

What do Americans want?

Lane Kenworthy

April 2010

Outline

Understanding public opinion

What do Americans want? The traditional view

What do the data tell us?

Understanding public opinion

Understanding public opinion

Americans tend to have very little accurate understanding of socioeconomic issues

And few devote much effort to getting better informed

As a result, many Americans have shallow, weak opinions and preferences about most issues

Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse,
Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes

The American Voter Unabridged Edition

Understanding public opinion

Despite this ignorance and apathy, there are discernible patterns to American public opinion in the aggregate

It does not tend to fluctuate randomly

On many issues it is remarkably consistent over time

When it shifts, it often does so in understandable ways



The Rational Public

**Fifty Years
of Trends
in Americans'
Policy
Preferences**

Benjamin I. Page & Robert Y. Shapiro

THE MACRO POLITY

ROBERT S. ERIKSON
MICHAEL B. MACKUEN
JAMES A. STIMSON



Sources of public opinion data

There are dozens of public opinion polls

Which are the most trustworthy?

Gallup

General Social Survey (GSS)

National Election Study (NES)

Pew Research Center

**What do Americans
want? The traditional
view**

The traditional view

The traditional view about Americans' attitudes toward fairness, justice, and government's role

Americans believe in capitalism and markets

Americans want equal opportunity, not equal outcomes

Americans are skeptical of government's ability to help



THE

RIGHT NATION

CONSERVATIVE POWER IN AMERICA



"The best political book in years."—George F. Will, *The Washington Post*

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT AND ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE

Inequality in America

The rich, the poor and the growing gap between them

Jun 15th 2006 | WASHINGTON, DC
From The Economist print edition

The rich are the big gainers in America's new prosperity

Getty Images



AMERICANS do not go in for envy. The gap between rich and poor is bigger than in any other advanced country, but most people are unconcerned. Whereas Europeans fret about the way the economic pie is divided, Americans want to join the rich, not soak them. Eight out of ten, more than anywhere else, believe that though you may start poor, if you work hard, you can make pots of money. It is a central part of the American Dream.

What do the data tell us?

What do the data tell us?

Americans appreciate capitalism, and most think our economic system is reasonably fair

They tend to believe inequality and poverty are too high

They tend to dislike government intervention in the abstract, but they favor expanding government programs that

- help the poor (except "welfare")

- enhance opportunity

- provide security

What's Fair?

American Beliefs about Distributive Justice

JENNIFER L. HOCHSCHILD

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England
1981

WHY
AMERICANS
HATE
WELFARE

Race, Media, and the
Politics of Antipoverty Policy

Martin Gilens

Americans' Social Policy Preferences in the Era of Rising Inequality

Leslie McCall and Lane Kenworthy

Rising income inequality has been a defining trend of the past generation, yet we know little about its impact on social policy formation. We evaluate two dominant views about public opinion on rising inequality: that Americans do not care much about inequality of outcomes, and that a rise in inequality will lead to an increase in demand for government redistribution. Using time series data on views about income inequality and social policy preferences in the 1980s and 1990s from the General Social Survey, we find little support for these views. Instead, Americans do tend to object to inequality and increasingly believe government should act to redress it, but not via traditional redistributive programs. We examine several alternative possibilities and provide a broad analytical framework for reinterpreting social policy preferences in the era of rising inequality. Our evidence suggests that Americans may be unsure or uninformed about how to address rising inequality and thus swayed by contemporaneous debates. However, we also find that Americans favor expanding education spending in response to their increasing concerns about inequality. This suggests that equal opportunity may be more germane than income redistribution to our understanding of the politics of inequality.

CLASS

BENJAMIN I. PAGE
LAWRENCE R. JACOBS

WHAT AMERICANS REALLY
THINK ABOUT ECONOMIC
INEQUALITY

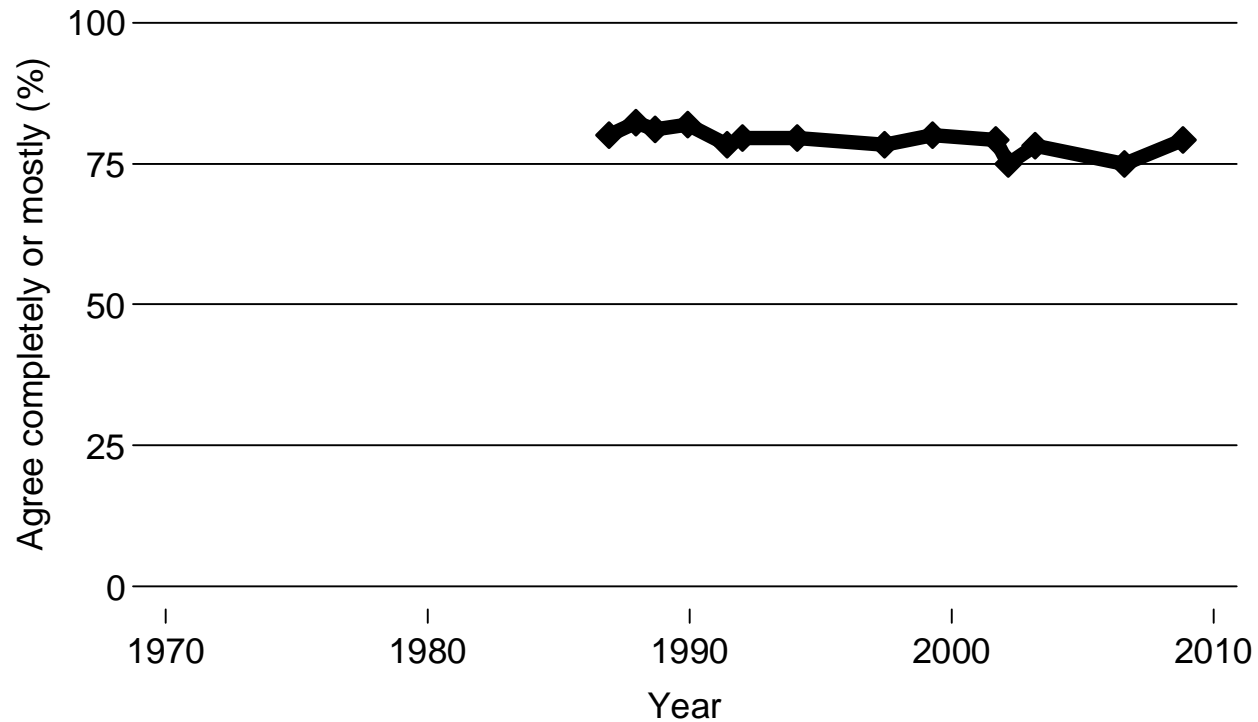
WAR?

Americans support capitalism and business

Agree the strength of this country today is mostly based on the success of American business: 75-80%

Americans support capitalism and business

Agree the strength of this country today is mostly based on the success of American business (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: disagree mostly, disagree completely.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q20-h.F1), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Many believe hard work yields success

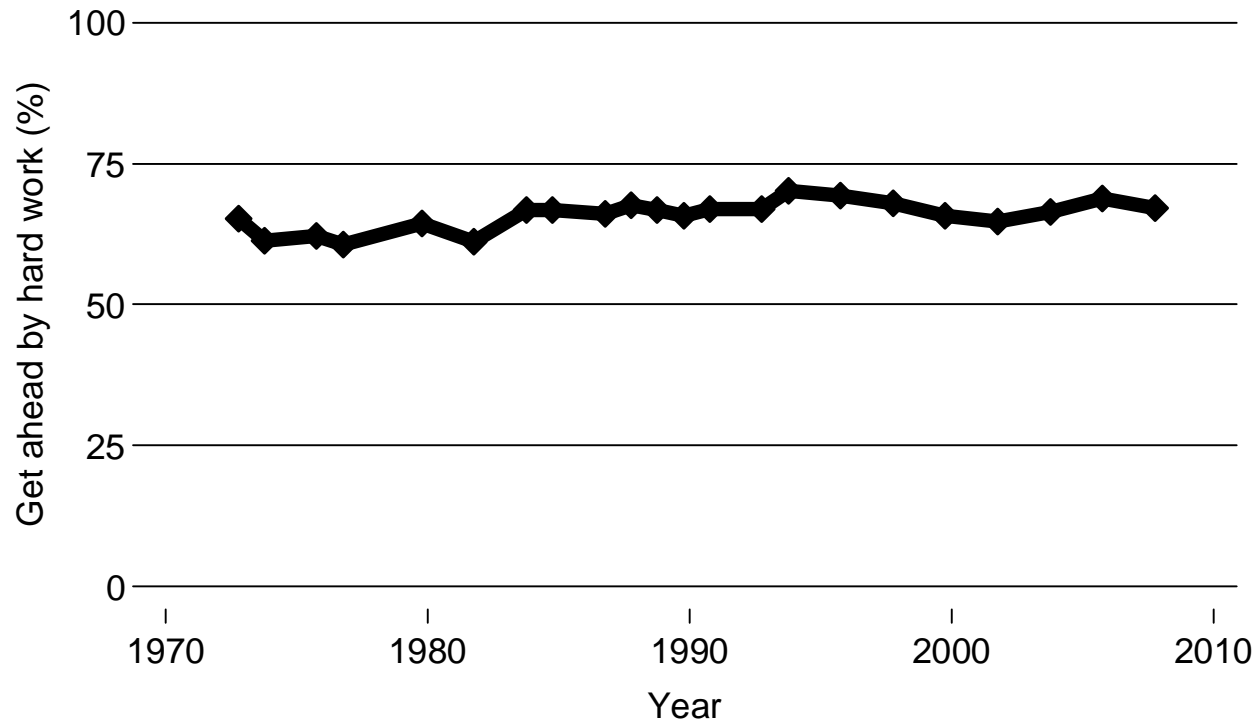
People get ahead by hard work more than by lucky breaks or help from others: 60-70%

Disagree hard work offers little guarantee of success: 55-70%

Disagree success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control: 55-70%

