



Javier Zarracina / Vox

The case against equality of opportunity

It's an incoherent, impossible ideal. And if we're really going to fight inequality, it needs to be abandoned.

By Dylan Matthews | @dylanmatt | dylan@vox.com | Sep 21, 2015, 8:30am EDT

"While we don't promise equal outcomes, we have strived to deliver equal opportunity."

– **Barack Obama**

"Instead of focusing on equality of outcomes, we should be focusing on equality of opportunity."

– **Paul Ryan**

"President Roosevelt ... said there's no mystery about what it takes to build a strong and prosperous America: 'equality of opportunity. ... ' That still sounds good to me."

– **Hillary Clinton**

"The opportunity gap is the defining issue of our time."

– **Jeb Bush**

Everyone wants equality of opportunity. It is not a subject of political debate, but the precondition of political debate. Promises to achieve equality of opportunity, like promises to create jobs or protect America abroad, are the white noise of campaign season, drawing neither notice nor challenge. Respected think tanks like the Brookings

Institution establish **entire projects** devoted to figuring out how to advance equality of opportunity. Raj Chetty and Emmanuel Saez, two of the best microeconomists of their generation, have joined forces to start the **Equality of Opportunity Project**, which is meant to produce hard numbers about opportunity across time and across regions. Huge amounts of time, money, and intellectual effort are devoted to this idea, that a just world is one in which opportunity is equal, even if outcomes aren't.

The only problem? No one really wants equality of opportunity, nor anything close to it. Nor should they. Pursuing true equality of opportunity would require turning America into a dystopian, totalitarian nightmare — and even then, it would still prove impossible.

Moreover, equality of opportunity is simply a bad goal. It assumes that life is a zero-sum competition for wealth and status, that the most important thing is ensuring that only the smartest and hardest-working among us end up the victors. It assumes there will always be an underclass; it just wants to reserve membership for those who truly deserve it.

We shouldn't want a better underclass. We should want *no* underclass, a world in which there might be some inequality but deep poverty is a thing of the past. A decent society shouldn't try to build a better aristocracy. It should try to achieve a reasonable and rising standard of living for all.

Implementing equality of opportunity would be a totalitarian nightmare



Oracle heir and movie producer Megan Ellison. | Imeh Akpanudosen/Getty Images

On her 25th birthday, Megan Ellison — daughter of Larry Ellison, the fifth richest man in the world with an estimated net worth of **\$50 billion** — inherited a massive sum, rumored at as much as **\$2 billion**, and used it to finance films and boost her career as a producer.

There is no possible universe in which every child in America is going to get \$2 billion to pursue her dreams. And there's also no possible universe in which enough wealth redistribution takes place that future Megan Ellisons start their careers with the same monetary resources as every other 25-year-old.

At least in Ellison's case we know how equalizing opportunity would work. There is a proven mechanism — inheritance taxes — that the government could use to cut her wealth down to the level of her peers, even if doing so would be politically impossible, and probably undesirable.

But some of the most important inequalities of opportunity cannot be addressed by governments in any reasonable way. Taking them seriously underscores what should be obvious: Pure equality of opportunity is deeply illiberal, and no one who understands its true implications would ever endorse it.

Equality of opportunity promises not just *sufficient* opportunities to all families, but *equivalent* ones.

Think for a second about what that means. For one thing, any actions taken by affluent families meant to help their kids get ahead are *prima facie* illegitimate. That means **no private schools. No fancy preschool or daycare. No au pairs or nannies. No after-school tutors. No summer camps. No violin lessons or chess lessons or tennis lessons or theater classes. Certainly no inheritances.**



EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY WOULD MAKE EVERY PARENTING CHOICE A MATTER OF PUBLIC POLICY, TO BE REGULATED ACCORDINGLY

But the problem goes much deeper than monetary inequality. Imagine two families, one headed by two classical musicians, one headed by two computer programmers. Each set of parents decides to teach their children their trade. The children of programmers are left with a highly marketable skill that earns them hundreds of thousands of dollars and considerable social prestige later in life. The children of the musicians face

exceptionally difficult odds in finding work in that field, and even if they succeed in finding steady jobs, they almost certainly won't make as much as the children of programmers.

If we take equality of opportunity seriously, that's a problem. The musicians' children are being wronged, and either they deserve compensation from the government to make up for this wrong, or the programmer parents have to be barred from teaching their children to code.

If you think that conclusion is absurd, you are correct. There are important values other than equality — like the freedom of parents to raise children how they like, and the importance of goals other than money or social standing — that tell us it would be disastrous to micromanage the skills parents teach their children.

