



POLICY PREFERENCES

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 6 KEY FINDINGS

- 6.1 Public support for an increase in the national minimum wage has increased significantly in recent years**
- 6.2 Support for Social Security remains high**
- 6.3 Americans' attitudes about taxation are divided but the majority of Americans now support a more even distribution of money and wealth among people and higher taxation of the highest earners**
- 6.4 The majority of Americans view foreign trade as an opportunity for the economy but are more divided on the benefits of free trade agreements**
- 6.5 Americans are more open to living in racially diverse communities**

- 6.6 Americans are largely supportive of subsidized housing**
- 6.7 While opinion is divided across party lines, many Americans are satisfied and supportive of the Affordable Care Act**
- 6.8 Affirmative action remains a somewhat contentious issue**
- 6.9 The majority of Americans support continuation of programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, but there is stigma attached to the term “welfare.”**

6.1**PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR AN INCREASE IN THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE HAS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY IN RECENT YEARS.**

As of 2015, three-quarters (76 percent) of Americans support raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10 per hour—a nine-point increase compared to 2010 when 67 percent of Americans were in favor and a 7-point increase since 2013 (69 percent).⁹⁵ The majority (59 percent) of Americans also support raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, but as noted by researchers at PRRI, there is less agreement across party lines. Roughly equal numbers of Democrats favor raising the minimum wage to either \$10.10 or \$15 (91 percent vs. 84 percent, respectively). In contrast, while 6 in 10 Republicans support raising the minimum wage to \$10.10, only a third (32 percent) say they favor raising it to \$15 per hour.⁹⁷

6.2**SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL SECURITY REMAINS HIGH.**

Social Security remains one of the most universally supported social safety nets. In a January 2016 poll, more than 8 in 10 surveyed respondents expressed the view that protecting the future of Social Security is an extremely or very important issue that should be tackled by the next president of the United States.⁹⁸

6.3**AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT TAXATION ARE DIVIDED BUT THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS NOW SUPPORT A MORE EVEN DISTRIBUTION OF MONEY AND WEALTH AMONG PEOPLE AND HIGHER TAXATION OF THE HIGHEST EARNERS.**

In a 2015 New York Times and CBS poll, respondents were asked how they feel about the distribution of money and wealth in the United States, specifically, if they feel the distribution of money and wealth is fair or that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among more people?⁹⁹ Nearly 7 in 10 (66 percent) of those surveyed agree that money and wealth in the United States should be more evenly distributed among more people, compared to just 27 percent who think the

distribution is fair.¹⁰⁰ In the same survey when asked if they support or oppose raising taxes on people earning more than \$1 million per year, just under 7 in 10 (68 percent) support higher taxes on those earning more than \$1 million, while about a third (30 percent) oppose this measure.¹⁰¹ There are significant partisan differences: 87 percent of Democrats support higher taxes on people earning more than \$1 million vs. 53 percent of Republicans.

6.4

THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS VIEW FOREIGN TRADE AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE ECONOMY BUT ARE MORE DIVIDED ON THE BENEFITS OF FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS.

In recent months, foreign trade deals have been increasingly discussed in the context of unemployment and inequality,¹⁰² with Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump making the reform of trade agreements a cornerstone of his campaign. Debate has centered on the role existing trade deals have played in the loss of manufacturing jobs among the American working class. Survey data spanning more than 20 years indicates that while Americans' overall attitude towards foreign trade has become more positive, as of 2016, the majority of Americans support more restrictions on trade policy.

Gallup polls have asked about foreign trade since 1992, presenting respondents with two statements:

- 1 Foreign trade is an opportunity for economic growth through increased U.S. exports.
- 2 Foreign trade is a threat to the economy from foreign exports.¹⁰³

Opinions on these statements have fluctuated over the years, with the percentage of people viewing foreign trade as a threat reaching a high of 52 percent in 2008 and a low of 33 percent in 2015. In 1992, the public was almost evenly split, with 48 percent perceiving foreign trade as an opportunity for economic growth and 44 perceiving it as a threat.¹⁰⁴ By 2000, 56 percent of surveyed Americans viewed foreign trade as an opportunity, while roughly 35 percent deemed it a threat. As of April 2016, the majority (58 percent)

view foreign trade as an economic opportunity, while only 34 percent agreed that it is a threat to the economy. This compares to 54 percent agreeing with “opportunity” and 38 percent agreeing with the threat statement in 2014.¹⁰⁵

