

# **Campbell *Public Affairs* Institute**

## **Inequality and the American Public** Results of the Fourth Annual Maxwell School Survey Conducted September, 2007

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Note on the presentation of results: This report presents results for the surveys conducted in 2004 – 2007. The intent of this report is to summarize broad patterns over time and to draw on the cumulative results where possible. If a question has been asked over time and the concern is the relationship among responses, the cumulative file of responses is used. If a question was asked in only one or two years, only the results from those years are used.

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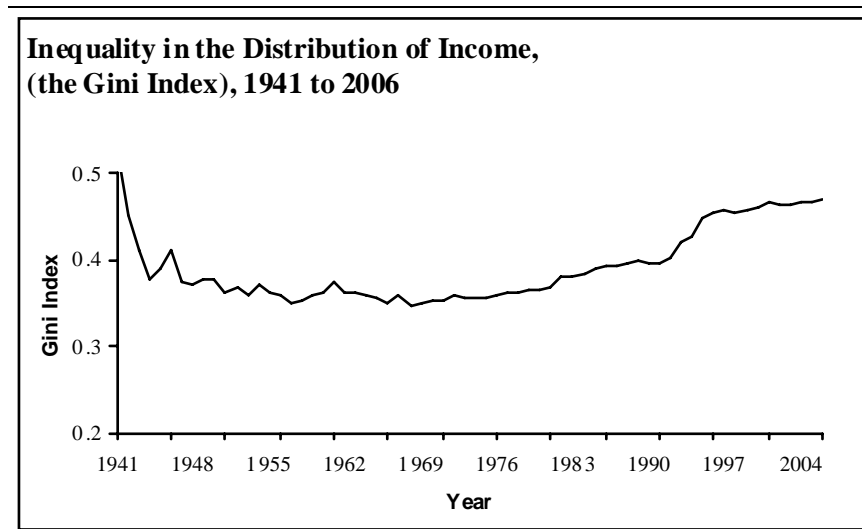
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## I. Inequality Trends in American Society

### The Steady Rise in Inequality

Inequality in the distribution of income continues to increase in American society. While inequality declined from the mid-1940s until the early 1970s, since then there has been a steady rise in inequality. The figure below presents one measure of inequality, the Gini index, for individual incomes for 1941 – 2006.<sup>1</sup> Higher values indicate greater inequality, and the inequality is now greater than it has been since the late 1940s.



Source: US Census Bureau Reports

### Changes by Income Groups

How this greater inequality is coming about is particularly important. If people at all levels were enjoying income increases with those at the top experiencing larger increases, greater inequality might be somewhat more palatable to the public because everyone is better off. As the following table indicates, however, inequality in household incomes is increasing primarily because over the last 25 or so years those with higher incomes are experiencing

large increases in real incomes and those in the lower income brackets are experiencing very little growth in real incomes. The less affluent are not only being left behind relatively speaking but they are also experiencing very limited increases in real income over a lengthy period of time. This is occurring even as more and more families have two adults earning incomes. In the 1960s about 20 percent of women were in the labor force. It is now almost 70 percent.<sup>2</sup> This increase in inequality is also occurring at a time when there is evidence of a decline in social mobility,<sup>3</sup> and the costs of gaining access to and completing college are steadily increasing.<sup>4</sup>

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**Pre-Tax Average Household Income by Income Groups (2004 dollars),  
1979 – 2004.**

Income quintile	1979	2004	% Change 1979 – 2004	Dollar Change 1979 – 2004
Lowest fifth	15,100	15,400	2.0	\$300
Second fifth	32,700	36,300	11.0	\$3,600
Middle fifth	49,000	56,200	14.7	\$7,200
Fourth fifth	66,300	81,700	23.2	\$15,400
Top fifth	127,100	207,200	63.0	\$80,100
Top 10 %	165,600	297,800	79.8	\$132,200
Top 5 %	225,400	443,400	96.7	\$218,000
Top 1 %	498,200	1,259,700	152.9	\$761,500

