



Role of
GOVERNMENT, FREE
MARKET ECONOMY,
and Attitudes Toward
PUBLIC SPENDING
AND TAXATION

Excerpted From the full report

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY II: AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POVERTY

This section forms part of a larger report exploring public opinion on poverty and related issues. To access the full report and learn more, please go to: [OPPORTUNITYAGENDA.ORG/POVERTY_TO_OPPORTUNITY](https://opportunityagenda.org/poverty_to_opportunity)



Section 5 KEY FINDINGS

- 5.1 The majority of Americans believe the government should play a major role in tackling poverty**
- 5.2 There is growing dissatisfaction with government efforts to reduce poverty**
- 5.3 Americans are conflicted about the role government should play in reducing income and wealth inequality**

5.1

THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN TACKLING POVERTY

In an August 2015 Pew Research Center Governance Survey, respondents were asked what the government’s role should be in helping people get out of poverty: 55 percent said they believe government should play a major role,



A Rising Generation Who Understands Poverty

Millennials are the largest generational cohort since the baby boomers, and their economic self-perceptions may shift the political calculus on poverty. Millennials in the US are more likely to identify as working class than any generation in the last three decades, with more than 55% doing so, increasing the likelihood that they will support efforts to combat poverty. See the Guardian’s [research](#) on millennials and poverty.

38 percent believe government should play a minor role, and 5 percent express the view that government should play no role at all.⁷⁹

Opinion becomes slightly more divided when the question is framed in the context of government spending. When presented with two statements: “the government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt” or “the government today can’t afford to do much more to help the needy,” 46 percent agreed with the first statement, and 47 percent with the second.⁸⁰

5.2

THERE IS GROWING DISSATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO REDUCE POVERTY

The American public’s satisfaction with federal poverty efforts are at a 15-year low. When a 2015 Gallup survey asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with the federal government’s work in 20 different areas, only 16 percent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the federal government’s handling of poverty,⁸¹ compared to 26 percent in 2001, 24 percent in 2005, and 19 percent in 2013.⁸² In another 2015 survey, 6 in 10 people said they think the government is doing a very bad or somewhat bad job of helping people out of poverty. This compares to 36 percent who believe the government is doing a very good or somewhat good job, and 2 percent of Americans who believe helping people out of poverty is not a government job.⁸³

There are major partisan differences in satisfaction with the federal government's efforts to tackle poverty. Gallup poll data demonstrates that Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are the key drivers of the decline in satisfaction with federal poverty efforts. As noted in an accompanying Gallup article, Republicans' satisfaction with the federal government's efforts to handle poverty have taken a significant dive since the election of Barack Obama in 2008. In 2001 and 2005, during George W. Bush's presidency, roughly 4 in 10 Republicans and Republican-leaning were satisfied with government actions to address poverty.⁸⁴ Since the election of Barack Obama, Republican satisfaction has declined to 14 percent. A similar variation is seen when people are examined by ideology, with conservatives' satisfaction with poverty efforts down from 36 percent in 2001 to 16 percent as of May 2015. Liberals' satisfaction is up from 10 percent in 2001 to 17 percent as of May 2015.⁸⁵

Partisan differences may be explained by conflicting opinions about the ideal role government should play in solving the issues of poverty and inequality. Republicans are less supportive of using the federal government to help people out of poverty or to reduce income differences.⁸⁶ In a recent publication, Ron Haskins, a researcher for The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, gives some context to this conflict of opinion. "The poll results are consistent with respective philosophies of the two parties," he notes; "namely, Democrats favor higher taxes and bigger government to solve the nation's domestic problems, including help for the poor and boosting economic mobility, while Republicans favor lower taxes, less government, and more personal and civic responsibility to deal with poverty and opportunity."⁸⁷ Political commentators have noted that policies introduced during the Obama administration, namely the Affordable Care Act, are seen by many Republicans and conservatives as being in direct opposition to the ideals of small government and even an attempt by the Obama administration to redistribute wealth.⁸⁸

