



NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

Public Opinion on Poverty,
Income Inequality and
Public Policy: 1996 - 2002

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PREFACE

At the start of the 21st century, wide disparities in economic well-being and opportunity remain one of the most critical problems facing our society. After two decades of stagnating wages, rising health care, housing and child care costs-many Americans are struggling to meet their basic needs. Over 31 million live in poverty. With the boom of the 1990s decisively over, an era of budget cuts and growing unemployment stands likely to increase the economic vulnerability of low- and middle-income families. For advocates seeking to improve social policies to bolster income and opportunity, public opinion on these issues offers a measure of optimism.

The public strongly supports a range of policies to improve economic well-being, including expanded child care and health care, tax credits, and increasing the minimum wage. This support is reinforced by an enduring and strong belief in core American values of equality of opportunity, fairness and government responsibility. As the report explains, this support reflects the new context in which debates over poverty take place. Reform of the welfare system coupled with changes in the economy, have shifted the terrain of the debate. The old frames-focused on the "undeserving poor" and issues of dependency and illegitimacy-have decreasing traction in current public policy debates. This provides advocates with an enormous opportunity to reframe the debate, and expand public support.

This report was first published in November 2001, and is now updated with new polling data, drawing on over two dozen surveys. The report examines areas of broad support among the public, as well as enduring conflicts and divisions. The central conclusion is that there are new opportunities for building a public consensus around the goals of reducing poverty and economic insecurity. At the same time, the report considers the enduring challenges advocates face in harnessing this support to create bold, unified action.

This study is the first report released by Dēmos that explores the context of the current debate over poverty, inequality, and public policy. The second report, *Crossing Divides*, examines shifts in values among policymakers and politicians on these issues. Like this report, *Crossing Divides* highlights promising areas of consensus - while identifying enduring disagreements and tensions. Both studies were undertaken as part of Dēmos' ongoing efforts to focus new public and political attention on the challenge of closing America's prosperity gap, and to help frame issues in ways that encourage significant policy reform and investment.

I hope you find this report informative and useful to your work.



Miles Rapoport
President, Dēmos

OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

The following report analyzes public opinion between 1996 and 2001. The report draws on over a dozen surveys commissioned by non-profit organizations, media outlets and foundations, as well as from two regularly conducted academic surveys. The results outlined in this report indicate that while long-standing disagreements about the causes of poverty endure, the public stands united in support of policies to make work pay and improve the standard of working families' lives. This support appears to emerge from a growing recognition that hard work is no longer a guarantee against poverty and income insecurity. With strong support for public policies ranging from raising the minimum wage to providing health care, there is cause for optimism that a policy agenda around economic security could garner wide public support.

COMPETING VALUES

- Opinions about the causes of and solutions to economic insecurity are shaped by two core values driving the ideology of the American dream and our social consciousness: individualism (embodied by hard work) and egalitarianism (a belief in fairness).
- Individualism and egalitarianism can be viewed as competing values—both vying for emphasis in explaining and solving the economic insecurity facing families. This competition helps explain the seemingly inconsistent opinions that on the one hand blame individuals for being poor, and on the other, recognize that inequality is a serious problem that contributes to today's problems.

POVERTY AND OPPORTUNITY

- The public is divided over the primary cause of poverty. Roughly half of Americans believe that a person being poor is due to a lack of individual effort, while the other half attribute poverty to external circumstances beyond individual control.
- Americans agree that work should be a cornerstone of anti-poverty efforts. But they also feel that individual effort alone is not enough to empower families and erase economic insecurity—and support policies that would both enable work and supplement earnings.
- The public is strongly united in affirming the importance of equal opportunity: 79% agree that the country would have fewer problems if people were treated more equally and 90% believe society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

The public is divided over the causes of poverty: Roughly half believe that a person being poor is due to a lack of individual effort—the other half attribute poverty to external circumstances beyond a person's control.

Many Americans are feeling left behind.

Over one-third view themselves as “have-nots”—compared to just 17% in 1988.

INEQUALITY

- At the end of an era of great economic prosperity, many Americans are feeling left behind. In 2001, over one-third of Americans view themselves as a “have-not”—compared to just 17% in 1988.
- Two-thirds believe that something needs to be done about the income gap between the wealthy and other Americans. To help close the gap, they support a range of policies including child care and health care subsidies.

RENEWING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

The public acknowledges that many jobs no longer provide a guarantee against poverty and believe the government has a responsibility to ensure those who work hard are not poor.

Making Work Pay. The public supports a range of policies to supplement the incomes of working families and help meet their families’ basic needs:

- There is almost universal support for raising the minimum wage and providing some form of guaranteed health coverage for all Americans.
- The majority of Americans favor tax credits for low-income families including the Earned Income Tax Credit and child tax credits.