Source: Congressional Budget Office, *Effective Federal Tax Rates, 1979 to 2004*, Table 4C, December 2006. Data from: <http://www.cbo.gov/publications/bysubject.cfm?cat=33>

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This inequality and its steady growth in recent decades have the potential to have a significant impact on American politics. Sustained increases in inequality may create doubts about the American Dream - the belief that “those who play by the rules and work hard have a chance to succeed.”<sup>5</sup> If greater inequality leads to greater usage of government programs by some and not others and differences in the inclination to participate, then greater

inequality may create a divided society – one segment doing well economically, having little use of and contact with government and participating consistently, and another less well off, using government programs but not registering its needs and views via political activity.

These differences will in turn affect the political debate about whether we should respond to greater inequality.

In an effort to explore the many aspects of inequality, the Maxwell School began an annual nationwide survey of Americans in October 2004. Respondents were asked about their economic situation and about their views on inequality and opportunity in American society. They were also asked their views about government programs and whether they or a family member has ever used various government programs.

This report addresses the questions raised above. The report first focuses on perceptions of whether inequality is increasing or decreasing. Second, it examines optimism about the future and views about what affects economic success in America. Third, it reviews how usage of government programs affects opinions about the efficacy of programs and the need for government to do more to address inequality. Fourth, it examines the representation of differing views about inequality issues in American politics. A crucial aspect of American democracy is how these views become represented through voting and identification with political parties. Do those concerned about inequality participate more or less, and how do differences in views about inequality play out in partisan politics?

This report covers only some of the questions asked in the survey. The specifics of how the surveys were conducted are explained in the appendix. The full questionnaire, the data sets and frequencies of responses for each year are available at the web site:

<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/campbell/Poll/CitizenshipPoll.htm>. The survey is being conducted annually.

## II. Public Views about Inequality

### Perceptions of Inequality Trends

While inequality is increasing, do Americans recognize this trend? Since 2004 the percentage seeing inequality as increasing has been over 40 and is now at 48.3. The percentage that sees it as decreasing is now 18.6 and 27.1 see no change. There are also far more who think it will continue to increase (45.8 % in 2007) than think it will decrease (12.1 % in 2007). Most respondents, 67.4 %, agree that we are becoming a society of the haves and have-nots, with 26.2 % disagreeing.

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**Over the last 5-10 years, do you think income inequality has increased, stayed the same, or decreased?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Increased	44.2	41.8	56.7	48.3
Stayed the same	25.9	28.6	23.0	27.1
Decreased	23.9	24.5	16.4	18.6
No opinion	6.0	5.2	4.0	6.0

**Over the next 5 years, do you think income differences will decline, stay about the same, or grow larger?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Increase	37.4	49.2	54.7	45.8
Stay the same	34.7	30.9	26.3	34.1
Decrease	14.1	16.9	11.4	12.1
No opinion	13.8	3.0	7.7	8.0

**Do you think we are becoming a society of the haves and the have-nots?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Yes	67.6	75.2	70.6	67.4
No	27.8	20.5	23.4	26.2
No opinion	4.6	4.3	5.9	6.4

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2007, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

Views about recent changes in inequality carry over into views of the future. Those who see inequality as increasing are more likely to think it is going to increase in the future. Among those who see inequality as increasing in recent years, 61 % think it will increase in the future and only 10 % think it will decrease. Among the 26 % who see no change in recent years, only 32 % think it will increase and 50 % think it will not change. Likewise, among those who agree that we are becoming a society of haves and have-nots, 54 % think inequality will increase. Among those who disagree that we are becoming such a society, only 30 % think inequality will increase.