Many believe hard work yields success

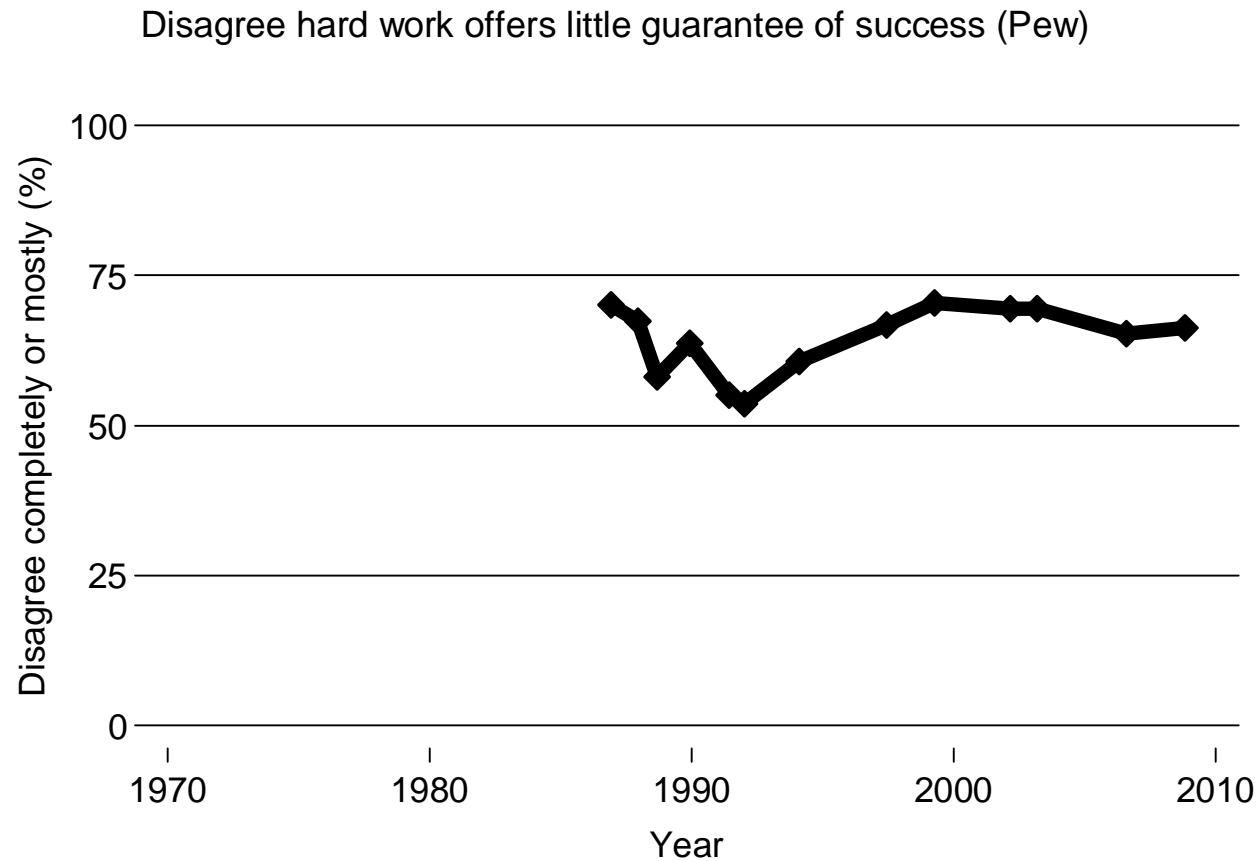
People get ahead by hard work more than by lucky breaks or help from others (GSS)



Note: Other response choices: lucky break or help from others, both equally.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable getahead), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Many believe hard work yields success

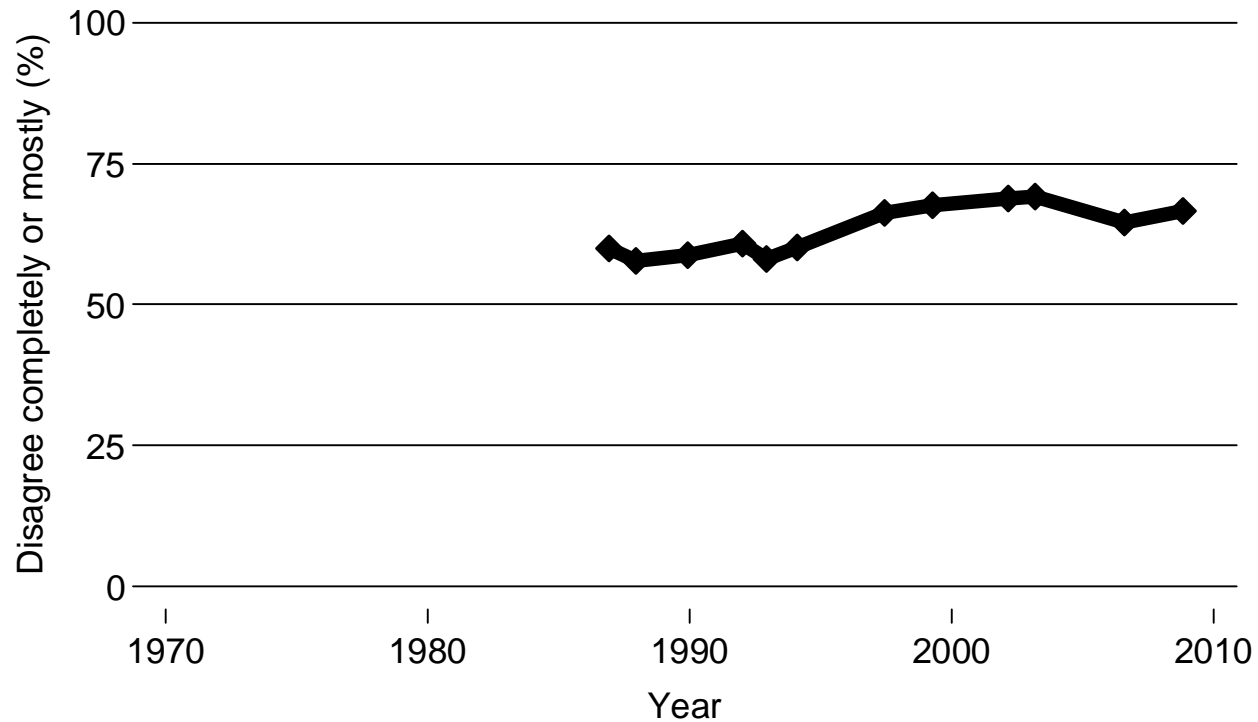


Note: Other response choices: agree completely, agree mostly.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q20-f), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Many believe hard work yields success

Disagree success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: agree completely, agree mostly.

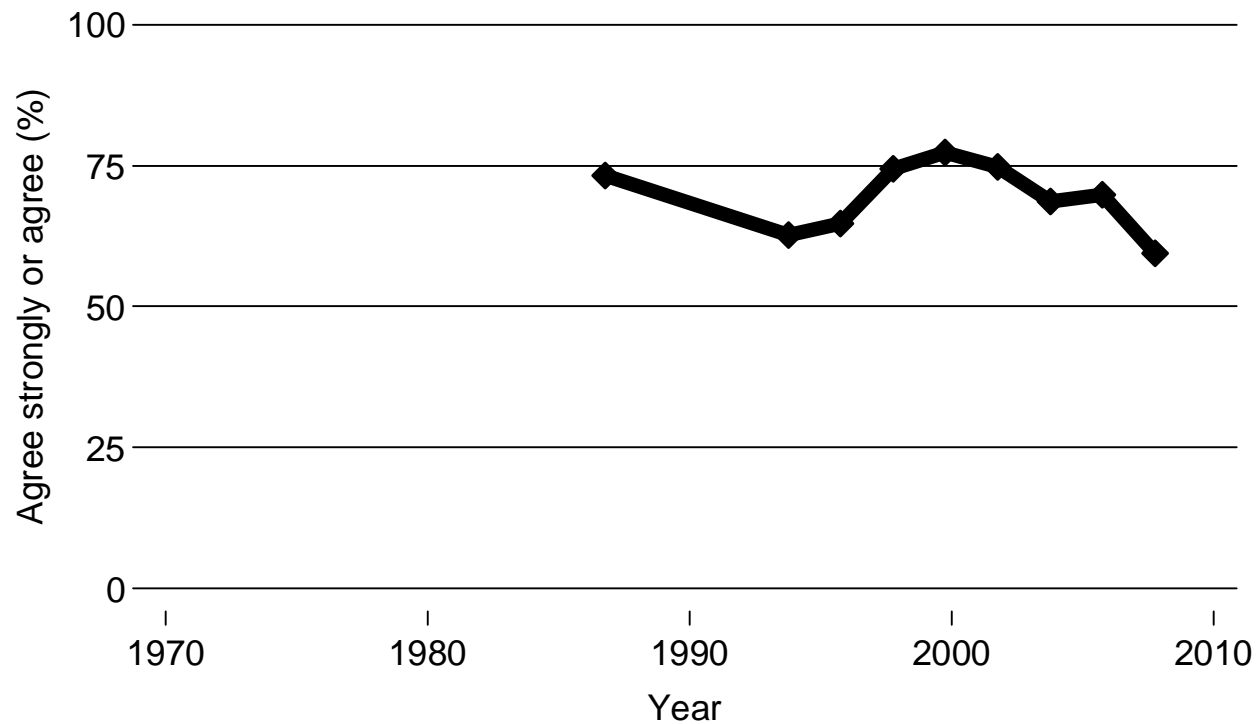
Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q20-e), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Many feel they have opportunity to get ahead

Agree people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living: 60-75%

Many feel they have opportunity to get ahead

Agree people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living (GSS)



Note: Other response choices: neither, disagree, disagree strongly.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable goodlife), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