Enabling Work. Policies to help parents enter and function in the job market are also supported by most Americans:

- Nearly three-quarters support increased spending on child care for low-income families, child care tax credits for all but the wealthiest families, and tax incentives for American businesses to invest in child care.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The research presented in this paper offers two important findings for advocates: 1) American beliefs about poverty issues are dually influenced by the values of individualism and egalitarianism, and 2) the public is aware that many jobs do not pay enough to keep a family out of poverty and support policies to help ease expenses and bolster the incomes of workers.

Finding ways to communicate progressive ideas that resonate with public values about work, individual responsibility and fairness is a significant challenge facing advocates. The data in this paper suggest that using messages that reinforce progressive values of fairness and equality (eg, if you work hard, you shouldn't be poor) could be a good starting point for advocates.

- Further research, including focus group and polling, is needed to better understand the values guiding Americans' policy preferences.
- New public opinion research is needed about several public policy solutions, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), and living wage policies. Research on how the public feels about large disparities in *wealth* accumulation would also be valuable.
- Communications research (such as focus groups and message testing) is necessary to help identify messages that can reconcile the competing values of individualism and equality of opportunity.

POVERTY

Americans aren't thinking much about the problem of poverty today. When asked to name the top two issues government should address, only about one in 10 name poverty, welfare or a related issue.¹ However, when asked about poverty directly, people do believe it is a big problem and show strong support for ameliorative public policies.

CAUSES OF POVERTY

People's views on poverty are very complex. The complexity is in part due to competing values that on the one hand attribute success in life to hard work and effort, and on the other hand, recognize that sometimes circumstances are beyond an individual's control.

The conflict between these two values is reflected in the fact that people are divided between believing in individual-based explanations for being poor and believing in external or structural explanations.

- When asked to choose between two statements about the cause of poverty today—48% side with the belief that “people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty,” while 45% believe that “circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor.”²

Beliefs about the cause of poverty are divided along racial, economic and partisan lines:

The poor, blacks, and Democrats are more likely to believe that the biggest cause of poverty today is circumstances.

Republicans, whites and the non-poor are more likely to believe poverty is caused by people not doing enough.

The divisions over the cause of poverty are further split along racial, economic and partisan lines. Among the poor (those with incomes below the official poverty line), 57% believe that the biggest cause of poverty today is circumstances, while 39% attribute it to lack of effort. Blacks are more likely than whites to view outside circumstances as the main cause of poverty (57% to 44%). In contrast, Republicans are much more likely to say that poverty is caused by people not doing enough—63% of Republicans hold this view compared to 37% of Democrats.³

It's worth noting that many people believe both individual and external factors are to blame for poverty. As Table 1 illustrates, 17% to 31% of people

volunteered “both” as an explanation when asked—high percentages for a volunteered response. Therefore, it may be more likely that the majority of the public feels that both individual and external causes are operating and would answer accordingly if explicitly given the option.

Table 1. Causes of Poverty.

In your opinion, which is more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on his (sic) part, or circumstances beyond his control?			
	Lack of Effort	Circumstances	Both (volunteered)
2001*	48	45	NA
1997	39	44	14
1994	44	34	18
1992	27	52	18
1988	40	37	17
1984	33	34	31
1982	37	39	17

Source: 2001 data: Kaiser Family Foundation/NPR/Harvard University, 2001. All other years: various organizations as reported in Washington Post/Harvard University/Kaiser Family Foundation, 1998 National Survey of American Values.
 * Question worded differently than other years: “In your opinion, which is the bigger cause of poverty today—that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, or that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor?” No respondents volunteered a “Both” response.

However, there is a tension inherent in the core American values of individualism and egalitarianism. The extension of the logic that individual effort is responsible for each person’s success is that the failure to get ahead is rooted in a lack of individual effort (rather than in structural constraints). However, Americans place great importance on equal opportunity, recognizing that giving everyone an equal chance to succeed is central to a healthy society. An extension of this logic is that individual failures are indicative of broader inequalities and differences in opportunity. Opinion research confirms this duality in beliefs that in part rests the blame on the individual and in part, believes that the lack of a level playing field is responsible for “society’s problems.”