### **Concerns about Inequality**

Opinions are divided about the extent of opportunity and upward and downward mobility in American society. The 2007 poll indicates that 33.4 % think everyone has an opportunity to succeed while 27.0 % think only some have this opportunity. There is more optimism than pessimism about mobility with 33.7 % thinking there is a lot of upward mobility and only 13.1 % thinking there is not much mobility. Only 21.5 % see a lot of downward mobility and 22.5 % do not see much downward mobility.

The sense of whether we are becoming a society of haves and have-nots affect views about the existence of opportunity. Among those that agree that we are becoming a divided society, 23 % see everyone as having an opportunity and 36 % think only some have opportunity. Among those who disagree about the emergence of a divided society, 48 % see opportunity available to everyone and only 9 % think some have opportunity. There are clearly some optimists and some pessimists about the existence of opportunity and the future of inequality in American society.

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**Do you think everyone in American society has an opportunity to succeed, most do, or do only some have this opportunity?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Everyone	28.9	30.3	25.7	33.4
Most	45.5	39.7	40.2	37.9
Only some	24.9	29.6	32.2	27.0
No opinion	0.8	.4	1.9	1.8

**How much upward mobility - children doing better than the family they come from – do you think there is in America: a lot, some, or not much?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
A lot	33.4	34.1	30.5	33.7
Some mobility	56.4	48.9	56.1	50.3
Not much	9.1	14.8	9.7	13.1
No opinion	1.0	2.2	3.7	2.9

**How about downward mobility in America - children doing worse than the family they come from – is there a lot, some, or not much?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
A lot	19.0	16.9	17.3	21.5
Some mobility	55.0	50.2	48.2	49.2
Not much	22.9	28.3	27.4	22.4
No opinion	3.1	4.6	7.0	6.9

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2006, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

When asked about the seriousness of inequality, 45.7 % of Americans now see the extent of inequality as a serious problem, an increase from 38.3 % in 2004. Only 14.2 % see it as not much of a problem. This assessment that inequality is a serious problem is considerably greater (57 %) among those who see our society as becoming one of haves and have-nots. Among those who do not see us as becoming a divided society, only 15 % see it as a serious problem and 39 % as not much of a problem. Among those who think all have an opportunity to succeed, 30 % see inequality as a serious problem. In contrast, among



those who think only some have an opportunity to succeed, 70 % see inequality as a serious problem.

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**Do you see the current extent of income inequality in our society as a serious problem, somewhat of a problem, or not much of a problem?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Serious problem	38.3	46.8	51.6	45.7
Somewhat of a problem	43.1	38.5	30.6	38.0
Not much of a problem	17.1	12.6	15.3	14.2
No opinion	1.6	2.0	2.6	2.1

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2007, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

### **What Creates Success?**

Essential to the American Dream is the notion that individuals are not bound by family background, and that individuals can make it on their own on the basis of hard work. We asked people several questions about the role of family background and hard work in the ability to achieve. When asked what affects “what you achieve in life, largely your family background, or your abilities and hard work,” in 2007 only 12.3 % chose family background, while 54.2 % chose abilities and hard work. When asked: “While people may begin with different opportunities, hard work and perseverance can overcome the different opportunities people begin with” in 2007 85.0 % agree and 11.3 % disagree.

It is important to note the joint distribution of responses for these two questions and what they tell us about the faith in individualism in American society. Among those who think hard work overcome initial disadvantages, 62 % also believe that abilities and hard work are more important than family background. Among those who disagree that hard work can overcome disadvantages, 29 % think family background matters most and 25 % think

abilities and hard work matter most. In terms of the entire sample, 52 % of all respondents think hard work can overcome disadvantages *and* that hard work is most important. In contrast only 4 % of respondents disagree that hard work overcomes disadvantages *and* think family background matters most. The belief in the role of individualism in creating success is very strong in American society.