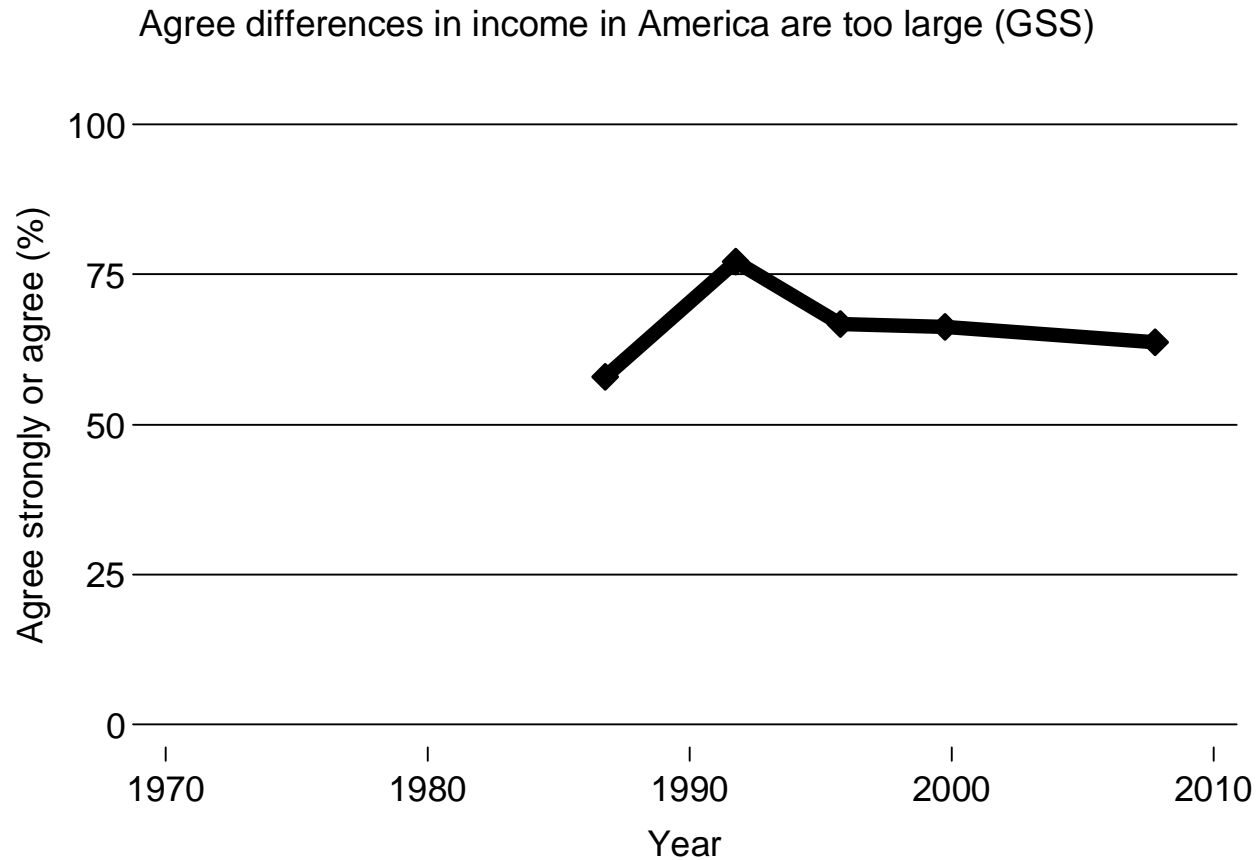
Many think inequality is too high and rising

Agree differences in income in America are too large: 60-75%

Money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed: 55-70%

Agree today it's really true that the rich just get richer while the poor get poorer: 65-80%

Many think inequality is too high and rising

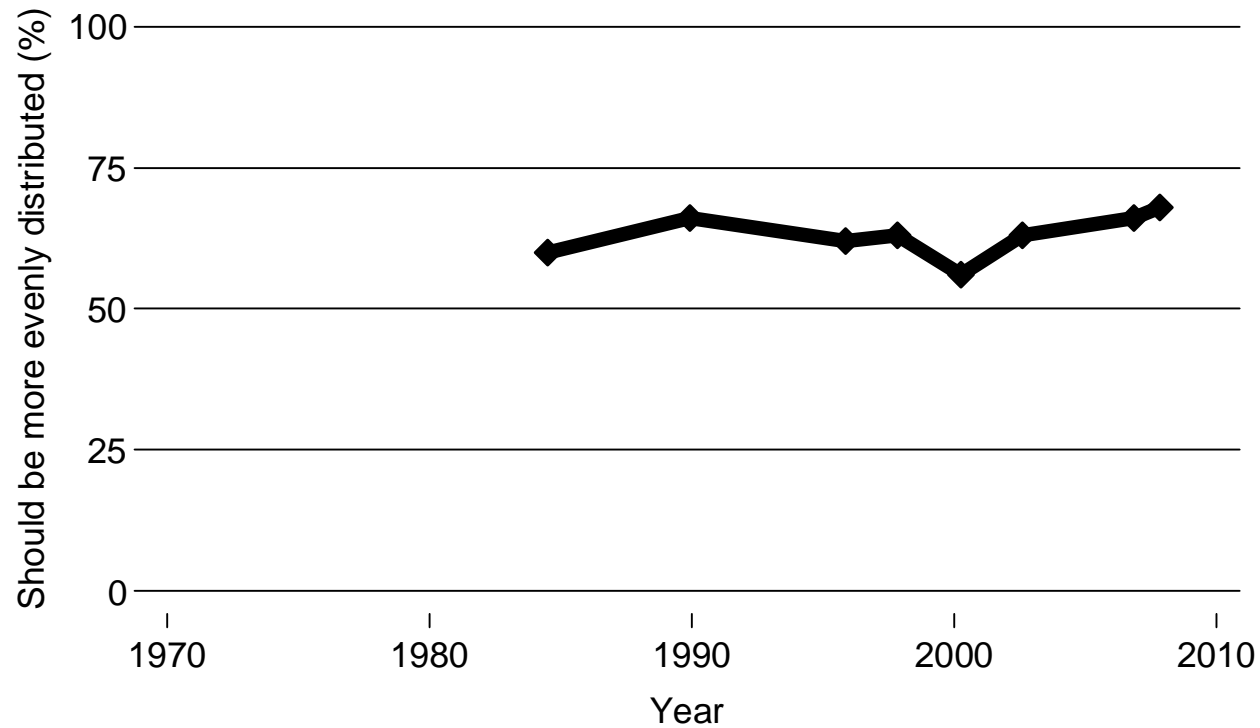


Note: Other response choices: neither, disagree, disagree strongly.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable incgap), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Many think inequality is too high and rising

Money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed (Gallup)

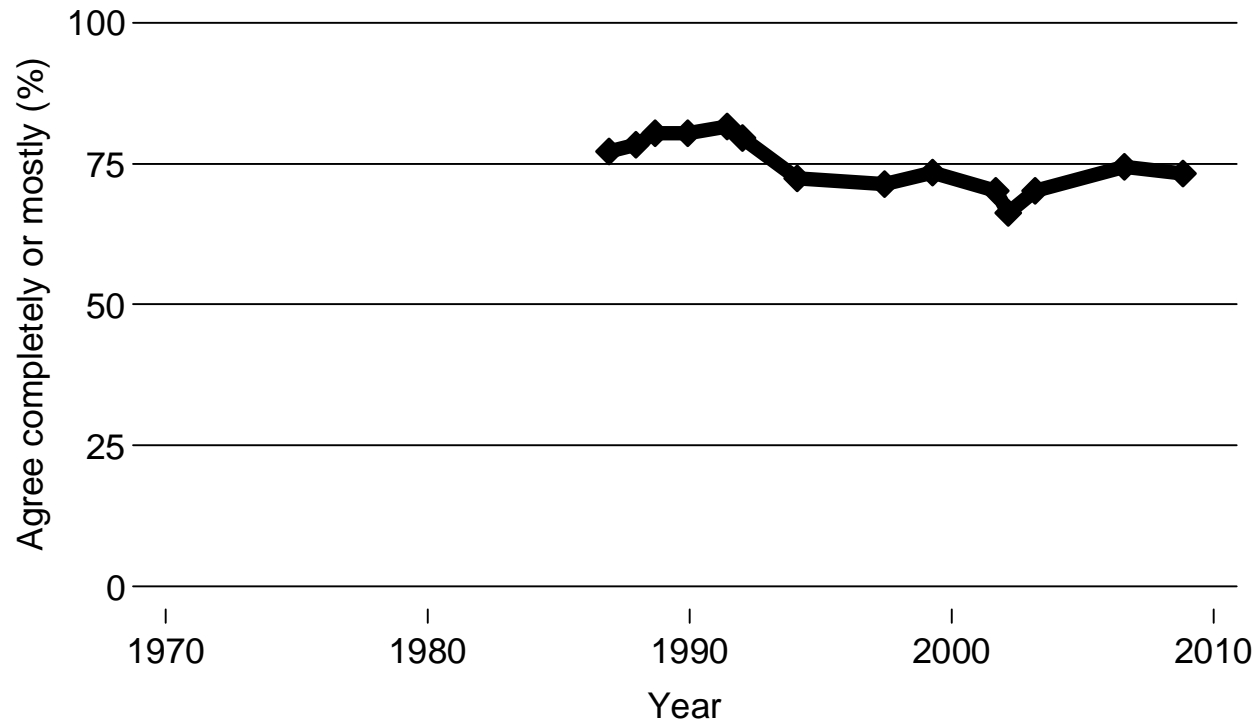


Note: Other response choices: distribution is fair, no opinion.

Source: My calculations from Gallup data.

Many think inequality is too high and rising

Agree today it's really true that the rich just get richer while the poor get poorer (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: disagree mostly, disagree completely.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q31-qF2), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

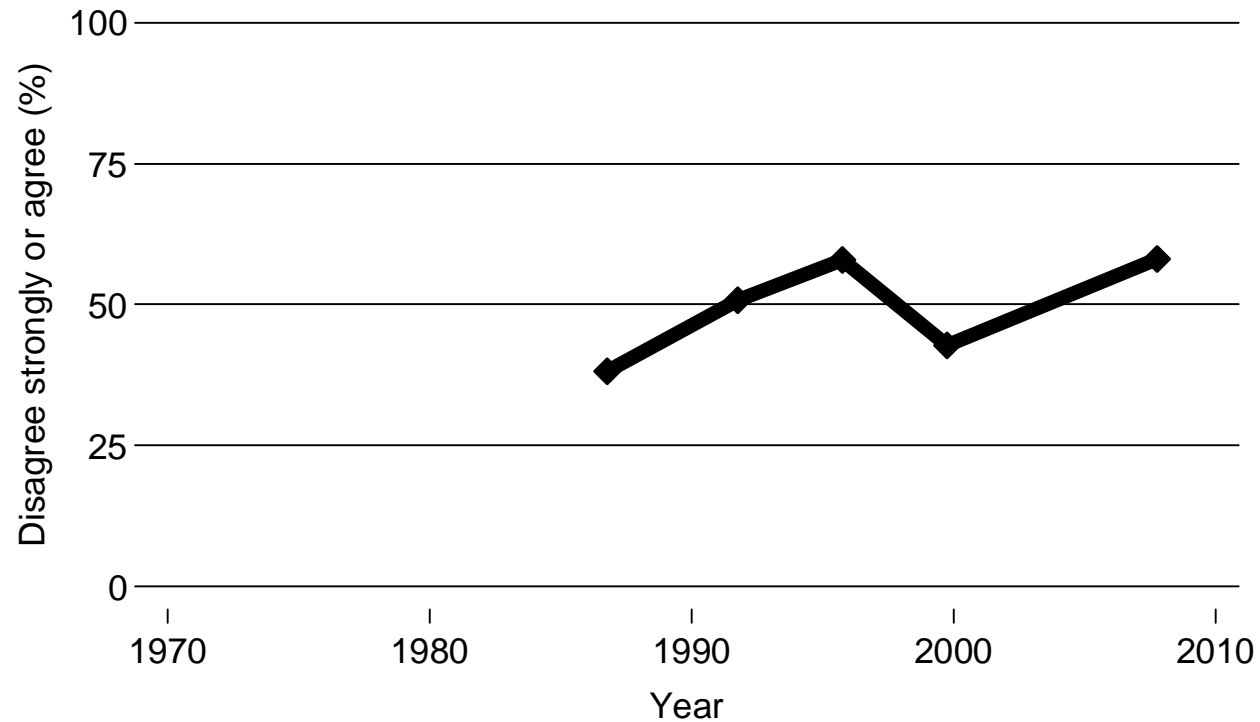
Many believe high inequality isn't necessary