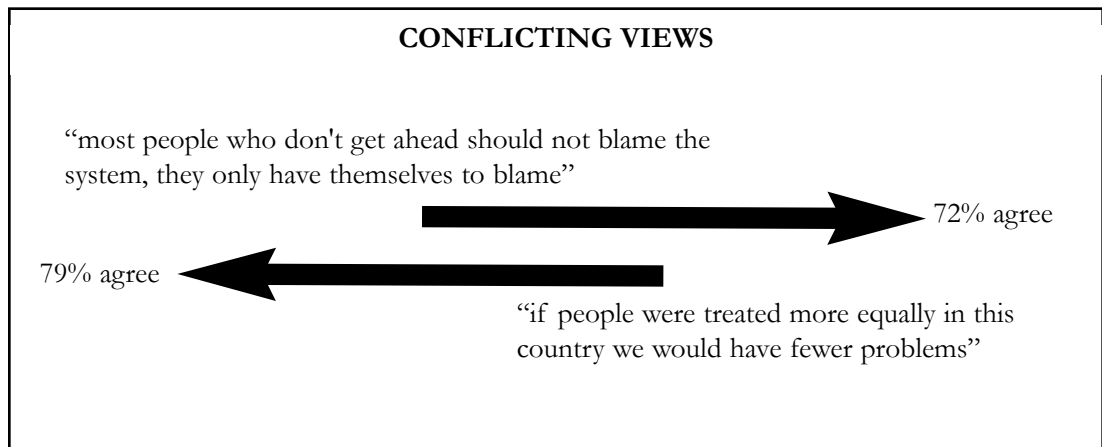
For example, people have strong expectations about the need for individuals to be economically “self-sufficient:”

- 78% agree with the statement that people should take responsibility for their own lives and economic well-being and not expect others to help (47% strongly agree; 31% somewhat agree).⁴
- 72% agree that “most people who don’t get ahead should not blame the system, they only have themselves to blame (36% strongly agree; 36% somewhat agree).”⁵

Yet the majority of people also say that the lack of a level playing field is a major contributor to society's problems:

70% believe the government has a responsibility to do away with poverty in this country.

- 65% agree (40% strongly; 25% somewhat) “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance.”⁶
- 79% agree (55%strongly; 20% somewhat) that “if people were treated more equally in this country we would have fewer problems.”⁷
- 90% agree (52% completely; 38% mostly) that “our society should do what is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.”⁸



GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IN REDUCING POVERTY

Opinions about the role and ability of government in solving poverty are mixed. The public believes the government has a responsibility to do away with poverty in this country—fully 86% (65% strongly) support this notion.⁹ There is also overwhelming agreement that the “federal government should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all Americans,” with 84% agreeing with this statement.¹⁰ Yet the public is divided about whether the government could eliminate poverty. If government spending were no object, 47% believe poverty could be eliminated, while 49% think it could not.¹¹

The lack of faith in government to solve poverty may explain the public’s reticence to increase spending on these efforts. Only 44% agree that “the government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper in debt.” With regard to the level of government spending on “assistance to the poor,”

Americans think the country is either spending the right amount (36%) or too little (38%).¹²

However, when asked about specific public policy measures the government could take to help the poor, large majorities express support for a range of policies, including increasing the minimum wage and spending more on housing, health care and child care. 57% of those supporters say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to fund these policies—three-fourths of whom were willing to pay \$200 more a year.¹³ (See Table 4 for details).

AMERICAN DREAM/ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Some polls have attempted to assess American’s beliefs in the American dream—the deeply held belief that anyone can get ahead in life with hard work. Regardless of whether the question actually uses the phrase “American Dream”, people’s faith in the American Dream is far from absolute, and is particularly weak among black Americans.

- 51% of voters believe it is still possible for most Americans to live the American Dream while 34% believe that living the Dream is not possible for most Americans today.¹⁴
- Results do not differ dramatically when “American Dream” is defined for respondents. In 1996, when asked if “the American dream of equal opportunity, personal freedom, and social mobility has become easier or harder to achieve in the past 10 years, 67% responded that it had become harder.¹⁵

54% of white Americans believe it is still possible to live the American Dream.

Only 27% of black Americans agree.

- Lower percentages of black Americans affirm the belief in the American Dream: While 54% of white Americans believe it is still possible to live the American Dream, only 27% of black Americans agree.¹⁶

Americans also believe that living the American Dream will be harder to achieve in the future. A CBS News/New York Times poll in 1998 found that 55% of people feel that “attaining the American Dream” will be harder a generation from now. Only 9% believe it will be easier and 34% believe it will be about the same.¹⁷

The belief that it is possible to work one’s way out of poverty and up the economic ladder is an important tenet of the American Dream. A survey in 2001 shows that many Americans, particularly those with low-incomes, think it is becoming harder to get ahead.

- 48% of Americans believe that “compared with 10 years ago, it is harder today for a person to start out poor, work hard, and to get out of poverty.” A closer examination of responses by income levels reveal that individuals below the poverty line are more skeptical about the ability to work their way out of poverty with 62% of those under 100% of the poverty line believing it is harder, compared to 44% of those above 200% of the poverty line (Table 2).¹⁸

In addition to believing it has become harder for people to work their way out of poverty, almost half of Americans—a full 49%—are concerned that they will be poor at some point in their lives.¹⁹

Table 2. Easier/Harder to Get Ahead.

“Compared to 10 years ago, do you think it is easier today or harder today for a person to start out poor, work hard, and to get out of poverty?”		
	% Easier	% Harder
Total	44	48
< 100%	34	62
100-200%	34	59
200%+	48	44

INCOME INEQUALITY

Although the country experienced its greatest sustained economic expansion in the 1990s, more and more Americans are aware that they’re being left behind.