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**Do you think what you achieve in life depends largely on your family background, or on your abilities and hard work?**

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Family background	7.5	11.6	13.2	12.3
Both	27.3	27.6	39.4	32.6
Abilities and hard work	63.2	59.8	45.4	54.2
No opinion	2.0	1.1	2.0	1.0

**Would you agree or disagree with the following: While people may begin with different opportunities, hard work and perseverance can usually overcome those disadvantages.**

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Agree	82.5	84.2	82.9	85.0
Disagree	13.5	12.5	14.3	11.3
No opinion	3.9	3.3	2.8	3.8

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2007, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

### **Work Effort and Fairness of Results**

A fundamental tenet of the American Dream is that hard work will produce fair results. Americans are rarely asked about their own work effort and the fairness of the outcomes that occur. In an effort to incorporate the role of work effort, The Maxwell Poll asked people to rate their work effort and their sense that their personal outcomes have been fair. Half of the respondents in 2006 and 2007 said they have worked very hard. 66.6 % of Americans say how life has worked out is fair with only 8.4 % saying life has not been very fair. Those who

say they have worked very hard are as satisfied with fairness as those who say they have not worked hard.

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**If you were to rate your own work efforts in life, with 1 being not very hard and 5 being very hard, where would you place yourself?**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
1 (not very hard)	1.0	2.2
2	2.0	0.7
3	15.1	12.6
4	30.7	32.6
5 (very hard)	50.0	49.9
No response	1.3	1.9

**When you think about how you have fared economically in your life, given the effort you have put in and the talents you have, do you think the way things have worked out for you has been fair, only somewhat fair, or not very fair?**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Fair	60.1	66.6
Somewhat	28.1	23.7
Not very fair	9.6	8.4
No response	2.2	1.3

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Source: 2006 Maxwell Poll, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

### **Optimism about the Future**

Not only do respondents believe that hard work and abilities are primary in determining success, in 2007 Americans' views of their own situation and of the future are fairly positive. 51.9 % say they are better off than their parents while 19.6 % say they are worse off. When asked how they have fared over the last several years, 47.5 % say they are better off and 19.6 % say they are worse off. When asked how they are faring relative to others, 41.6 % say they are doing better than others and only 12.3 % say they are doing worse. Finally, when asked about how they think they will do in the next several years, 57.4

% think their situation will get better and only 10.4 % think they will do worse. While inequality may be steadily but gradually increasing in American society, most respondents have a relatively positive sense of their own situation and their prospects for the future.

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**Compared to your parents, are you better off economically, about the same, or worse off?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Better	52.6	50.1	51.6	51.9
Same	25.0	27.5	28.7	26.7
Worse	19.7	20.6	17.3	19.6
No response	2.7	1.8	2.4	1.8

**Over the last several years has your economic situation improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Improved	48.8	47.9	40.8	47.5
Stayed same	30.2	26.0	35.2	32.0
Gotten worse	20.3	25.8	23.8	19.1
No response	.8	.3	.3	1.4

**Over the last 5 years, when you compare your economic situation to how others in our society are doing, do you think you are doing better than average, about the same, or worse than average?**

	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Better	38.7	32.4	41.6
Same	52.6	55.9	44.6
Worse	7.8	10.1	12.3
No response	.9	1.5	1.6

**Over the next several years, do you think your economic situation is likely to improve, stay the same, or get worse?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Improve	61.6	57.9	49.7	57.4
Stay the same	23.3	28.9	34.8	29.4
Get worse	9.9	12.3	13.4	10.4
No response	5.3	.9	2.1	2.9

There are, however, clear differences in economic experiences and views among the American public. Some have fared well, are optimistic about their future, the fairness of life, and the presence of opportunity and upward mobility. Others have not fared well and are not positive about these matters. These differences affect the sense of whether inequality is a serious problem. Among those who say that their economic situation has improved over the last several years, 73 % think their situation will improve in the future, 41 % see a lot of upward mobility in society, 37 % see inequality as a serious problem, and only 23 % see opportunity as only available to a few. In contrast, among those who say they are worse off recently, 37 % think their situation will improve in the future, 27 % see a lot of upward mobility, 76 % think inequality is a serious problem, and 49 % think opportunity is available to only a few.