However, as Gallup researcher Frank Newport noted, when trade policy was linked directly to job security in an April 2016 Bloomberg survey, public opinion almost reversed. Respondents were asked if they thought U.S. trade policy should have more restrictions on imported foreign goods to protect Americans jobs, or have fewer restrictions to enable American consumers to have the most choices and lower prices.¹⁰⁶ Sixty-five percent of those surveyed agreed with the “more restrictions” statement, 22 percent believed there should be fewer restrictions, and 12 percent were unsure.¹⁰⁷ This opinion has not seen much movement in the last year. When a similarly worded question was posed in a June 2015 poll, 66 percent of respondents agreed that “protecting American industries and jobs by limiting imports from other countries” is preferential to “allowing free trade so people can buy products at low prices no matter what country they come from.”¹⁰⁸

Survey data from 2014, 2015, and 2016 suggest that the public is growing more concerned about the benefits of free trade agreements. When asked whether the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has been a good or bad thing for the U.S. economy, a large segment of Americans (44 percent) says NAFTA has been bad for the economy, while only 29 percent say it has been a positive development. Republicans are more likely to view NAFTA as bad than Democrats and Independents (53 percent versus 36 percent and 46 percent, respectively).¹⁰⁹ When a similar question was posed in a May 2015 Pew survey, 58 percent of respondents said free trade agreements are a good thing for the United States and 33 percent said they are bad. In 2014, similarly, 59 percent of people surveyed said free trade was good, while just 30 percent said it was a bad thing.¹¹⁰

6.5

AMERICANS ARE MORE OPEN TO LIVING IN RACIALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

The General Social Survey has included questions exploring Americans' willingness to live in racially diverse neighborhoods for more than four decades. Data from 1990, 2000, and 2014 suggests that Americans are increasingly open to living in racially diverse areas. In 1990, the GSS survey asked participants whether they would be in favor, somewhat in favor, neither in favor nor opposed, somewhat opposed, or very much opposed to living in a neighborhood where half of their neighbors were black. In 1990, a large segment of Americans (42 percent) was strongly or somewhat opposed to living in neighborhoods where half of their neighbors would be black, compared to 15.9 percent of respondents who were strongly or somewhat in favor. By 2000, the rate of opposition had decreased to 26.9 percent, while the number of Americans expressing that they were strongly/somewhat in favor of living in a neighborhood where half of the residents are black was up by more than 10 percentage point (27.5 percent). As of 2014, only 18.5 percent of Americans strongly oppose/oppose living in a neighborhood in where half the population is black, and 26.6 percent are strongly or somewhat in favor.¹¹¹

Trends in attitudes concerning residential segregation present important implications for anti-poverty advocates. Cross-tabulation of General Social Survey data reveals that people's attitude about residential segregation, specifically strongly favoring or strongly opposing living in a neighborhood where half the residents are black, is a strong predictor of attitudes about affirmative action, income inequality, government assistance to the poor, the causes of racial inequality, and support for improving the conditions of black Americans. For instance, people who strongly favor living in an area where half the residents are black are more than six times as likely than people who strongly oppose this (62.1 percent vs. 10 percent) to believe that "too little" government resources are being allocated to improving the conditions of black people in America.¹¹²

6.6



AMERICANS ARE LARGELY SUPPORTIVE OF SUBSIDIZED HOUSING

Americans are not only more open to living in more racially diverse

communities, they are largely supportive of providing affordable housing to people struggling in the current economic climate.

When asked whether subsidizing affordable housing would be very effective, somewhat effective, not too effective, or not at all effective when it comes to helping people who are struggling, more than 7 in 10 (74 percent) of people surveyed expressed the belief that housing subsidies would very effective or somewhat effective.¹¹³

Poverty is Urban, Rural, Suburban, and Exurban

Even communities traditionally thought of as affluent are not immune to poverty. A recent PBS NewsHour **Weekend story** showed how soaring home and property values are forcing lower income and even middle class people into living in RV's in the Silicon Valley's boom town of Mountain View, CA, the home of Google.

