

BEYOND CLASS WAR: AMERICANS WANT GOVERNMENT TO PROMOTE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

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Occupy Wall Street has put a public face on the backlash against growing inequality. As most Americans struggle to make ends meet, income and wealth at the very top continue to burgeon, in bad times as well as good. Although rag-tag protesters have been vilified, protests against the widest economic disparities in more than a century resonate with the wider public. For some time, the best research has documented shared American worries about inequality and broad support for steps to enhance opportunity.

Some claim that Americans don't care about economic inequality. According to this argument, everyone just wants a chance to work for the riches promised by the American Dream, and people distrust efforts by government to redistribute the fruits of private economic efforts. There is some truth to this. Survey researchers have repeatedly documented an authentic conservative strain in American thinking – especially when the issues are posed as big philosophical questions: government versus the market and free enterprise; individual effort versus public assistance. Yet the very same research shows another longstanding strain in public opinion. Americans reject glaring inequalities and pragmatically favor government programs specifically tailored to expand economic opportunity and protect against economic insecurities and vulnerabilities.

Americans of all Backgrounds Worry about Growing Inequality

- Asked whether the distribution of U.S. income and wealth is “fair,” two thirds of Americans disagree. Three quarters say that differences in income are too large. Respondents favor a more even division of the fruits of the economy.
- Views about equality and opportunity are broadly shared across the usual divides of economic wellbeing and race. A majority of Republicans, and a majority of the more affluent, share the same concerns as other Americans. Citizens from all backgrounds are worried about the return of Gilded Age inequalities as a threat to democracy and the American dream.
- Public disgruntlement might be even greater if people accurately understood how much of the national economic pie the very rich are gobbling up. For example, Americans estimate that corporate bosses take in half a million dollars per year; but in reality the CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies average about \$14 million a year in total compensation. The top one percent took less than 10% of all income from the 1950s into the 1970s; their share started to rise during 1980s. By 2010, the super rich claimed a whopping 24%.

What Should Government Do?

Americans favor government action to widen opportunity and protect the vulnerable, but their views are not simple and defy sweeping rhetorical calls for “social justice.” People of all economic backgrounds – and Democrats as well as Republicans – are suspicious of government waste and resent high taxes. Yet most Americans are also keenly aware of the concrete challenges faced by their families and neighbors. They want government to act in specific ways to enhance opportunities and mitigate threats to economic security for vulnerable groups of fellow citizens.

- Across partisan and income lines, Americans have expressed broad support even for bold and expensive programs, as long as they are carefully focused and further rather than counter the values inherent in the American Dream. Solid majorities of the U.S. public have expressed enthusiasm for the G.I. Bill, Social Security, and Medicare – including a willingness to pay taxes dedicated to covering the costs of such efforts.
- Two thirds or more Americans (including six out of ten Republicans and the affluent) favor a range of education programs from early childhood enrichment efforts and K-12 schooling to programs that widen access to college. For early childhood education, substantial majorities of Republicans and the affluent defy GOP orthodoxy by accepting the need for taxes to pay for these programs – even to the point of paying higher taxes.
- Even when it comes to helping less privileged adults, similar patterns of broad support exist for public programs such as job training and well-focused assistance to help poor families during rough patches.
- Although recent battles over health reform have led to partisan polarization about the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act of 2010, underlying views about government’s role in ensuring access to health care are much less divided. Just before the 2008 election, majorities of all Americans, including Republicans and higher-income earners, said that government has a responsibility to make sure that all citizens, especially children, receive health care. Today, heated rhetoric has polarized opinion about “Obamacare” along party lines, but substantial majorities regardless of party affiliation support most of the new law’s specific provisions – including generous tax subsidies to enable lower and middle-income citizens to obtain health insurance.

Data come from an innovative 2007 survey and an extensive review of additional opinion data. Read more in Benjamin I. Page and Lawrence R. Jacobs, *Class War? What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).