Surprisingly, these personal experiences and assessments do not significantly affect opinions about whether government should do more about inequality. 57 % of those better off think government should do more about it, while 69 % of those worse off think government should do more. While personal economic experiences shape assessments to some degree, the sense that government should do something about the issue is widespread.

In summary, there is concern about inequality. There is a sense that it has increased and is likely to in the future. A substantial percentage sees it as a serious problem or somewhat of a problem. Most respondents do not think that everyone has the opportunity to succeed, but there is a widespread belief that individual abilities and hard work are the primary sources of success. Most think there is mobility, they have experienced such mobility, and they think it will occur in the future. Despite these differences, the sense that government should do more about the matter is pervasive.

## Class and Views about Inequality

With inequality increasing, how much are reactions to this influenced by economic class? There are differences by income groups, but the differences are less than some might expect. 29.3 % of those in families making less than \$50,000 think everyone has an opportunity to succeed, while 36.4 % of those in families above \$100,000 adopt that position, for a difference of only 7.1 percentage points. When it comes to whether we are becoming a society of the haves and have-nots, the difference between these two income groups is 14.8 percentage points. With regard to whether income inequality is a serious problem, the difference is 17.9 percentage points. Issues of inequality do not divide Americans by class. There are differences by class, but there is more agreement than division.

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## Family Income and Views about Inequality

### Who has opportunity in American society?

	All	Most	Just some
Less than \$50,000	29.3	37.0	31.1
\$50 – 99,999	35.4	38.8	25.5
\$100,000 +	36.4	41.2	22.4

### How serious of a problem is the current extent of income inequality in our society?

	Serious	Somewhat	Not much
Less than \$50,000	57.9	33.8	5.9
\$50 – 99,999	34.6	48.9	14.4
\$100,000 +	40.0	32.8	24.7

### Are we becoming a society of haves and have-nots

	Agree	Disagree
Less than \$50,000	73.8	16.9
\$50 – 99,999	67.3	29.8
\$100,000 +	59.0	32.9

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2007, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

### III. Assessments and Use of Government Programs

#### Should Government Do More?

While individuals recognize inequality and are concerned about it, do they see government as an effective way to address the problem of inequality or do they think what matters most is individual motivation? Further, when presented with the choice of government or non-profits as a means of taking action, which do they prefer?

When asked whether government should do more to reduce inequality, 58.6 % say do more and only 17.4 % want government to do less. Despite this generally positive reaction, when asked whether government programs help a lot or whether individual motivation is most important, 46.5 % think individual motivation is most important and only 26.0 % think programs help a lot. As might be expected, those who think inequality is a serious problem are much more supportive of government taking action to reduce inequality. Among those who see inequality as a serious problem, 75.5 % think government should do more. Among those who think it is not much of a problem, only 27.6 % want government to do more.

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#### Should government do more to try to reduce inequality, about what it is doing now, or less that is done now?

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
More	53.8	55.1	61.5	58.6
About what done now	22.4	19.0	18.6	18.7
Less	17.5	21.5	14.5	17.4
No opinion	6.3	4.4	5.4	5.3

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2006, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

While there is support for government doing more about inequality, it is not the case that most are convinced that the best way to take action is directly through government.

When asked if government programs help a lot or individual motivation is most important, more choose individual motivation than government programs. When asked if they prefer taking action through government or through charities, opinion is divided. When asked which will be most effective, respondents choose charities over government by 49.2 % to 23.0 %. There is support for government efforts about inequality, but not necessarily through government programs.