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That's the deepest difficulty with achieving full equality of opportunity. Parents, in practice, endow their children with a diverse array of opportunities. Some teach their children violin. Some teach their children C++. Some teach their children to speak Mandarin. Some teach their children French cooking. Some of those skills are going to be more valuable on average. But all of them are going to be valuable to *someone*. We need programmers *and* violinists, and chefs, and fluent Mandarin speakers. We could attempt to control children's opportunity sets so that everyone grows up with opportunities that, together, provide an equal shot at economic or education success. But that would be monstrous, and would deny us the benefits of our current pluralist approach to parenting.

As Joseph Fishkin, a law professor at the University of Texas and author of ***Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity***, says, "It's actually very difficult to imagine what completely equal opportunity would look like in a world where families are different and some parents can give their children different advantages."

Defenders of equal opportunity might object that they're only concerned with opportunities granted by *money*. But it's unclear what principled justification there is for such a distinction; plenty of other factors influence children's odds of success, and could be affected by government intervention.

Equality of opportunity would make every parenting choice a matter of public policy, to be regulated accordingly. It's a deeply, deeply illiberal ideal.

Equality of opportunity is not an ethical way to decide who deserves what

you wont be here, best friend (Good Will ...



Equality of opportunity is also a morally heinous ideal. It is a way for us to justify the abandonment of people who — we insist — were given opportunities and squandered them. Even if it were possible to achieve equality of opportunity, it's not an achievement worth fighting for.

Call it the *Good Will Hunting* problem. The title character and his friend Chuckie (played by Ben Affleck) both expect to work menial jobs their whole lives, by virtue of having been born working-class in South Boston rather than rich in Back Bay. Will gets out, not because he is Chuckie's moral better or even because he works harder than Chuckie, but because, due to some genetic fluke, he has a near-perfect memory and is a mathematical prodigy. Chuckie, meanwhile, is stuck working jobs he hates, telling Will, "I'd do anything to fuckin' have what you got."

Equality of opportunity promises to help people like Will. It promises to abandon people like Chuckie.

Equality of opportunity is usually defined **in opposition to equality of outcomes**. The idea is that there are *some* people who struggle despite being smart, hard-working, industrious members of society. They deserve the same opportunities that smart, hard-working, industrious people in the upper classes receive. *Good Will Hunting* is an effective romanticization of this ideology, a portrait of a world where a good intellect is all you need to escape poverty, a depiction of equality of opportunity in practice.

That all sounds rather pleasant. But equality of outcomes would also help these poor, smart strivers. The difference is that while equality of outcomes promises gains for every poor person, equality of opportunity explicitly leaves some people out. It tells the poor who are not Mensa members, who don't have the work ethic of John Henry, that they deserve nothing. It gives Will Hunting everything, and offers his Southie friends squat.

But the people equality of opportunity abandons do not deserve to be abandoned, for the simple reason that they did next to nothing to deserve their lot. If you separate out socioeconomic factors, a huge chunk of people's economic success is determined by genetic variations beyond anyone's control.

WE LOOK AT AN OFT-SUSPENDED KID WITH A 1.4 GPA AND SEE A DELINQUENT. WE LOOK AT A VIOLINIST WITH A 4.0 AND SEE OURSELVES

A 2005 paper by Harvard sociologist **Christopher Jencks and Laura Tach** (then at Harvard, now at Cornell) estimated that about two-fifths of the correlation between parents' and children's earnings can be attributed to genetic factors. Research by behavioral geneticist **Robert Plomin** comparing British standardized test results of twins and non-twin siblings suggested that genes explained a substantial share of the variation in scores. The point is not to identify the exact size of the effect. All we need to acknowledge is that genes play a nontrivial role.

That implies that even in a world of pure equality of opportunity, where environmental inequalities were eliminated and the Will Hunting of the world had an equal shot at success, there would be inequality. There would be an overclass and an underclass, people who do better or worse due to no fault of their own. Chuckie would still be throwing his back out working construction. This is the end goal that the opportunity agenda is hurtling toward. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel once **noted**, "When racial and sexual injustice have been reduced, we shall still be left with the great injustice of the smart and the dumb, who are so differently rewarded for comparable effort."



Residents of New York City apartments with lead paint protest in 2003. | Spencer Platt/Getty Images

This matters in practice. When specific parts of the government try to pursue equality of opportunity, they not only disadvantage people due to genetics, they also disadvantage them based on inequalities between families and neighborhoods that the opportunity egalitarians haven't stamped out yet.