Disagree large differences in income are necessary for America's prosperity: 40-60%

Agree inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful: 50-65%

Many believe high inequality isn't necessary

Disagree large differences in income are necessary for America's prosperity (GSS)

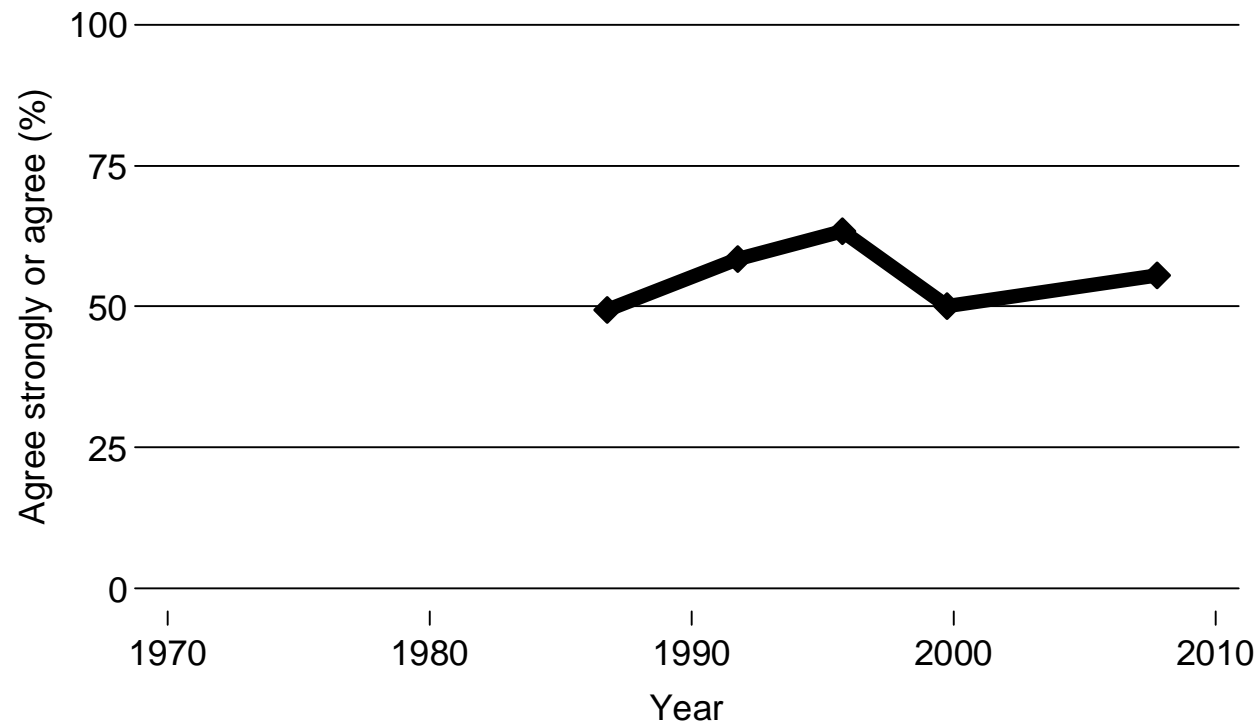


Note: Other response choices: agree strongly, agree, neither.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable inequal5), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Many believe high inequality isn't necessary

Agree inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful (GSS)



Note: Other response choices: neither, disagree, disagree strongly.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable inequal3), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Many are skeptical about government's ability to help

A great deal of confidence in the executive: 10-30%

A great deal of confidence in Congress: 5-25%

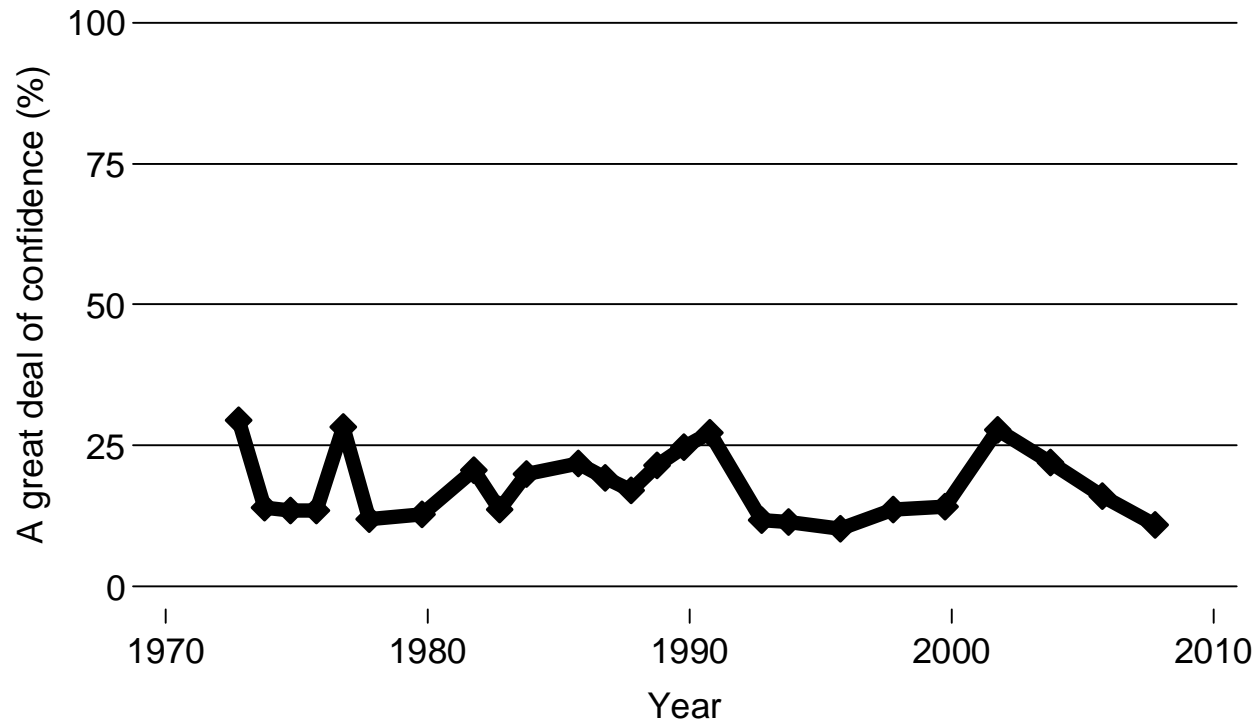
Disagree the government is really run for the benefit of all the people: 40-60%

People in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes: 50-75%

Agree when something is run by the government it is usually inefficient and wasteful: 55-70%

Skeptical about government's ability to help

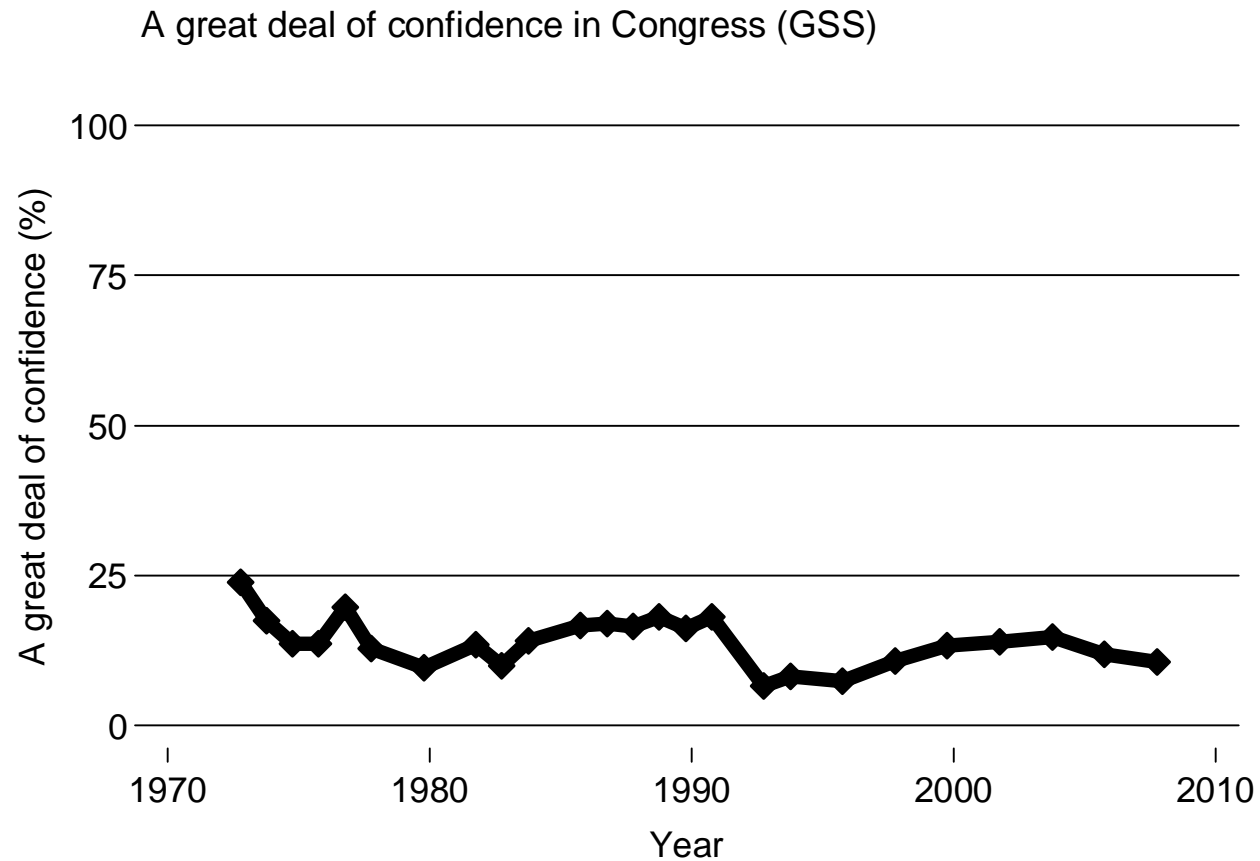
A great deal of confidence in the executive branch of the federal government (GSS)



Note: Other response choices: only some, hardly any.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable confed), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Skeptical about government's ability to help