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**There are lots of government programs (Head Start for young children, loans to go to college, job training) to try to create more equality of opportunity. Generally speaking, do you think these programs help a lot or do you think the most important matter is individual motivation?**

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
Programs help a lot	40.6	36.2	29.4	26.0
Both are important	17.5	17.0	26.5	22.1
Individual motivation most important	38.7	43.9	39.5	46.5
No opinion	3.2	2.9	4.6	5.4

**If you wanted to see efforts made to do something to help those less well off, would you prefer it be done through government programs funded with tax revenues or through charities/ non-profits funded primarily by charitable contributions?**

Government	40.6
Both	17.5
Non-profits	38.7
No opinion	3.2

**When it comes to establishing programs to try to do something to help those less well off, which approach would be most effective in helping people: government programs or local non-profits/ charities?**

Government	23.0
Both	22.3
Non-profits	49.2
No opinion	4.5

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## Using Government Programs

How many people use government programs and how does usage of government programs affect citizen views of them? Surprisingly, few polls ask citizens about their use of government programs intended for those in need, and those that do inquire ask only about present usage, not whether individuals have ever utilized the program. To explore how much people have used government programs, the Poll includes this question:

“Speaking of government programs, I’d like to ask you about your experience with several programs. Could you tell me for each of the following if you or anyone in your immediate household / family (such as your brothers and sisters, your children, or your parents), have *ever* received some benefit / payment from the program?”<sup>6</sup>

Respondents were then asked about usage of ten government programs that in some way address inequality. The table below shows the percentage of respondents using each program at some time during their life. Usage rates vary from 22.1 % for unemployment compensation, 21.0 % for the Earned Income Tax Credit to 2.1 % for subsidized housing.

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### *Usage of Government Programs: Percentage saying program used by:*

<i>Program</i>	Self only	Both me and a family member	Total Self
Unemployment compensation	14.0	8.1	22.1
Earned Income Tax Credit	13.3	7.7	21.0
Medicaid	5.9	5.6	11.5
WIC	8.4	2.6	11.0
Food Stamps	5.7	5.3	11.0
Workmen’s Compensation	7.5	2.1	9.6
Welfare/public assistance	4.6	5.0	9.6
Disability	7.2	1.3	8.5
Head Start	3.3	2.0	5.3
Government Subsidized Housing	1.0	1.1	2.1

Note: self is either the individual or the individual and a family member; the two are added together to represent the total percentage of individuals surveyed who used the program.

Using responses from 2004-07, 61 % of Americans have used one or more of these programs during their lifetime and 33 % have used two or more. Usage decreases as income increases. Among those making \$50,000 or less, 72 % have used one or more and 47 % have used two or more. But surprisingly, even among those who now have family incomes of \$100,000 or more, 52 % have used at least one and 21 % have used two or more. Even among those now making \$150,000 or more, 46 % report that they have used one of these programs at one time and 13 % have used 2 or more. There is income mobility – people moving up and down in relative income in America society - and that mobility appears to have created greater usage of government programs than might be expected.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of using or not using government programs has some effect on people's evaluations of government programs. When asked if government programs help or individual motivation is most important, among those who have never used a program, 31 % think programs help and 48 % think individual motivation is most important. Among those who have used 2 or more programs, 38 % think programs help and 36 % think individual motivation is most important. Among those who have never used one of these government programs 51 % think government should do more to address inequality and 48 % would prefer to see any action take place just through charities. Among those who have used 2 or more programs, 65 % think government should do more and only 27 % prefer working through charities. Experience with programs has an effect, but it is also the case that support for government action through some means is fairly widespread.

## **IV. The Representation of Inequality Concerns**

### **Participation Differences**

Americans are concerned about inequality trends and think government should do more. While there are continuing efforts to call attention to inequality trends and their effects,<sup>8</sup> there is often concern about whether those who use government services or support efforts in this area achieve representation. Three issues are particularly important. Do users of government programs vote at lower rates? Do those concerned about inequality and supportive of greater action vote as frequently as those less concerned? Does one of the parties, the Democrats, have an electoral base that would prompt them to advocate for this issue?