- More than four in ten (44%) people now see society as divided between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ compared to 26% who felt that way in 1988.²⁰ Over one-third of Americans view themselves as have-nots, up from 17% in 1988 (Table 3).²¹

By the end of the 1990s, middle class and affluent Americans reported being more satisfied with the quality of life they can afford, while poorer Americans remain largely dissatisfied. Since 1992, the proportion of Americans saying it is fairly easy for them to afford the things they want has risen from 39% to 50%. However, among low income Americans that percentage has grown only two points, from 24% in 1992 to 26% today.

About one-quarter of Americans reported having problems paying for several basic necessities, including medical and health care (27%), gasoline or other transportation costs (25%) and utility bills (23%). Sixteen percent of Americans reported not having enough money to buy food, while 21% didn't have enough money to buy clothing. The inability to meet basic needs was especially acute among those households earning under \$20,000—more than half reported times when they could not pay for health care, and over a third said they have struggled to buy food in the last year.²²

Americans see the widening income gap as a problem. Nearly two-thirds of likely voters believe that “the income gap between the wealthy and other Americans has become so great that something needs to be done about it.”²³ And they overwhelmingly support a range of policies, including subsidies for health care and child care, to help close the gap.²³

While specific proposals to ease inequities enjoy wide support, the public is less enthusiastic about the general concept of income redistribution. In 1998 only 30% agreed that “it is the responsibility of government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and people with low incomes.” Using a scale from 1 to 7, another survey found 42% of people expressed some level of support for government to reduce income differences.²⁴

Nearly two-thirds of likely voters believe “the income gap between the wealthy and other Americans has become so great that something needs to be done about it.”

Table 3. Society is Divided into the Haves/Have-Nots.

Believes Society is Divided Into the Haves and the Haves Not		
	% Yes	% No
2000	44	53
1999	39	59
1988	26	71
1984	31	61
Source: Pew Center for People and the Press, 2001.		

There are several important differences in attitudes between black and white Americans about income inequality specifically between the two groups. Black Americans are much less likely to believe that income differences between whites and blacks will eventually close. 71% of whites compared to 42% of blacks think that “black Americans will ever be able to close the income gap and earn as much money as white Americans.”²⁵

²²To close the income gap, 93% support continuing “welfare reforms that require able-bodied people to work”; 91% support tax credits to companies that provide health care and other benefits to employees; 90% support public works jobs; 89% support more tax breaks and tax credits for the working poor; and 89% support more government support for daycare that serves low and middle income workers.

MEDIA EFFECT ON PUBLIC OPINION

Understanding survey responses to questions regarding poverty is aided by a theory that connects media to public opinion. To explain how media exposure can affect survey responses, the following commonly asked question will be used as an example:

"In your opinion, which is more often to blame if a person is poor-lack of effort on their part, or circumstances beyond their control?"

One model of how people respond to survey questions suggests that when asked a question such as the one above, a person will consider ideas or information that are at the "top of the head" to help formulate their response. The connection of survey responses to the media lies in how news coverage works to make some ideas more accessible when answering questions.

Shanto Iyengar at UCLA has used empirical research to assess how the frames used in news stories affect people's attitudes toward poverty. After exposing viewers to two different "frames" commonly used by news stories-episodic (event oriented, focuses on one person's experience) or thematic (places issues in more general or abstract context), he found that people who viewed episodically framed stories were more likely to blame poverty on individual factors and those who viewed thematically framed stories were more likely to blame systemic factors.

Because episodic frames dominate news stories about poverty, the media effect has been to reinforce notions of individual responsibility for poverty. Iyengar notes in *Is Anyone Responsible?*, "when poverty was described in societal terms, individuals assigned responsibility to societal factors-failed government programs, the political climate, economic conditions, and so on. Conversely, when news coverage of poverty dwelled on particular instances of poor people, individuals were more apt to hold the poor causally responsible."

Reinforcing individualistic tendencies also applies to stories that focus on individual triumph over poverty, such as how one woman worked her way off welfare by working three jobs and going to school at night to get a degree in nursing. While these stories are positive and portray poor individuals as having initiative and a strong work ethic, they also serve to cement the notion that success in life is purely attributable to individual effort, and conversely, that failure to get ahead is due to an individual deficiency. If that person did it, why can't every poor person?

This research illustrates the importance of finding better ways of framing and communicating about poverty and economic insecurity issues. Further work is needed to identify what these new messages should be, but it's clear that such Horatio Alger type stories of individuals "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps" won't help the cause.

Sources:

Shanto Iyengar. *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.

John Zaller. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 1992, Cambridge University Press.