However, Haskins's cross-tabulation of data revealed that lower-income Republicans' views diverge significantly from high-income Republicans. When asked in a 2015 survey⁸⁹ if the government should play a "major role," "minor role," or "no role at all" in helping people out of poverty, 53 percent of low-income Republicans support the government playing a major role versus only 24 percent of high-income Republicans.⁹⁰

5.3

AMERICANS ARE CONFLICTED ABOUT THE ROLE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PLAY IN REDUCING INCOME AND WEALTH INEQUALITY

While the majority of Americans are in agreement that the government should play a major role in tackling poverty, opinion is more mixed when it comes to the role government should play in tackling income and wealth inequality.

Since 1974, the General Social Survey has asked respondents if Washington should reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or giving income assistance to the poor, or if the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences between the rich and the poor.⁹¹ Respondents are presented with a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 meaning a strong belief that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor, and a score of 7 indicating a strong belief that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences.

Analysis of this data shows that public support for the higher taxation of the rich to reduce income inequality has remained stable over the last three decades, however more Americans strongly support government intervention than strongly oppose. When the question was posed in 1974, roughly 19 percent of respondents were strongly in support of government intervention in reducing the gap between the rich and poor people through higher taxation of the rich, while roughly 12 percent were in strong opposition. By 1990, there had been minimal change, with 20 percent in strong support of government intervention and 10 percent in opposition. Roughly 21 percent of Americans were in strong support of government intervention in closing the gap between the rich and poor in 2015, possibly through higher taxation on the rich, while 15 percent were strongly opposed to such measures.⁹²

American's attitudes towards taxation have been explored in-depth in a new report, "Taxlandia," published by Topos Research Partnerships. The research notes that there is a prevailing perception among the American public that lower taxes are "better." When asked to think about the taxes they pay at the federal, state, and local levels, and whether the amount they pay is

“high,” “low,” or “about right,” the majority of Americans (63 percent) believe their taxes are currently too high, compared to 32 percent who believe their taxes are about right, and roughly 2 percent who believe they are too low.⁹³ In addition, while the majority of those surveyed agree that government assistance helps people meet their needs (84 percent) and helps lift people out of poverty (50 percent), notions about over-dependency still hold strong: More than 9 in 10 of Americans surveyed in the Topos study agreed that “government assistance makes people too dependent on government.”⁹⁴



PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.

⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

Tell a new economy story

Americans are increasingly concerned about income inequality, and a substantial majority thinks the government should do something to reduce the gap. This rising public concern presents an important opening for anti-poverty advocates seeking to tell a new story about the economic system and government responsibility. The Topos Partnership and Public Works collaborated on a project which aimed to create a new public conversation on the role of government in the economy. The project included both qualitative and quantitative research, and resulted in a set of recommendations about the elements of a successful message and established central pillars of a new economy story.

Core pillars of a new economy story:

- The economy is man-made and intentional – policy matters.
- Systems and structures affect outcomes.
- Everyone’s interests are connected and interdependent.
- Average people’s economic wellbeing matters.
- Government’s role is fundamental and proactive.
- As citizens, we all have the ability and responsibility to shape the economy we need.⁹⁵

⚡ 1.2 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT:

Topos Partnership and Public Works, “Promoting Broad Prosperity: A Topos Strategy and Research Brief,” October 2009: <http://www.publicworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Public-Works-Topos-Promoting-Broad-Prosperity.pdf>

Topos Partnership and Public Works, “Government, the Economy and We, the People: Research Summary,” October 2009: <http://www.topospartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Government-The-Economy-and-We-The-People.pdf>

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- 14 Ibid., 1974, 1990, 2015.
- 15 Topos Research Partnerships, "Taxlandia," 2016, page TK.
- 16 Ibid., p. 41.
- 17 Topos Partnership and Public Works, "Government, the Economy and We, the People: Research Summary," October 2009. <http://www.topospartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Government-The-Economy-and-We-The-People.pdf> (accessed 11 Sept. 2016).

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