Still Matter?

By Janny Scott & David Leonhardt

It's harder than it once was to tell a person's class in America. But in some ways, class still plays an important role in our lives.

There was a time when Americans thought they understood class. The upper crust took their vacations in Europe and worshipped in Episcopal churches. The middle class drove Ford Fairlanes and lived in the suburbs. The working class belonged to unions and did not take cruises to the Caribbean.

Today, the United States has gone a long way toward at least an appearance of classlessness. Americans of all classes are awash in luxuries that would have dazzled their grand-
parents, so it's become harder to read people's status in the cars they drive, or, for that matter, by the votes they cast or the color of their skin.

But class can still be a powerful force in American life. In some ways, over the past three decades, it may have come to play a greater, not lesser, role. Indeed, longstanding questions about class were raised recently by the disastrous aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which seemed to fall so much more heavily on the poor than the privileged.

**CONTRADICTORY TRENDS**

The trends are seemingly contradictory: a rise in standards of living over all, while most people remain moored in their relative places. It may now be easier for a few high achievers to scale the summits of wealth, but it has become harder for many others to move up from one economic class to another. Nevertheless, Americans continue to believe in the prospect of economic mobility.

Mobility, the movement of families up the economic ladder, is the promise that lies at the heart of the American dream. But new research on mobility shows there is far less of it than was once thought and less than most people believe. (Some economists consider the new research inconclusive.)

Meanwhile, the ranks of the elite are opening. Today, there are more and more self-made billionaires and anyone may have a shot at becoming a Supreme Court Justice or CEO. Take, for example, Bill Clinton, who began life dirt-poor in a small Southern town and rose through the class ranks to become President. Or consider the Forbes 400, a list of the richest Americans: Only 37 members of last year's list inherited their wealth, down from almost 200 in the mid-1980s.

Merit has replaced the old system of inherited privilege. But merit, it turns out, is at least partly class-based. Parents with money, education, and connections cultivate in their children the habits that the meritocracy rewards. When their children succeed, their success is seen as earned.

Most Americans say hard work and a good education are more important to getting ahead than connections or a wealthy background, and most Americans remain upbeat about their prospects for getting ahead. A recent *New York Times* poll on class found that 40 percent of Americans believe that the chance of moving up from one class to another has risen over the last 30 years, but the new research shows that it has not.

"I think the system is as fair as you can make it," says Ernie Frazier, a 65-year-old real-estate investor in Houston. "I don't think life is necessarily fair. But if you persevere, you can overcome adversity. It has to do with a person's willingness to work hard, and I think it's always been that way."

Most people say their standard of living is better than that of their parents and imagine that their children will do better still. Even families making less than $30,000 a year subscribe to the American dream; more than half say they have achieved it or will do so.

**LESS-RAPID MOBILITY**

Many Americans say that they have moved up the nation's class ladder. In the *Times* poll, 45 percent of respondents said they were in a higher class than when they grew up.

"I grew up very poor and so did my husband," says Wanda Brown, the 58-year-old wife of a retired planner for

"They call it the land of opportunity, and I don't think that's changed much," says Diana Lackey, a 60-year-old homemaker and wife of a retired contractor in Fulton, N.Y., near Syracuse. "Times are much, much harder with all the downsizing, but we're still a wonderful country."

*Janny Scott and David Leonhardt were part of a team of Times reporters who wrote about class issues this year. Additional reporting by Patricia Smith.*
the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard who lives in Puyallup, Wash. "We're not rich but we are comfortable and we are middle class, and our son is better off than we are."

The new studies of mobility, which track people's earnings over decades, have found less movement. Mobility still happens, just not as rapidly as was once thought. "We all know stories of poor families in which the next generation did much better," says Gary Solon, an economist at the University of Michigan who is a leading mobility researcher.

But in the past, Solon goes on to explain, "people would say, 'Don't worry about inequality. The offspring of the poor have chances as good as the chances of the offspring of the rich.' Well, that's not true."

LUXURIES FOR ALL

Meanwhile, globalization and technological advances have changed the economic landscape: Manufacturing jobs, like those in the car industry that propelled many working-class Americans into the middle class a generation ago, have mostly moved overseas, where they can be done more cheaply. And that has removed a big stepping-stone to the middle class for many people.

So why does it appear that class is fading as a force in American life? For one thing, it is harder to read position in possessions. Factories in China churn out picture-taking cell phones, home computers, and other luxuries that are now affordable to so many people. Federal deregulation has done the same for plane tickets and long-distance phone calls. Banks, more confident about measuring risk, now extend credit to low-
income families, so that owning a home or driving a new car is no longer evidence that someone is middle class.

Cruises, a symbol of the high life years ago, have become available at all price ranges. Martha Stewart sells chenille drapery at Kmart, and even luxury automaker BMW produces a cheaper model. “The level of material comfort in this country is numbing,” says Paul Bellew of General Motors. “You can make a case that the upper half lives as well as the upper 5 percent did 50 years ago.”

Like consumption patterns, class alignments in politics have become jumbled. In the 1950s, professionals were reliably Republican; today they lean Democratic. Meanwhile, skilled labor has gone from being heavily Democratic to almost evenly split.

**RACE & IMMIGRATION**

The formerly tight connection between race and class has weakened too, as many African Americans have moved into the middle and upper middle classes. Diversity of all sorts has complicated the class picture, and high rates of immigration and immigrant success stories seem to hammer home the point: The rules of advancement have changed.

Immigrants make up 11 percent of the country’s population. “In terms of mobility, what we see is rapid income gains over time for the immigrant population as a whole,” says Michael Fix of the Migration Policy Institute. Legal immigrants do better than illegal ones; in fact, Fix says, legal immigrants are, on average, more economically successful than their American-born counterparts.

The American elite, too, is more diverse than it was. The number of corporate chief executives who went to Ivy League colleges has dropped over the past 15 years. There are many more Catholics, Jews, and Mormons in the Senate than there were a generation ago. If Samuel A. Alito Jr. is confirmed as a Supreme Court Justice, he would be the fifth Catholic on the Court, which also has two Jewish Justices.

Whatever career path people follow, a degree from a four-year college makes even more difference today. More people are getting those degrees than did a generation ago, but class still plays a role in determining who goes to college. At 250 of the most selective U.S. colleges, the proportion of students from upper-income families has grown, not shrunk.

The slicing of society’s pie may be more unequal than it used to be, but economic growth in recent decades has made the pie bigger, and most Americans have a larger piece than they or their parents once did. They seem to accept the trade-offs.

Faith in mobility, after all, has been woven into the national self-image. The idea of fixed class positions doesn’t feel right. Americans have never been comfortable with the notion of a pecking order based on anything other than talent and hard work. The very concept of class contradicts their assumptions about the American dream and equal opportunity. Americans, who are constitutionally optimistic, are disinclined to see themselves as stuck.