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<http://216.4.58.61/frameworks/issue5.html>

WELFARE REFORM

The public is very supportive of welfare reform. At the same time, people believe that most of the jobs attained by welfare recipients do not pay enough to support a family. Therefore, the public is also very supportive of expanding early education and child care, job training and education programs, and health benefits—all policies that help supplement a family’s wage. The public also believes that these benefits should extend beyond single-parent families and be made available to all low-income working families.

The public still remains skeptical about the true need of welfare recipients. 44% believe that people who receive money from welfare today could get along without it if they tried while 47% believe that most of them really need this help.²⁶ The public is similarly divided over the work ethic of welfare recipients: 47% believe welfare recipients today really want to work, while 44% believe they do not. Differences between Republicans and Democrats on the work ethic of welfare recipients is striking:

- 55% of Democrats believe welfare recipients want to work; 37% do not. Republicans’ beliefs are the exact opposite: 55% of Republicans believe welfare recipients *do not* want to work, while 38% believe they do.²⁷

The public believes there are jobs available for welfare recipients who want them. They also believe these jobs don’t pay enough to support a family.

The majority of the public believes there are jobs available for welfare recipients who want them (78%). But they also believe that these jobs don’t pay enough to support a family (59%). In fact, over 70% believe that most former recipients who have gotten jobs are still poor.³⁰

Given that the majority of the public believes the jobs that welfare recipients obtain are not enough to lift a family out of poverty, it is not surprising that there is strong support for “transitional” government benefits, such as health and child care.²⁹ And the public supports the idea of making these benefits available to the so-called “working poor”—defined as those families in America where the adults have jobs but are still poor. 81% believe that “the working poor should be eligible for the same kinds of help that people who are making the transition from welfare to work get.”³⁰

Reauthorization of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law

When asked about the priorities for the 2002 reauthorization of the welfare reform law, voters placed expanding training, child care and other work supports as the top priority. Voters also rejected increasing the work requirement for welfare recipients to 40 hours.

81% believe that “the working poor should be eligible for the same kinds of help that people who are making the transition from welfare to work get.”

- Fully 88% of voters favor allowing people to fulfill their work requirement by taking job training, and 84% say that education should fulfill the requirement.³¹
- 82% favor (49% strongly) increasing funds for job training, child care, and other welfare-to-work programs.³²
- 83% favor (55% strongly) creating work programs that provide temporary jobs for people leaving welfare who cannot find jobs in the private sector.³³
- 65% of voters want the original 30-hour work requirement for mothers on welfare to be maintained.³⁴

RENEWING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Over the last two decades, American social policy has emphasized the individualistic half of the American dream—focusing on increasing personal responsibility and decreasing so-called deviant behaviors such as out-of-wedlock births. While Americans have always supported encouraging work as a cornerstone of anti-poverty policy, it appears the public is recognizing that personal responsibility can only go so far in ameliorating the economic insecurity and increasing disparities in the quality of life between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

There appears to be growing support for renewing America’s social contract for low- and middle income working families by reducing poverty and expanding economic opportunities to get ahead.

SUPPORT FOR MAKING WORK PAY

Minimum Wage

Polls consistently show that Americans strongly support raising the minimum wage.³⁵ A full 85% support raising the wage today.³⁶

In 2002, 77% of voters favored increasing the minimum wage from \$5.15 per hour to \$8.00 per hour (57% strongly favor). And 79% favor regularly raising the minimum wage to keep up with inflation (55% strongly favor).³⁷

The public rejects many of the common economic arguments used by opponents against raising the minimum wage. 69% of people disagree that “raising the minimum wage would make it harder for low-wage workers to find jobs, because employers would hire fewer people.”³⁸ Additionally, the public sweepingly rejects the argument that raising the minimum wage would cause low wage earners to lose jobs because employers would be unable to afford the higher salaries.³⁹

While not as widely supported as raising the minimum wage, a majority (57%) of Americans favor guaranteeing a minimum income as a way for the government to “help the poor.”⁴⁰

Polls consistently show that Americans

strongly support raising the minimum wage.

85% support increasing it today.

Table 4. Support for Specific Public Policies.

Support for Government Policies to Directly Help the Poor		
	% Support	% Oppose
Increasing the minimum wage	85	14
Increasing tax credits for low-income workers	80	17
Increasing cash assistance for families	54	40
Expanding subsidized daycare	85	12
Spending more for medical care for poor people	83	14
Spending more for housing for poor people	75	23
Making food stamps more available to poor people	61	35
Guaranteeing everyone a minimum income	57	39
Percentages do not add up to 100 because “don’t know” responses are not shown. Source: Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University/NPR, 2001.		

Tax Credits

There is little information on public opinion toward tax credit policies for low-income families. In April 2001, Peter D. Hart Research conducted a poll specifically to gauge support for tax credits including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the child tax credit, as well the general concept of refundable tax credits for low income Americans.