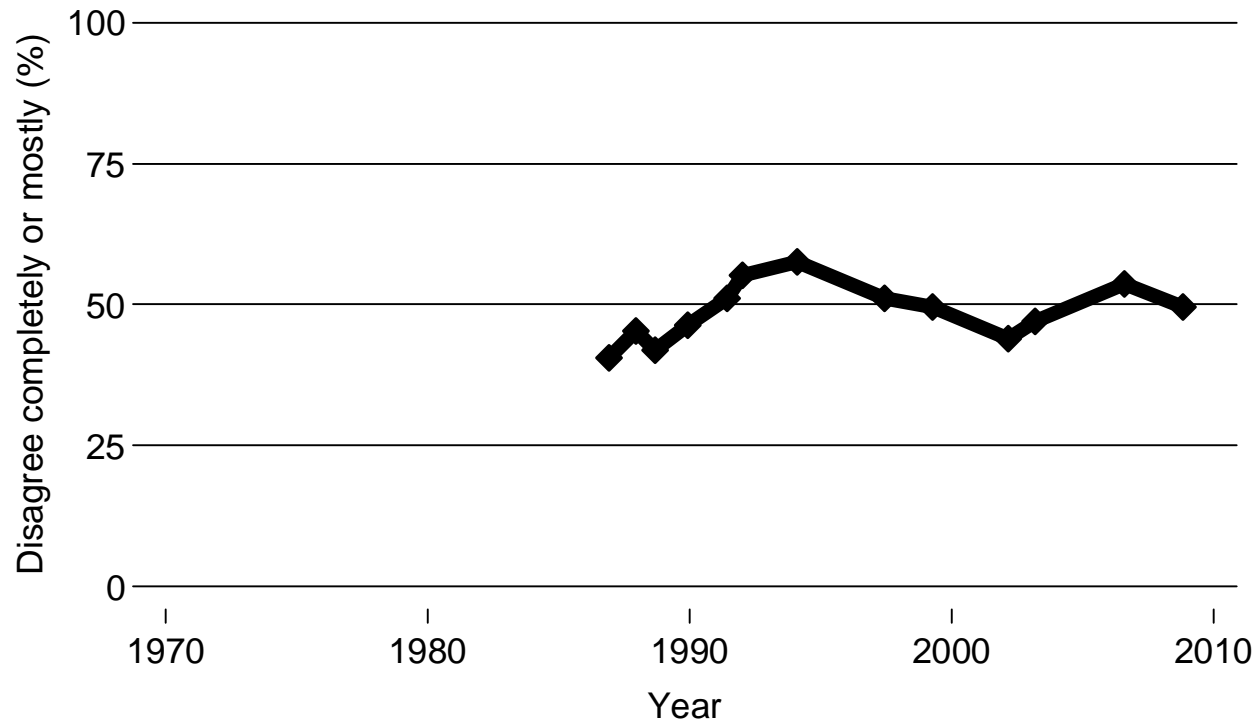


Note: Other response choices: only some, hardly any.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable conlegis), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Skeptical about government's ability to help

Disagree the government is really run for the benefit of all the people (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: agree completely, agree mostly.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q20-m), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Skeptical about government's ability to help

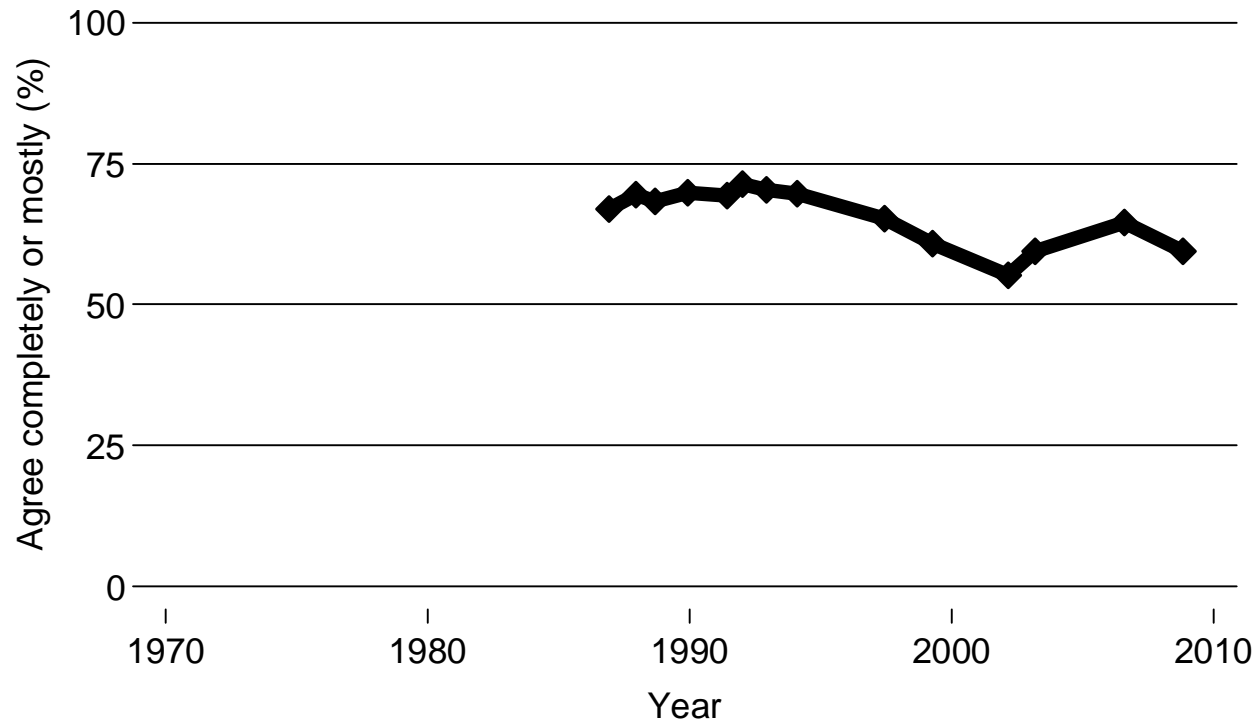


Note: Other response choices: some, not very much, don't know.

Source: My calculations from National Election Study data (variable vcf0606), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Skeptical about government's ability to help

Agree when something is run by the government it is usually inefficient and wasteful (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: disagree mostly, disagree completely.

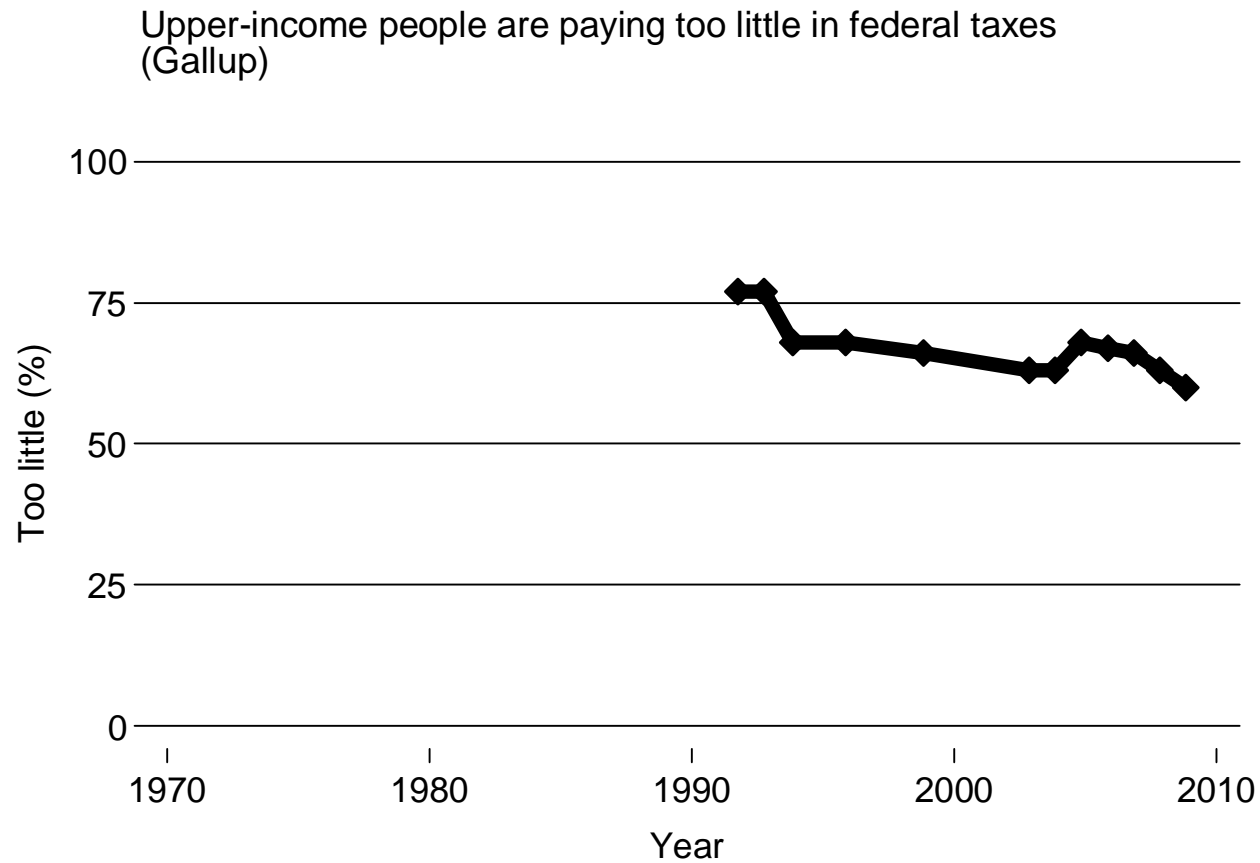
Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q20-k.F1), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Mixed support for redistribution

Upper-income people are paying too little in federal taxes: 60-75%

Agree the government ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor: 40-55%

