimism, that all-American trait, remains strong.

For that reason, agrees Morton: "The class warfare argument doesn't work well in politics. Americans really have a much greater interest in making sure everyone starts at the same starting line rather than dragging down the wealthy."

With his tax cuts for the middle and working classes, and education and health care reforms, President Barack Obama is trying to bring about an America that looks more like the mid-century period of greater upward mobility and opportunity for average Americans.

Whether his approach will produce that goal is the subject of a worthwhile debate.

But one thing is for sure: most Americans still believe in the hardy American dream. And they want leaders who will help give everyone a fairer shot at reaching it.

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