- 43% of voters are very or fairly familiar with the term “earned income tax credit.”
- After describing the EITC to respondents, 66% describe their reaction to the EITC as very or somewhat favorable. Support for the policy extended across the political and income spectrum, although Republicans (55%) were less supportive than Democrats (74%) or Independents (68%). 59% of Americans with household incomes of over \$75,000 favored the policy, while 74% of those with incomes of less than \$30,000 responded favorably to the EITC.
- 39% of voters are very or fairly familiar with the child tax credit.

The public is aware that many jobs do not pay enough to keep a family out of poverty.

They support a range of policies to help ease expenses and bolster the incomes of workers.

Once informed about the policy, 68% describe their response as very or somewhat favorable. Sixty seven percent of voters supported the idea of making the credit refundable so that all low-income families would be eligible for the credit. Like the EITC, support for the child tax credit cuts across income levels and party identification.

- Only about one in five (18%) voters say that they are very or fairly familiar with the term “refundable tax credits.”
- After hearing more about the concept, 52% are very or fairly favorable to the policy.

SUPPORT FOR MEETING BASIC NEEDS

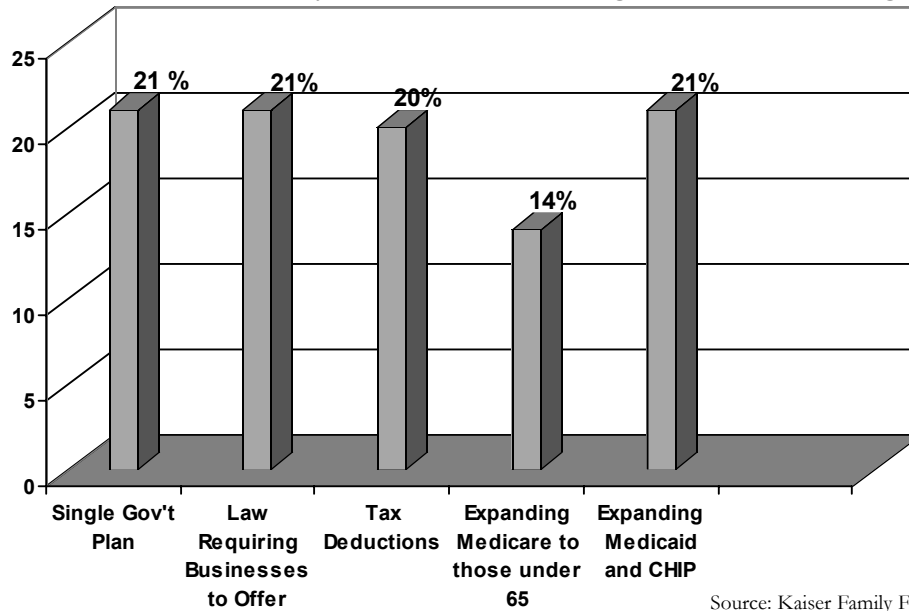
Health Insurance Coverage

The public supports the goal of universal health coverage, despite the polit-

ical defeat of the Clinton healthcare plan. People support a range of policies to achieve this goal, including government funding and laws requiring business to provide health insurance to their employees. There is no consensus among the public about the best approach to ensure health care coverage for all Americans.

- The public is very concerned about the lack of health care. On a scale from 0-10 with 0 being not at all concerned and 10 being extremely concerned, the mean level of concern was 8.28 and the median was 9.⁴¹ 77% believe that the fact that many Americans lack health insurance coverage is a serious problem.⁴²
- Americans want the government to provide health insurance for those not already covered—66% believe this is something the government should do.⁴³ Support is higher among Latinos and blacks: 83% of Latinos and 84% of blacks favor this policy compared to 61% of whites.

Chart 1. Preferred Policy Solution for Expanding Health Care Coverage.



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, April 2000

The lack of consensus on how to guarantee health insurance for more Americans is illustrated in Chart 1. When presented with several policy choices and asked to pick the policy they most prefer, none of the proposed solutions emerges as a clear favorite.

A 2002 survey assessed the favorability of some of these specific proposals:⁴⁴

75% support more government spending on housing for poor people.

57% would be willing to pay more in taxes for this and other programs to help the poor.

- 76% favor requiring businesses to offer private health insurance for their employees.
- 73% would favor offering the uninsured income tax deductions, tax credits or other financial assistance to help them purchase private health insurance.
- 84% favor expanding state government programs for low-income people, like CHIP and Medicaid to provide coverage to the uninsured.
- 80% favor expanding neighborhood health clinics.
- The majority of people oppose a national health plan—only 40% favored a plan in which all Americans would get their insurance from a single government plan.

Although the public does not support a national health care plan, they do believe it's the government's responsibility to ensure coverage. When asked who should have the most responsibility for helping ensure that Americans receive health insurance coverage—the federal government, employers and businesses or individuals themselves—43% say the federal government; 28% say employers and businesses; and 17% say individuals.⁴⁵

Affordable Housing

The public recognizes that finding affordable housing is a growing problem, with 61% of Americans saying that the availability of affordable homes is at least a moderate problem in their area.⁴⁶ To help solve the housing problem, the public supports a range of policy solutions, and believes government should be involved.