Mixed support for redistribution

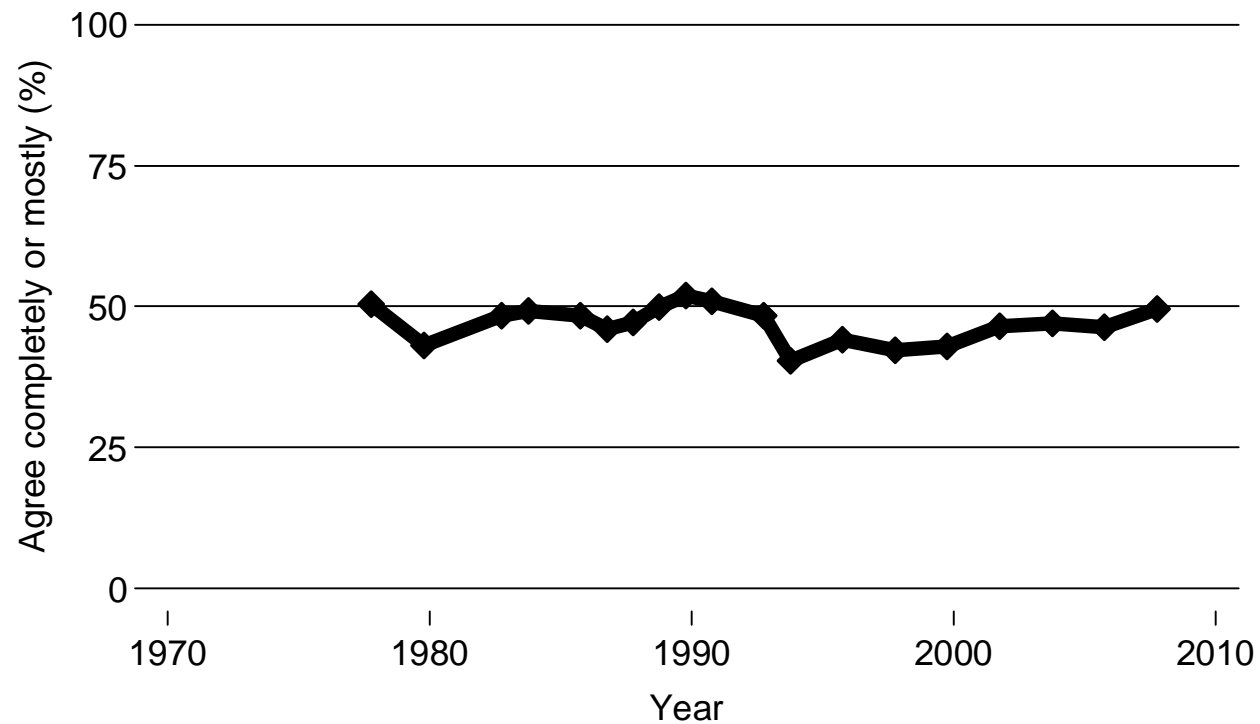


Note: Other response choices: fair share, too much, no opinion

Source: My calculations from Gallup data.

Mixed support for redistribution

Agree the government ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor (GSS)



Note: Seven-point agreement to disagreement scale.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable eqwlth), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Solid support for government aid to the poor, except for "welfare"

Agree it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves: 60-75%

We're spending too little money on assistance to the poor: 55-70%

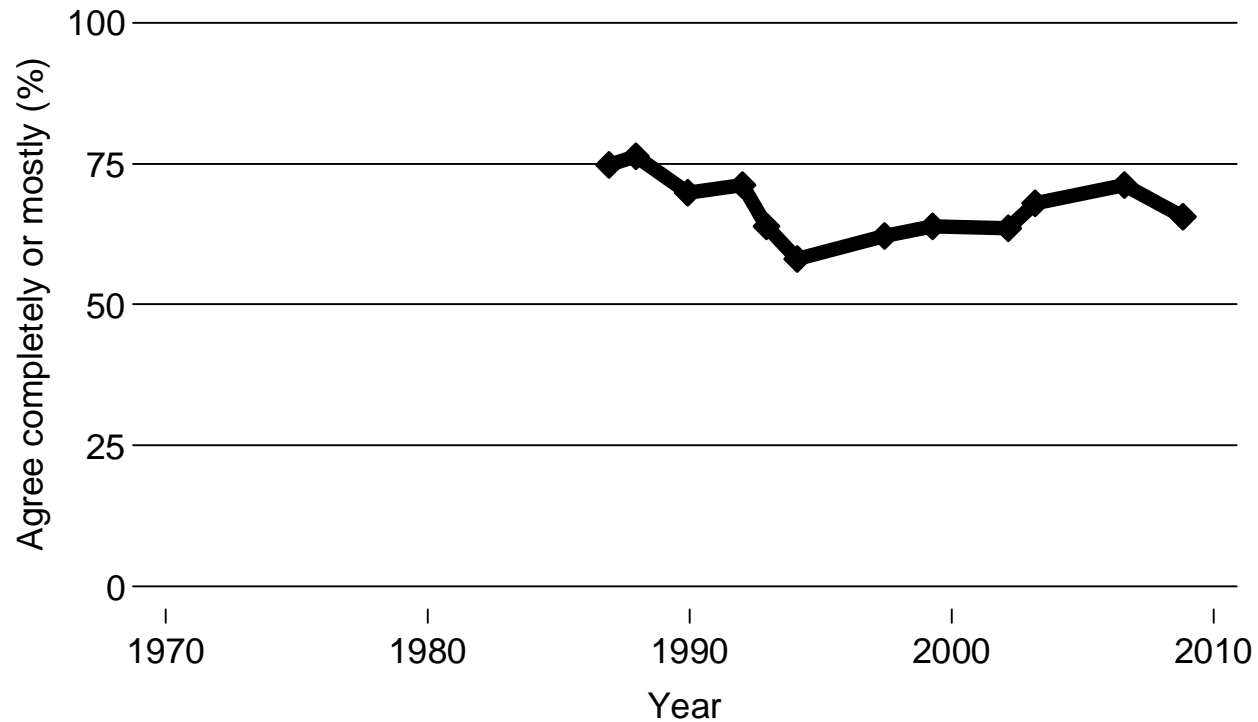
Agree the government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper into debt: 45-55%

Favor increasing the minimum wage: 80-85%

We're spending too little money on welfare: 15-25%

Solid support for government aid to the poor

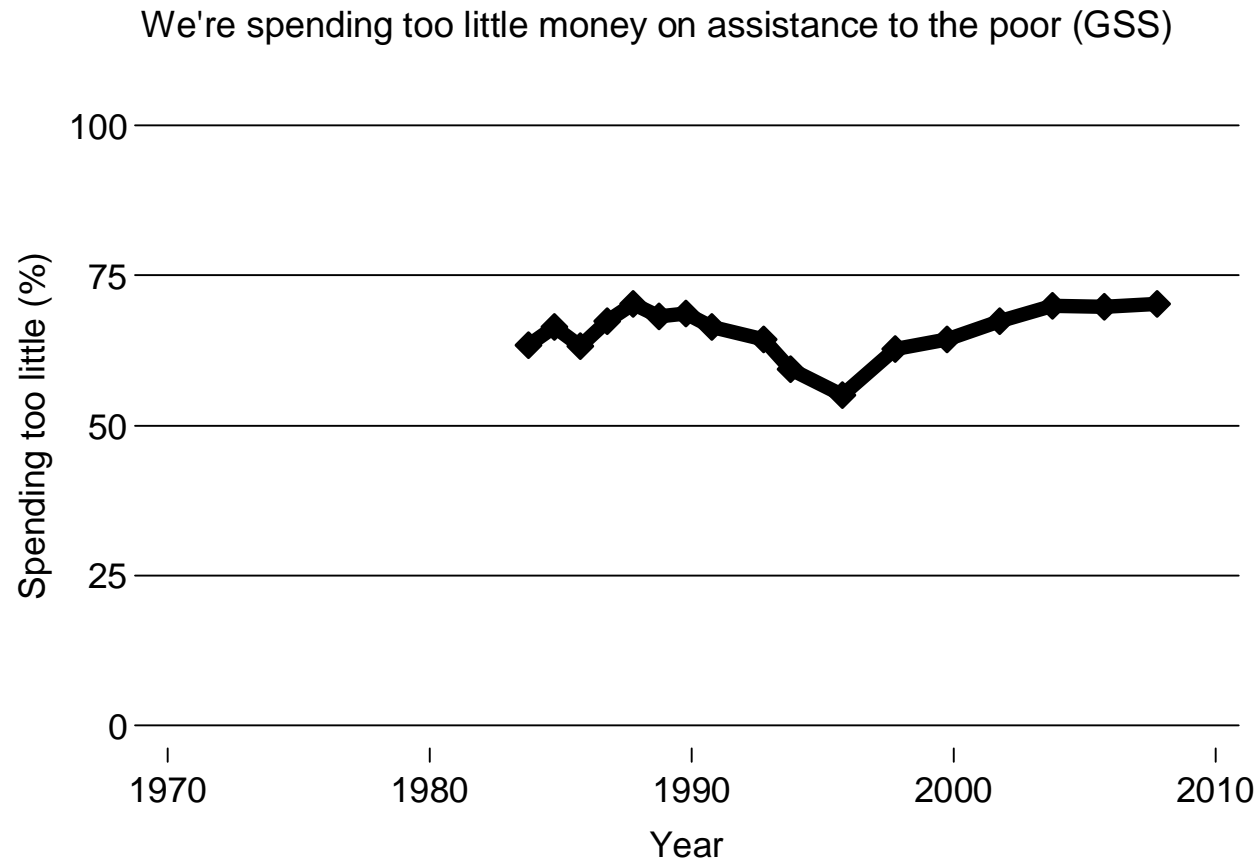
Agree it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: disagree mostly, disagree completely.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q30.e-F1), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Solid support for government aid to the poor

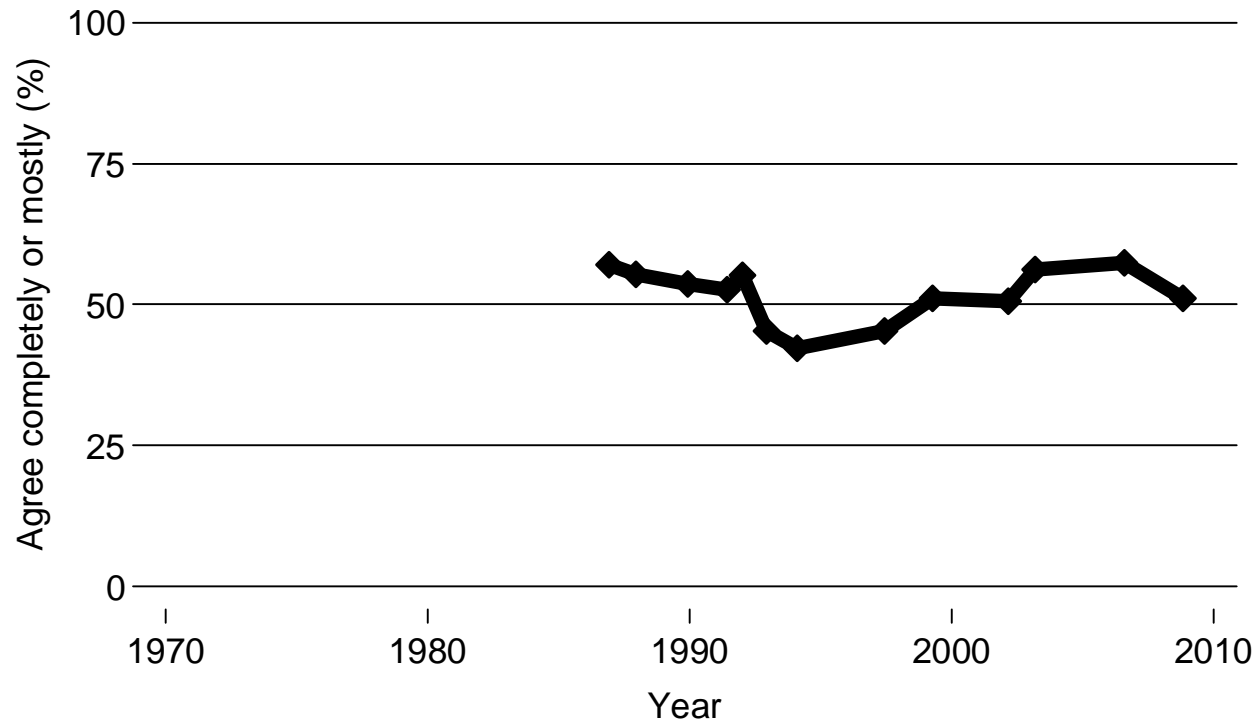


Note: Other response choices: about right, too much.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable natfarey), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Solid support for government aid to the poor