Welfare reform, for example, was meant to foster equality of opportunity. It sought to distinguish between the poor who were willing to work hard, abstain from drugs, and otherwise prove their virtue from the poor who were not: the deserving poor from the undeserving poor. But think about who falls through the cracks here. We know, for example, that lead paint is more prevalent in poor neighborhoods. We also know that **lead poisoning hurts children's IQs**, their ability to pay attention, and their school achievement, and that its effects on cognition last through adulthood. Many victims of lead poisoning are just not going to be able to hold a job, or to work enough hours to get by. They won't be able to work as hard as our welfare system demands they work.

AN OPPORTUNITY IS ONLY AN OPPORTUNITY IF IT CAN BE SQUANDERED — EVEN IF THAT SQUANDERING IS A CONSEQUENCE OF POVERTY, DEPRIVATION, AND LEAD POISONING

We could choose to help them despite that, to offer a **basic income** so that their injury doesn't condemn them to a life of poverty. But we don't choose that. Instead, we choose work requirements. We choose "responsibility." If they are really severely

impaired and can persuade the Social Security Administration as much, we might give them a pittance. But if they're among the large number of disabled people who can't get on insurance, who can't stand in front of a bureaucrat and prove that they're "deserving," or who *can* work but just can't work enough to survive, we sort them into the basket of people who don't deserve society's help. If we just cared about equality of outcomes, this sorting wouldn't be necessary. But focusing on equality of opportunity demands it. An opportunity is only an opportunity if it can be squandered — even if that squandering is a consequence of poverty, deprivation, and lead poisoning.

This obsession with effort, the conviction that it not only *is* the main difference between success and failure but *ought* to be as well, pervades the discourse on equality of opportunity. But effort is not the main difference between success and failure, nor should it be.

The motivation to work hard and make a serious effort isn't simply a personal choice. It's the result of millions of environmental and genetic factors: Did your parents push you growing up? Are you predisposed to depression? Did you go to a good school? Were you held as an infant? Did you inhale lead fumes as a child? The ability to work hard is a privilege, spread unevenly across genomes and households, with more going to the rich than to the poor. People who struggle with motivation due to factors beyond their control — be it genetics or mental illness or socioeconomic deprivation — do not deserve our scorn. They deserve our help.

Elites like to talk about effort because it justifies their own positions. It provides a non-arbitrary explanation for their wealth and privilege. It offers an excuse for elites to look out for disadvantaged people with whom they empathize, and not those with whom they feel no kinship. We look at an oft-suspended kid with a 1.4 GPA and see a delinquent. We look at a violinist with a 4.0 and see ourselves. And so we wind up helping the one who needs less help to begin with.

How would we ever know if opportunity were equal?





Javier Zarracina/Vox

Even if equality of opportunity were possible and desirable, we'd need a way to know if we were getting closer to it. As of 2015, we don't have one.

Proponents of equality of opportunity love to reference statistics on social mobility, on how much someone's economic destiny is controlled by his background, how easy it is to surge from the bottom to the top. The numbers are depressing. **Half of people's incomes** are determined by how much their parents made. A child born at the bottom of the income distribution only has a **9 percent chance** of making it to the top. But the numbers are also, for policymaking purposes, all but useless. They tell us literally nothing about how close we are to equality of opportunity.

In an excellent paper titled **"Would Perfect Mobility be Perfect?"** the British philosopher Adam Swift explains why. He notes that sociologists and other people studying mobility tend to assume that a world in which our incomes aren't related at all to those of our parents is best. "The conception of a society in which people's destinations are quite independent of their origins often acts as an implicit benchmark" in sociological research, he writes. But this is foolish. A society with perfect mobility would not necessarily be perfect.

Typically, mobility is estimated by calculating a statistic economists and sociologists call "intergenerational elasticity of income." That tracks the strength of the relationship between parents' earnings and that of their children.  The intuition behind using this stat is clear enough: We don't want parents' life outcomes to be wholly determinative of their children's life outcomes. If the intergenerational elasticity of income is zero, then every child has an equal chance of ending up on the top of the income distribution as on the bottom, regardless of where they came from.

But we shouldn't actually want that. Intergenerational elasticity of income can go down because poor kids are growing up rich, but it can also go down because middle-class or rich kids are getting poorer.  If poor kids are no better off but middle-class kids suddenly start struggling, intergenerational elasticity of income goes down — but we're not any closer to equality of opportunity. If a billionaire disinherits his son for being gay, that's a boon as far as intergenerational elasticity is concerned. This is madness. The goal isn't — or shouldn't be — to make life harder for people on top. It should be making it easier for people on the bottom to rise.