- The public has a slight preference for a local government solution, but a solid majority also supports action on the part of the federal government. 65% say that local government should do something to make affordable homes available to people like themselves, and 59% say that the federal government should do something to address this problem.⁴⁷

Both renters and homeowners believe increasing the availability of affordable homes to buy should be a higher priority than increasing affordable rental units. And they support a range of policy measures that state and local governments could take to increase the availability of affordable homes.⁴⁸

- 77% support giving grants to non-profit organizations if they build housing for low- and moderate-income working families.
- 72% support providing public servants such as firefighters, police officers, and teachers, with part of the down payment and closing costs if they purchase a home in the city or town where they work.
- 71% support the idea of giving tax credits to for-profit housing development companies if they build housing for low- to moderate-income working families.

There is also broad support for more government spending on housing for poor people—75% support this idea, with 57% saying they would be willing to pay more in taxes for this and other programs to help the poor.⁴⁹

SUPPORT FOR ENABLING WORK

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

High percentages of the public support increased government funding of child care. Reflecting current policy approaches, the public supports a patchwork of solutions including expansion of government programs like Head Start, increased tax credits for families, and tax-based business incentives. While the public wants increased government funding for ECEC, Americans hold parents primarily responsible for ensuring access to child care—above employers or the government.

- 74% favor increased federal spending on child care for *low income* families.⁵⁰ Support drops off only slightly for increasing federal spending on child care for *working parents*—63% favor.⁵¹ Another survey found 86% of the public believes “child care assistance should be available for all low income families so that they can work.”⁵²
- The public supports providing child care tax credits for families with somewhat generous incomes. 71% favor “giving tax credits to families that earn less than \$60,000 to help them pay for child care costs.”⁵³
- 73% support providing tax incentives to American corporations that invest in child care.⁵⁴

74% favor increased federal spending on child care for low income families.

- 50% of parents with children under 5 and 60% of non-parents strongly agree that “the nation’s poorest children need low cost, high quality day care centers to have a fair chance of succeeding in school and climbing out of poverty.”⁵⁵

Although the public supports public policies to increase the quality and affordability of ECEC, they still believe it is the primary responsibility of families to fulfill this need. When asked who “should be primarily responsible for ensuring that families have access to child care – government, employers or individual families”, 60% say families, while 23% say employers and only 15% say government.⁵⁶ This desire for families to be responsible for the care of their child is further illustrated that if faced with the choice, more parents say they would favor family leave policies that would enable one parent to stay home during a child’s first few years (62%) than policies aimed at improving the cost and quality of child care (30%).⁵⁷

Further research is needed to better understand the values that shape Americans’ public policy preferences.

Access

- People believe finding affordable, high quality child care is difficult for parents. 57% say it is extremely or very difficult.⁵⁸
- Half (51%) of parents who had used or needed child care in the last 5 years reported that it was extremely or very difficult to find *affordable* child care, and almost as many (44%) say it was extremely or very difficult to find *high quality* care.⁵⁹
- Lack of high quality and affordable ECEC has affected parents’ employment choices and work performance. Over half (52%) say the lack of acceptable child care reduced their, or their spouse’s or partner’s, ability to do their job as well as they wanted to do it. And 43% say the lack of acceptable care prevented them from a taking a job they wanted.⁶⁰

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

Further research is needed to better understand the values that shape Americans’ public policy preferences. While much public opinion research has been conducted to measure general support for specific policy solutions, very little research has probed the underlying values guiding these beliefs. For example, focus groups and polling could be conducted to find out what direct and indirect benefits the public thinks will flow to society from certain policy proposals. New research is also needed to gauge opinion on several public policy solutions, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), and living wage policies.

In addition, research is needed to examine how the public feels about large

disparities in *wealth* accumulation. Until very recently, political conversation and public attention on poverty-related issues has focused solely on income. Because the accumulation of wealth and the resulting intergenerational transfer of such wealth is a key factor for economic mobility and security, this is a critical area for study and public discussion.

Finally, communications research, including focus groups and message testing, is needed to identify messages that resonate with the public and can begin reconciling the core principles of hard work and fairness.

PUBLIC OPINION AND ADVOCACY

Knowing how the public feels about poverty and specific policy solutions can help with the initial planning of an advocacy campaign. The research presented in this paper offers two important findings for advocates: 1) American beliefs about poverty issues are dually influenced by the values of individualism and egalitarianism, and 2) the public is aware that many jobs do not pay enough to keep a family out of poverty and support a range of policies to help ease expenses and bolster the incomes of workers. Finding ways to communicate progressive ideas that resonate with public values about work, individual responsibility and fairness is a significant challenge facing advocates.