Agree the government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper into debt (Pew)



Note: Other response choices: disagree mostly, disagree completely.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q30-f.F1), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

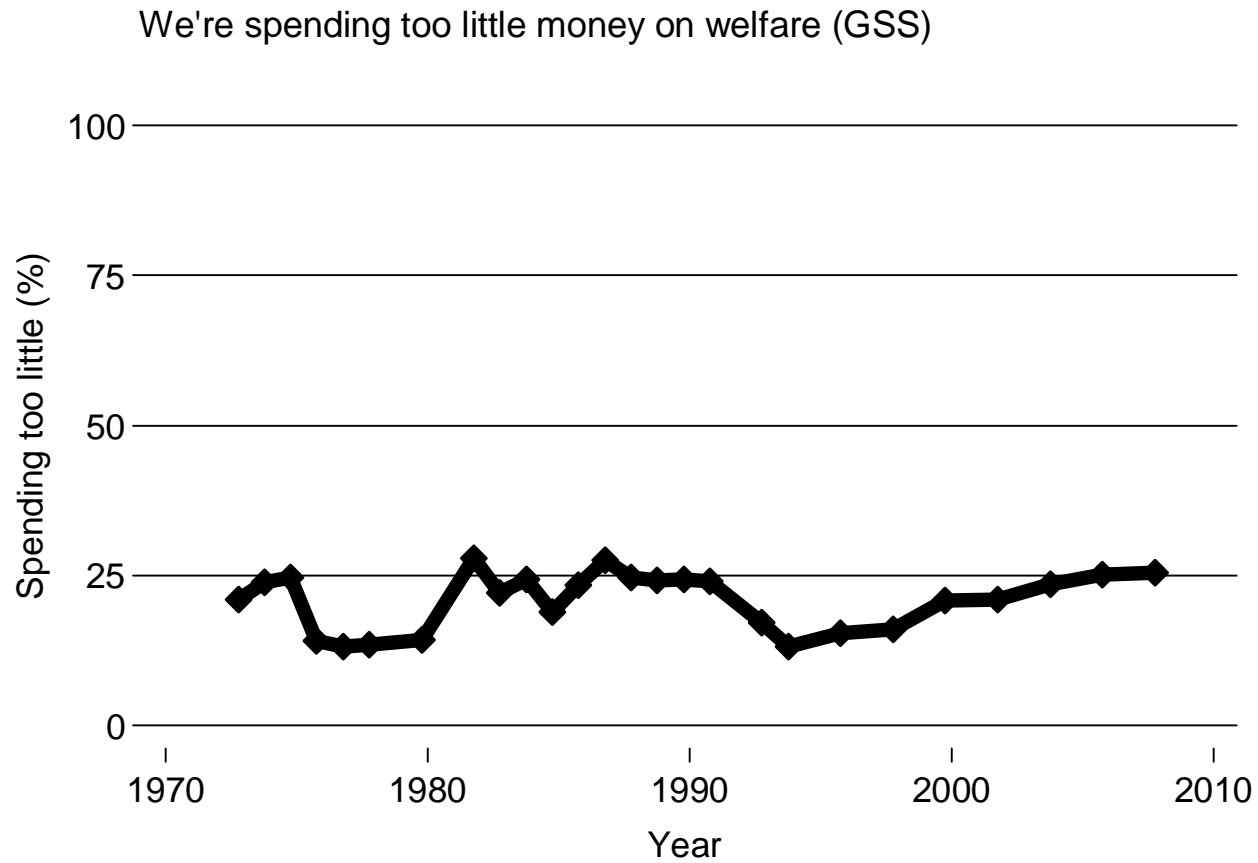
Solid support for government aid to the poor



Note: Other response choices: oppose, no opinion.

Source: My calculations from Gallup data.

... except for "welfare"



Note: Other response choices: about right, too much.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable natfare), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Strong support for enhancing economic opportunity and security

Agree our society should do what is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed: 90-95%

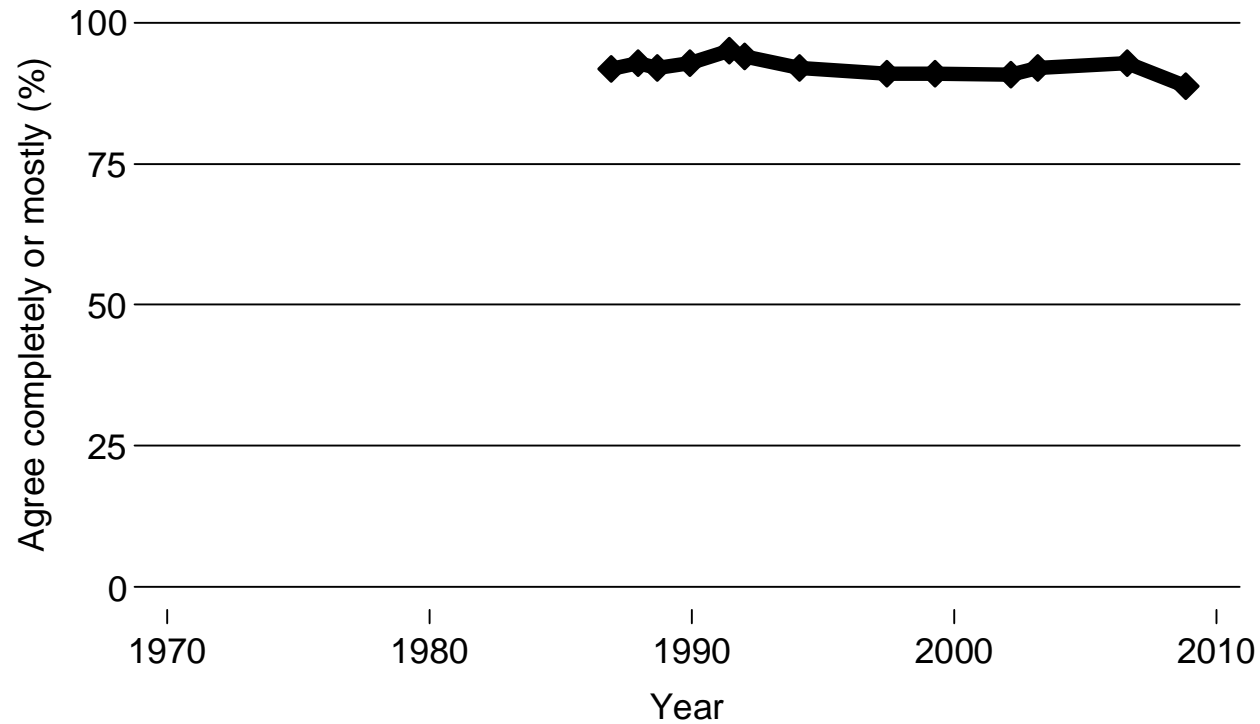
We're spending too little money on improving the nation's education system: 50-75%

We're spending too little money on social security: 45-65%

We're spending too little money on improving and protecting the nation's health: 55-80%

Strong support for opportunity and security

Agree our society should do what is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed (Pew)

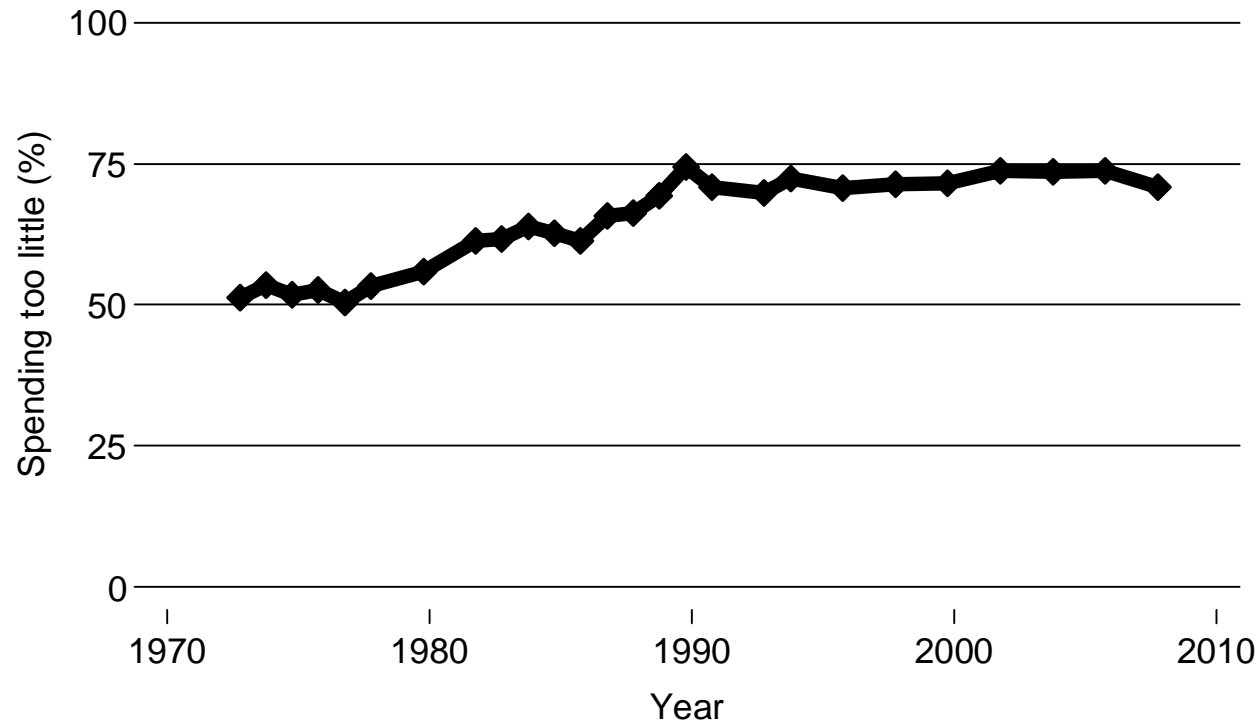


Note: Other response choices: disagree mostly, disagree completely.