6.7

WHILE OPINION IS DIVIDED ACROSS PARTY LINES, MANY AMERICANS ARE SATISFIED AND SUPPORTIVE OF THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Roughly one quarter (24 percent) of Americans support an expansion to the Affordable Care Act, 16 percent believe it should be kept the same, and 22 percent say the law should be repealed and/or replaced with a Republican alternative.¹¹⁴

There are also major partisan differences in opinion as well as divisions between racial and ethnic groups. The majority (69 percent) of Democrats support expansion of the law, or it being kept the same, while more than 8 in 10 Republicans (76 percent) believe the law should be repealed and replaced. In addition, while nearly 7 in 10 (66 percent) of black Americans and nearly 6 in 10 (57 percent) of Latinos support the maintenance or expansion of the law, the majority of white Americans (56 percent) believe the law should be repealed or replaced.¹¹⁵

6.8

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION REMAINS A SOMEWHAT CONTENTIOUS ISSUE

The Fisher vs. University of Texas Supreme Court case, which sought to challenge the use of race in the college admission, has brought the question of affirmative action into national discussions once again. Results from a recent survey show that the majority (8 in 10) of Americans strongly oppose or somewhat oppose race-based preferences in hiring, specifically in the hiring of black Americans.¹¹⁶ Data spanning 1990 to 2014 shows that the majority of Americans also believe that whites are disadvantaged by the existence of affirmative action. When asked in both 1990 and 2000 if white Americans are hurt by affirmative action, 65 percent stated that it was very likely or somewhat likely. As of 2014, the majority (57.8 percent) of Americans are still in agreement.¹¹⁷ The public is somewhat less oppositional to hiring preferences that take gender into account. In a 2015 survey, respondents were asked if they were for or against the preferential hiring of women. More than 6 in 10 (66.4 percent) are strongly against hiring that favors women, compared to 33.8 percent who are strongly for the preferential hiring of women.¹¹⁸

6.9

THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS SUPPORT CONTINUATION OF PROGRAMS SUCH AS THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) AND MEDICAID, BUT THERE IS STIGMA ATTACHED TO THE TERM “WELFARE”

More than 6 in 10 Americans believe that the current level of assistance to poor Americans is “too little.”¹¹⁹ At the same time, survey data from between 2010 and 2014 suggest that stigma attached to the word “welfare” is still shaping public perceptions. When asked about what programs should be prioritized, when “welfare” is included as an umbrella term, public support is low. A 2015 study revealed that “welfare” (a catchall term used in this survey to refer to all welfare programs) ranked in 22nd place among spending priorities, well below Social Security (ranked 4th or 5th between 1998 and 2014) and education and halting crime, which are now ranked as the first and second-most important spending priority, respectively.¹²⁰ In addi-

tion, despite the economic downturn, support for welfare did not rise from 2010 to 2014 but has instead declined since 2008. As noted in the report, “People favor the idea of the government helping those with low incomes, but many consider welfare a failed program.” When Americans are asked about specific programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly referred to as food stamps or Medicaid, the majority of the public is supportive of those programs. For instance, when asked in an April 2015 survey if government programs assisting poor people like Medicaid or food stamps should be abolished, nearly 7 in 10 (69.5 percent) of those surveyed strongly or somewhat disagree, compared to 19.8 percent who strongly or somewhat agree that these programs should be abolished.¹²⁰



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

Build on policies with high levels of support

A number of anti-poverty strategies receive high levels of support from the public. Lifting up these popular solutions while explaining and promoting more complex or less popular ones can help to build broader and more lasting support. Solutions with the greatest support include:

- Raising the federal minimum wage.
- Increasing taxes on those earning over \$1 million annually.
- The continuation of SNAP and Medicaid.

Tell a compelling story with the data

In 2015, we conducted an extensive literature review of research examining public attitudes towards income, gender, and racial inequality, including message-testing experiments and surveys. A key finding of our exploration of the literature is the centrality of data presentation in building an effective message. As noted in the literature review, many of the arguments advocates make in support of public policies to solve problems of inequality are based on statistics involving large numbers and complex systems. Communications scholars from the Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) recommend using a technique they call “social math,” which they define as follows:

“Social math is the practice of translating statistics and other data so that they become interesting to the journalist, meaningful to the audience, and helpful in advancing public policy. Unlike infographics which use visuals such as charts and graphics to present data, social math is the practice of making large numbers comprehensible and compelling by placing in the social context that provides meaning. The best social math surprises people and provokes an emotional response”.¹²²

BMSG offers pointers on how advocates can use social math to make data more compelling:

- A number broken down by time: Given the amount over the course of one year, what does that look like per day, per hour, or per minute?

- A number broken down by place: Comparing a statistic with a well-known place can give people a sense of the statistic's magnitude.
- A localized number: Make numbers meaningful to community members and policymakers in a specific region.
- A comparison to familiar things: Compare and contrast numbers with something easily identifiable to the audience.
- An ironic comparison: In order to draw attention to an unmet need, suggest more appropriate use of resources, point out skewed priorities, and make a case for a policy change.

⚡ 1.2 **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT**

Berkeley Media Studies Group: Using social math to support your policy issue: <http://bmsg.org/blog/social-math-support-public-health-policy>



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