Today, many people believe that problems of poverty and economic insecurity are personal in nature rather than systemic, both in their causes and their solutions. The rhetoric over the last two decades, most often used by conservatives, has played a central role in influencing these opinions. As personal responsibility and individual effort became front and center in the discussion about poverty—most recently during the crafting of welfare reform—structural factors and the responsibility of government have been left in the shadows. The data in this paper suggest that using messages that reinforce progressive values of fairness and equality (eg, if you work hard, you shouldn't be poor) could be a good starting point for advocates. The research also suggests that stressing the social and structural factors driving poverty and connecting the problems to specific public policy solutions will be critical. These core American values resonate just as powerfully with the public and reflect progressive policies and ideals.

Many organizations have begun utilizing communications research to inform and improve their advocacy work. In the field of early childhood education and care, good message development research has been conducted (and is ongoing) by advocates through projects with the Benton Foundation and the Communications Consortium Media Center. Advocates at Second Harvest with help from the Ad Council have also used focus group research to find effective messages to generate support for food and hunger programs. Groups

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at the state and local levels are also beginning to utilize polling and focus groups to drive their communications campaigns. However, there remains a great deal of research to be done on the broader frameworks used to communicate about poverty and economic security and specific policy solutions.

Finally, the fact that the public believes poverty is a major problem in this country and support a range of policies to improve the situation—*but do not* name this issue as a top priority—may indicate the need to better connect poverty and economic security to issues that do make the top of the list: education, the economy, taxes, crime and social security.

There is a great deal of public support to be mined—finding the messages and communicating the need for change is critical to generating active public support.

CONCLUSION

The conventional wisdom used to explain why the United States has failed to adopt comprehensive anti-poverty measures has been that the public “hates the poor” and blames them for failing get ahead. This review of public opinion over the last five years reveals that the public’s views are both more complex and supportive than is generally assumed.

Although opinion research cannot provide empirical explanations about influences on public sentiment, it is likely there are two contextual factors that have helped garner support for policies to ease poverty and improve income security. The first factor is the implementation of welfare reform. The transformation of welfare to a work-based system has illuminated the hidden costs of work faced by all families and spotlighted the problems of the low-wage labor market: underemployment, few benefits, lack of family-friendly policies, high turnover, few opportunities for advancement and pockets of high unemployment. As a result, the political and public dialogue has shifted away from welfare and dependency toward enabling work and “making work pay.” In this way, welfare reform has blurred the old distinctions between the “welfare poor” and the “working poor”—making it easier to garner support to help *all* low-income working families. The second contextual factor that may be influencing public sentiment is the uneven effect of the economic boom of the late 1990s. It appears that among all the rosy news of the country’s economic prosperity, the public has felt and recognized the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

In this new social and political context, it appears that a policy agenda based on core values of fairness, equality of opportunity and government—as well as personal—responsibility could ratchet wide public support.

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH: THE BASICS

Sampling: Public opinion polls are based on samples. National surveys, like those in this report, typically use sample sizes of 1,000 to 1,500 respondents. Samples this size allow for very accurate estimates of a larger population, with a sampling (or margin of error) of about 3 percent. This means that the survey results will be within plus or minus 3 points of the true population.

Voters vs. Adults: There are three different populations that are frequently polled: 1) adults age 18 and older, (2) registered voters, and (3) likely voters. This distinction is important because political opinions may vary depending on which population is being polled. For example, it has been shown that Senator Edward Kennedy is more highly rated among all adults than among registered voters. However, there is no universally used screen for identifying likely voters-some are better at weeding out non-voters than others.

Question wording: Many studies have shown that responses will differ based on how a question is worded. The following are different aspects of question wording that can affect responses.

Framing effects: The effect the previous content of the interview might have on a specific question. For example, general support for abortion will increase if a specific item with a high level of support is asked first. If respondents are asked if abortion should be permitted "if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby" general support for abortion is 13% greater than if the specific abortion item is not asked first.

Balanced arguments: If a question mentions only one side of an issue, that side will often get a disproportionate number of responses. For example, "Do you favor the death penalty?" Since only one option is given-"favor"-we would expect that option would be more frequently chosen.

Agree/disagree: Questions that present two polar alternatives (do you thing being poor is due to lack of effort by the poor person or circumstances beyond their control) are superior to agree/disagree type questions (do you agree or disagree that being poor is due to circumstances beyond the person's control). One agree/disagree question is generally not helpful in gauging public opinion, although several taken together can be useful.

When interpreting public opinion, some of the more reliable strategies are to compare responses to the same question-either between subgroups (such as males and females) or to compare responses to the same question over time. Since the question is the same, any significant variation is likely due to a change in the public's view. Additionally, comparing the responses to one question to slightly different, but related questions is helpful in identifying distinctions the public makes when considering policy options.

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