Source: My calculations from Pew Research Center data (variable Q30-c.F1), people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf.

Strong support for opportunity and security

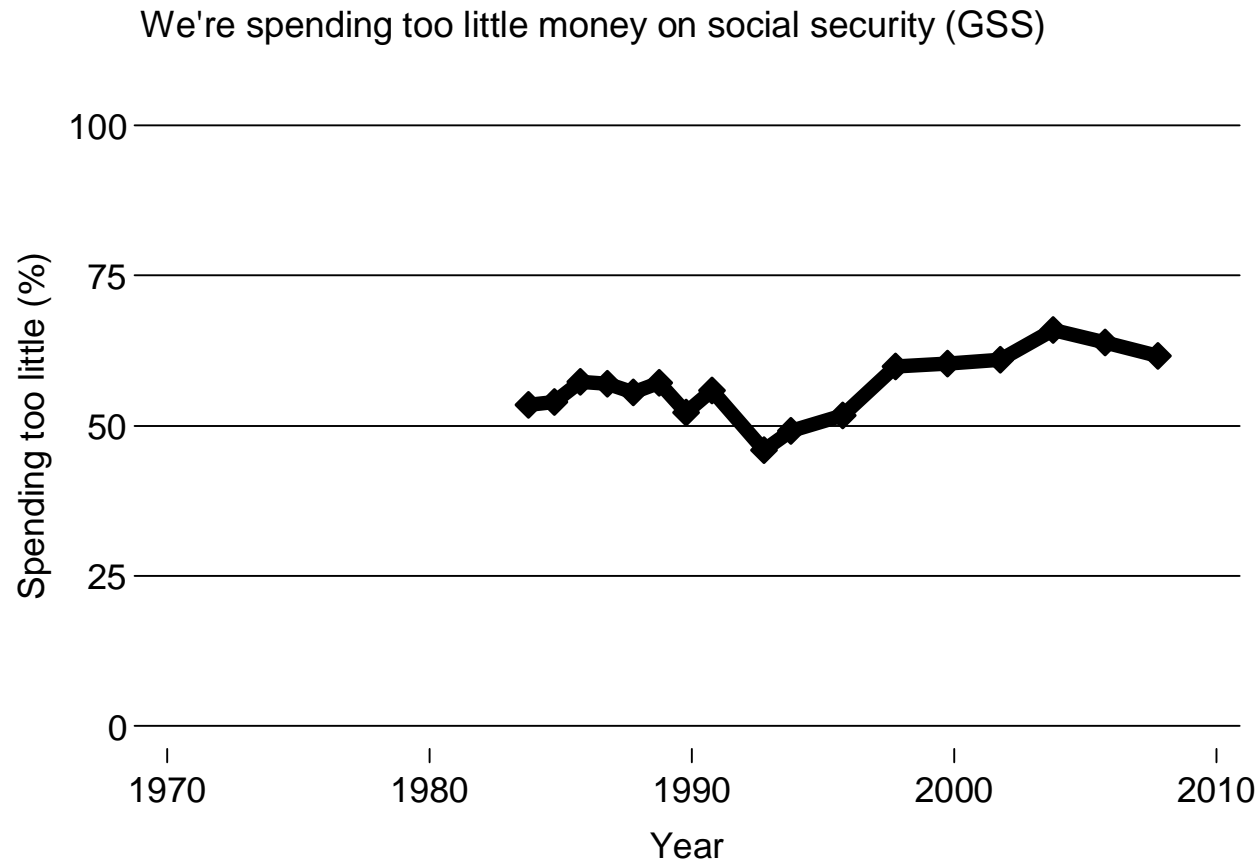
We're spending too little money on improving the nation's educational system (GSS)



Note: Other response choices: about right, too much.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable nateduc), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Strong support for opportunity and security

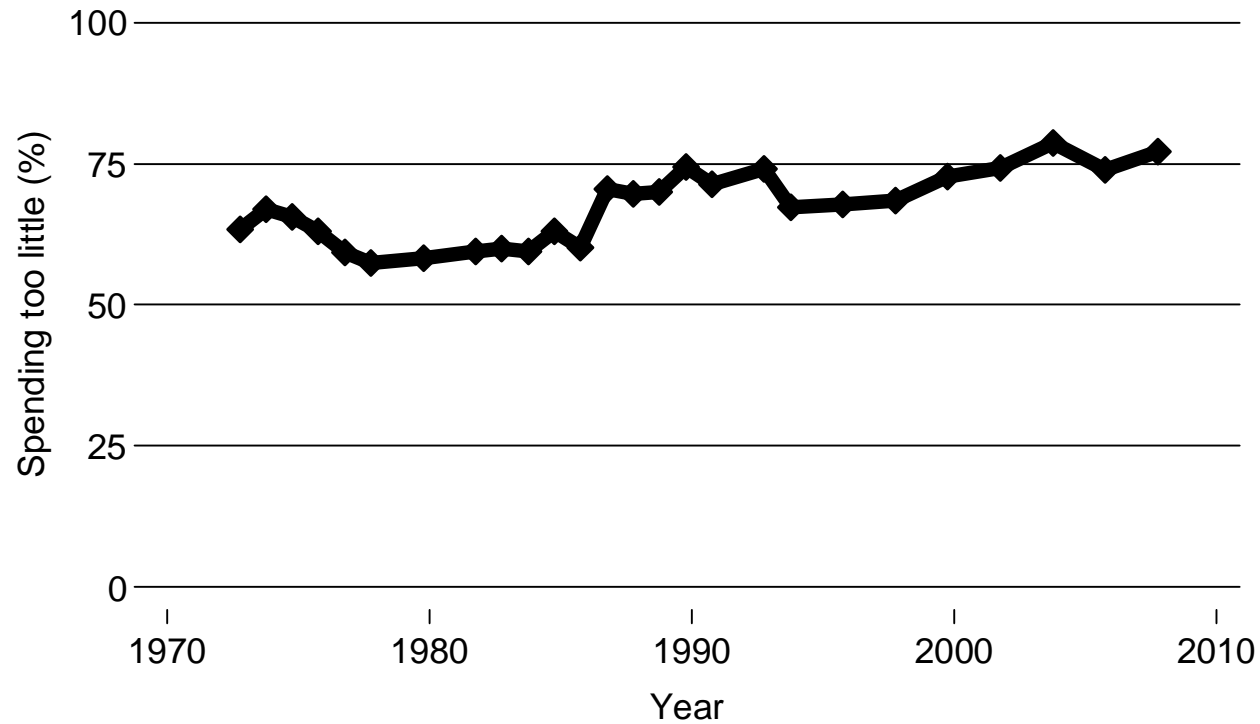


Note: Other response choices: about right, too much.

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable natsoc), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Strong support for opportunity and security

We're spending too little money on improving and protecting the nation's health (GSS)



Note: Other response choices: about right, too much

Source: My calculations from General Social Survey data (variable natheal), sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm.

Should we trust these data on levels of support and opposition?

Yes, probably

The worry is that responses in public opinion surveys tend to be heavily influenced by the way questions are asked

With these data, this worry is alleviated somewhat by
the use of multiple questions in many instances
the consistency of responses over time

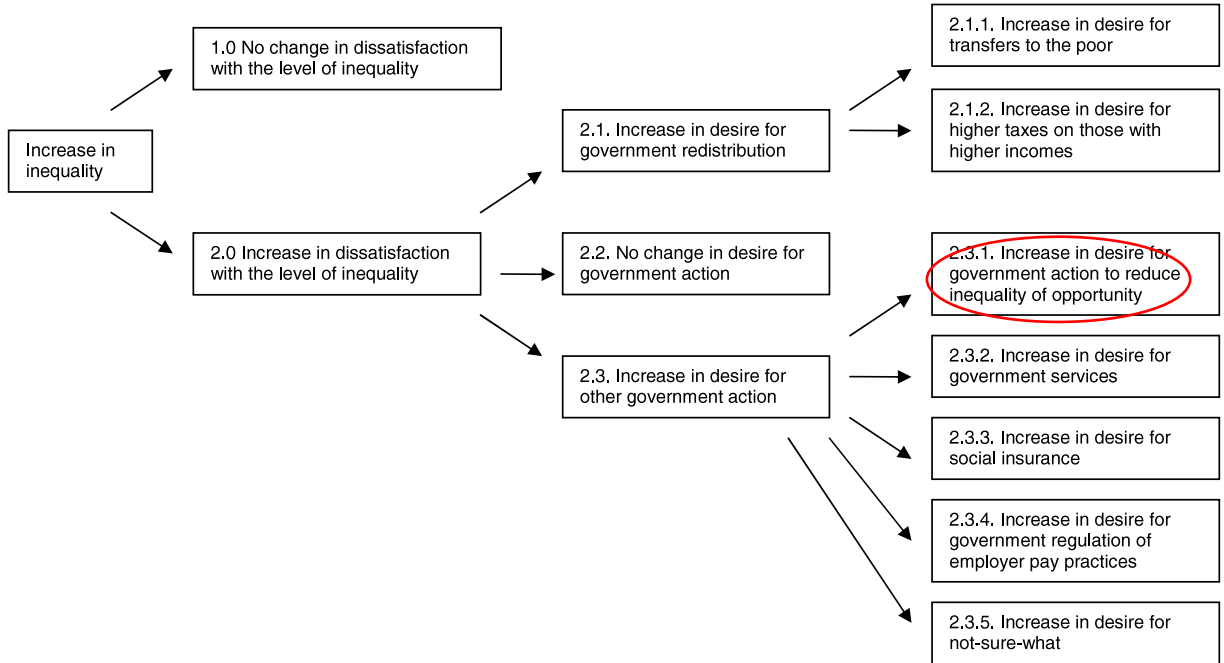
Should we trust these data on levels of support and opposition?

As a complement, we can look at whether public opinion *changes* in response to a significant socioeconomic shift

McCall and Kenworthy examine trends in public opinion during the period of sharply rising income inequality

We find that Americans noticed the rise in inequality, tended not to like it, and increased their support for programs that enhance opportunity

Figure 1
Possible reactions to rising inequality



Summary

Summary

Americans are ideologically conservative but programmatically progressive

Page and Jacobs label us "conservative egalitarians"

Summary

What do Americans want?

Americans support capitalism and business

Many believe hard work yields success

Many feel they have opportunity to get ahead

Many think inequality is too high and rising

Many believe high inequality isn't necessary

Many are skeptical about government's ability to help

Mixed support for redistribution

Solid support for government aid to the poor, except for "welfare"

Strong support for enhancing economic opportunity and security