The first two matters involve differences in individual voting rates. Respondents were asked if they vote always, usually, only sometimes, or not much at all. All responses other than “always” (except “no response”) were grouped together as “less frequently.” About 57 % report that they always vote. That rate is higher than election results suggest, but over-reporting voting is fairly common.

Those with lower incomes do vote at lower rates. 67 % of those making more than \$100,000 vote regularly, while only 58 % of those with family incomes under \$50,000 vote regularly. Those who have used the 10 programs asked about also vote less. 68 % of those who have never used a program report that they vote regularly while 59 % of those who have used 2 or more programs report voting regularly. The result is that the population that votes regularly is somewhat over-representative of non-users of the government programs asked about. 62 % of the entire population reports using one or more program, while 59 % of regular voters report having used one or more programs. There is a difference, but it is slight.

The second concern is that those who are more concerned about these issues vote less, such that these concerns receive less political expression. The results, using results from 2004-07, are mixed.<sup>9</sup> Those more concerned about these issues do not consistently vote less frequently. Even when those more concerned, as with the existence of opportunity, do vote less, the differences are not great. The evidence does not indicate that the voting population is less representative of inequality concerns.

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### Voting and Opinions about Inequality

Voting	Who has Opportunity		
	All	Most	Only some
Always	31.9	40.9	26.5
Less frequently	26.6	41.6	30.0

	How serious of a problem is inequality		
	Serious	Somewhat	Not much
Always	49.4	33.9	14.3
Less frequently	40.2	42.0	16.1

	Should government do more about inequality		
	Do more	What done now	Do less
Always	54.9	19.1	19.5
Less frequently	56.6	22.9	16.2

Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2007, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

### Partisan Representation of Differing Views

A second way in which representation can occur is through the political parties. Do Democrats and Republicans differ significantly on these issues? If Democrats have a base that is much more concerned with these issues and supportive of taking action on these issues, this could provide a base for the party to be an advocate for such concerns.

The results in the following table indicate that there are significant differences. Democrats are more likely to have used government programs, and much more supportive of government doing more about inequality (74.9 %) and using government as the vehicle to take action (37.9 %). Republicans are less likely to have used a government program, much less supportive of the government doing more (27.7 %) and more supportive of doing less (34.9 %). They are also very strong supporters of taking action through charities. Liberals and conservatives divide in the same ways. While class does not divide Americans about whether we should do anything about inequality, ideological and partisan inclinations do. Democrats do have the electoral base to articulate concern about inequality and that has shown up in the legislative positions they have taken.<sup>10</sup>

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### Party Identification and Inequality Issues

Party Identification	Prior usage of government programs?		
	Never	One	Two or more
Democrat	36.3	26.3	37.5
Independent	36.2	34.8	29.0
Republican	45.7	27.8	26.5

Party Identification	Should government do more about inequality?		
	Do more	What done now	Do less
Democrat	74.9	13.6	7.5
Independent	55.3	21.5	16.6
Republican	27.7	31.5	34.9

Party Identification	Who should take action?		
	Government	Both	Charities
Democrat	37.9	28.1	29.5
Independent	8.7	29.2	58.4
Republican	10.8	16.2	70.8

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Source: Maxwell Polls 2004 - 2007, Campbell Public Affairs Institute

## **Summary**

The increase in inequality of recent years is recognized by many Americans, and most think it is likely to continue to increase. Many Americans have used the programs intended to help those facing economic difficulties. While the trend of greater inequality is recognized, the belief that individuals have opportunity and can overcome any early disadvantages and succeed in American society is also fairly widespread. Not everyone shares that optimism, but it is sufficiently widespread that it somewhat restrains the extent of conflict that develops about the issue.

