

Mobility Impaired

What's the most important issue in American politics? In a narrow sense, the sputtering economy and ballooning deficits are likely to dominate the 2012 election season. But while every election has its own particular concerns, fundamentally it is to the American Dream that our politicians must tend – that libertarian and egalitarian bundle of values and hopes that transcend our partisan, economic, and social divisions.

When the Pew Economic Mobility Project (EMP) surveyed people about what the American Dream meant, it got widely ranging answers. Indiana's governor, Mitch Daniels, recently hit on a common sentiment when he observed that "upward mobility from the bottom is the crux of the American promise." But even those who would focus more broadly on the rising tide that lifts all boats should be concerned about the state of economic mobility in America. The economic inefficiency that results when much of the population is stuck at the bottom (and the top) means the tide may lift everyone less than it could.

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