

**Economic Inequality  
and the American Public**

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## **Abstract**

Many politicians and pundits – and some scholars – argue that most Americans don't know much about economic inequality, don't care about it, oppose egalitarian government programs, and are unwilling to pay taxes for such programs.

A new opinion survey conducted for the authors, together with past surveys, makes clear that these bits of conventional wisdom are incorrect. Most Americans are indeed philosophical conservatives, cherishing opportunity, favoring individual initiative, skeptical of government. But they are also pragmatic egalitarians, looking to government to enhance equal opportunity and to provide economic security. And they are willing to pay for it.

Most Americans are aware of highly unequal pay across occupations and extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth. Most favor reducing those inequalities. Large majorities favor egalitarian government programs to ensure that jobs are available to everyone at good wages; to provide high-quality education from pre-school through college; to ensure that everyone has health care coverage; to ensure that seniors have decent retirement pensions; and to provide food, clothing and shelter to the poor. Most Americans favor having their taxes used for these purposes and are willing to pay more taxes for such purposes. Most favor progressive tax policies, with heavy taxes on the rich.

If policy makers in Washington were to enact all these policies, economic inequality in the United States would be much reduced.