On the other hand, the political parties have electoral bases that differ significantly on issues involving inequality. Because of those differing bases, the parties are likely to play a major role in the next several years in articulating very different visions of what should be done about inequality. The issue of inequality is likely to be a major issue in the 2008 presidential election.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The logic of this index is to set perfect equality as a baseline and then measure divergence from that. If every one percent of the population had one percent of income we have perfect equality. If we were to plot this geometrically, every percentage increase in the percentage of the population would be matched by an equivalent percentage of income. In contrast, if there is inequality and 50 percent of the population has only 25 percent of income, a discrepancy from that baseline develops. The greater this discrepancy, the greater the inequality, and the higher the Gini index. Sources: The Gini index is taken from Robert D. Plotnick, Eugene Smolensky, Eirik Evenhouse, and Siobhan Reilly, "The Twentieth Century Record of Inequality and Poverty in the United States." Institute for Research on Poverty, Discussion Paper no. 1166-98, 1998. <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp/>. The index measures how evenly incomes are distributed and runs from 0 to 1. A score of zero indicates there is no difference between the percentage of the population and the percentage of income received by that population. High scores indicate that a small percentage of the population has a large percentage of income. He and his associates use the Gini index for family incomes from the Bureau of the Census for 1947 - 1996. To estimate scores for 1913-1964 they first fit an equation to estimate the Gini index for 1947-1996 using several independent variables. They then use the parameters derived from the 1947-1996 equation results and data on the same independent variables from 1913-1946, and estimate a Gini index for 1913-1946. The Gini index from 1997-2005 is taken from U.S. Census Bureau Historical Income Tables <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/ie1.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For recent figures, see: <http://www.bls.gov/opub/working/data/chart3.txt>.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of studies that track the same individuals over time, see: Katherin Bradbury and Jane Katz, "Are Lifetime Incomes Growing More Unequal?" Regional Review Q4 2002 Sep02, available at: <http://www.bos.frb.org/economic/nerr/rr2002/q4/issues.pdf>. For a graphical presentation of these data, see the New York Times' series on "How Class Matters." [http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/national/20050515\\_CLASS\\_GRAPHIC/index\\_03.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/national/20050515_CLASS_GRAPHIC/index_03.html).

<sup>4</sup> The real costs of attending college are rising, while federal aid covers a smaller percentage of college costs, and borrowing to attend college is increasing steadily. For reports on these matters, see the following: "Trends in College Pricing, 2004," The College Board, 2005. The full report is available at: [http://www.collegeboard.com/prod\\_downloads/press/cost04/041264TrendsPricing2004\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost04/041264TrendsPricing2004_FINAL.pdf). "Trends in Student Aid, 2004." The College Board, 2005. The full report is available at: [http://www.collegeboard.com/prod\\_downloads/press/cost04/TrendsinStudentAid2004.pdf](http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost04/TrendsinStudentAid2004.pdf). For changes in levels of student loans see Sandy Baum and Marie O'Malley, College on Credit: How Borrowers Perceive their Education Debt; Results of the 2002 National Student Loan Survey, February 6, 2003, at: [http://www.nelliemae.com/library/nasls\\_2002.pdf](http://www.nelliemae.com/library/nasls_2002.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Hochschild, *The American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of American Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Respondents were then asked whether the usage was by: just that individual, the individual and a member of their family, or just a member of their family. For this analysis, the focus is just on whether the individual respondent used a government program. To assess this the first two sets of responses are added.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Mettler and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, "Generation of Voters: Patterns of Policy Receipt and Political Voice," forthcoming, *Social Science Quarterly*.

<sup>8</sup> For studies attempting to make inequality of the income distribution more of an issue see those presented by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities at: <http://www.cbpp.org/pubs/povinc.htm>. For academic overviews of the issue, see Joe Soss, Jacob S. Hacker, and Suzanne Mettler, Editors, *Remaking America: Democracy and Public Policy in an Age of Inequality*, (New York: Russell Sage, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> The surveys during 2004 - 2006 indicated that users of government means - tested programs do participate at lower levels than non-users.

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<sup>10</sup> See Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Split: Class and Cultural Divisions in American Politics, (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 41-65.