Sociologists also have a metric that measures that: the odds that a kid born into the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution will reach the top 20 percent as an adult. But this measure, too, is flawed. If every kid in the bottom 20 percent reached the top 20 percent, then by definition they're knocking out kids who grew up in the top 20 percent. If they're doing that because everyone's getting richer and the poorest are gaining the most, great. If they're doing it because wages are generally stagnating but the rich are hurting more, is that a gain, from an equality of opportunity perspective? What good is really being done there?

More to the point, Swift points out that these metrics are indifferent as to *why* people gain or lose income relative to their parents. Suppose we've actually achieved equality of opportunity, and people from poor backgrounds really do have plenty of chances to make it ahead — but none of them take those chances. Fewer poor people would be jumping to the top 20 percent, but that wouldn't be evidence that equality of opportunity hadn't been achieved. Quite the contrary. Or take the opposite scenario:

We have no equality of opportunity, but poor people *are* doing better. Maybe they all just win the lottery or something. From an equality of opportunity perspective, these gains are ill-gotten; they're not coming because poor people worked hard and seized opportunities. But they make the mobility statistics look good.

It's absolutely maddening to see smart people like Raj Chetty and Emmanuel Saez study these statistics under the banner of equality of opportunity when they tell us *nothing at all* about how close we are to that ideal. At any given moment, it's genuinely unclear how we want these numbers to look, or which direction we want them to move in. That renders them basically useless as metrics. I know I want poverty to fall. I know I want incomes to rise. I have genuinely no idea if I want the intergenerational elasticity of income to go up or down. These kinds of numbers don't tell us what we need to know.

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IS A DISTRACTION. IT TAKES OUR EYES OFF THE PRIZE. AND IN THE PROCESS, IT PERPETUATES THE LOGIC THAT LETS ACTUAL INEQUALITY FESTER

The best attempt at identifying a way to measure progress toward equality of opportunity that I've seen comes from the University of Texas's Fishkin. Rather than seeking an unobtainable world with perfect equality of opportunity, or relying on impossible-to-interpret statistical metrics, he argues we should seek out "bottlenecks" that close off opportunities to the poor. Knowing English is a textbook bottleneck; if you're fluent in English, a whole bevy of opportunities are available to you, and if you're not, most of the economy is closed off. A college degree can be a bottleneck; a high school degree is an even bigger one. Professional licensing requirements are bottlenecks, as are old boys' clubs that exclude outsiders from choice careers. Bust up these bottlenecks, or make them easier to pass through, Fishkin argues, and you get closer to equal opportunity.

That all sounds nice. But it doesn't solve the problem of diverse opportunities. Knowing violin is a bottleneck if one wants to play in a symphony. Having access to a luge track is a bottleneck if one wants to be an Olympic luger. Inevitably, because of the diversity of opportunities granted to different children, everyone will face *some* bottlenecks.

More to the point, I'm not really sure we need to, or should, conceive of this in terms of equal opportunity. I don't want more job opportunities available to people without high school diplomas because it's *fairer*. It isn't, necessarily; one could argue it's not fair to people who went to the trouble to get the credential of a high school diploma (or a

college degree, or a professional license) for that effort to suddenly be devalued. I want more opportunities for high school dropouts because I *want their lives to be better*. Equality really has nothing to do with it. The desire isn't egalitarian, but humanitarian.

After equality of opportunity

Equality of opportunity is nearly impossible to measure, but you know what we *do* know how to measure? If people's incomes are growing. How equal the income — and wealth — distribution is. If poverty is falling. If life expectancy is increasing. If children are learning. How long kids are staying in school. How many people lack permanent homes. How many illnesses — physical and mental alike — are going untreated. These things are not necessarily easy to measure. But we can, and do, measure them, and we know how we want the numbers to look at the end of the day.

That's because they're *outcomes*, the thing opportunity egalitarians define themselves in opposition to. By embracing them, we give ourselves goals to strive for, a basis to determine if our politics are working, a clear path forward. By rejecting them, we are left with a morass of conceptual confusion. Equality of opportunity is a distraction. It takes our eyes off the prize. And in the process, it perpetuates the logic that lets *actual* inequality fester. The sooner we stop talking about mobility and opportunity and start talking about poverty and suffering, the sooner we can solve these problems.

Equality of opportunity is not the goal. The goal is a good life for all. We should settle for nothing less.

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