Inequality continues to increase in America and the public is concerned about this trend. While the economy is growing and the stock market has increased in the last several years, close to a majority of the public sees inequality as increasing and expresses strong concern about this.

The issue of whether government should try to respond to the wealth gap is now a major source of division between the two political parties and will likely play some role in the 2008 presidential election. This Campbell Brief presents these findings from The Maxwell Poll on Inequality and Civic Engagement conducted from 2004 to 2007.

Figure 1 indicates the trend since the early 1940s in the inequality of distribution of income. After declining from the early 1940s through the 1960s, inequality has risen steadily since around 1970.

Perceptions of Inequality

Increasing inequality is recognized by the public, as shown in Figure 2. Over the last two years the percentage of the public that thinks that inequality is increasing has been around 50 percent, while less than 20 percent see it as declining. This perception exists within all income levels.

Future Changes in Inequality

There is a sense that inequality is likely to continue to increase. Poll respondents were asked if they expect inequality to increase, stay the same, or decrease over the next 5-10 years. As shown in Figure 3, in 2004, 37.4 percent said they expected it to increase. That view was expressed by 49.2 percent in 2005, 54.7 percent in 2006, and 45.8 in the most recent survey. In 2007, 12 percent anticipate inequality declining in the future. These views about the past and the future are related. Among those who see inequality as increasing in recent years, 60.8 % think it will increase in the future. Among those who see it as decreasing in recent years, only 34.5 percent think it will increase. There is a substantial percentage of the public who are pessimistic about past and future inequality, and also some who are optimistic about both.

Concerns about Inequality

While the public sees inequality as having increased and as likely to increase, do they see it as a serious problem? Respondents were asked if inequality is a serious problem, somewhat of a problem, or not much of a problem. The percentage of the public that thinks that inequality is a serious problem has increased from 38.3 in 2004 to 45.7 in 2007 (see Figure 4).

The sense that inequality is a problem is matched by growing support for government action to try to reduce inequality. Respondents were asked if government should do more, about the same as now, or less to try to reduce inequality. In 2004, 53.8 percent said more should be done. In 2007, 58.6 percent said that more should be done. A majority consistently supports more government action.

Perceptions of Inequality, Partisanship, and the 2008 Presidential Election

Awareness of inequality is increasing and there is greater support for government efforts to try to do something about it. There are also those who do not see a problem. These trends create the conditions for inequality issues to become more prominent in our society.

Political parties are the primary vehicle to get an issue on the agenda and make it part of public
debate. For that to happen, those with differing views have to identify primarily with one party so the party sees that it has a clear base of support among those concerned about a social issue.

Those with differing assessments of inequality as a problem have sorted themselves out between the two parties. As Figure 5 indicates, among those who think that inequality is a serious problem, 48 percent identify as Democrats and 10 percent identify as Republican. Among those who think that inequality is not much of a problem, 43 percent are Republican and 20 percent are Democrats. Democrats have long stressed that individuals have major differences in family and personal resources and face significant differences in opportunity in society. The party is attracting those who share that view. Republicans are more likely to emphasize that individuals are responsible for their own situations. In their view inequality may simply reflect the consequences of differences in talent and effort and should not be seen as a problem. The party is attracting those who share that view. The consequence is that 55 percent of Democrats see inequality as a serious problem and only 20 percent of Republicans see it as a serious problem.

These perceptions affect support for government action. 82 percent of Democrats think government should do more while only 27 percent of Republicans hold that view. 67 percent of Republicans think government should do what it is doing now or less, while only 14 percent of Democrats agree with those positions.

These differences are likely to play a significant role in the 2008 presidential election. With inequality growing, the public recognizing that and the parties attracting those with very different ideas about what should be done, the party candidates are likely to reflect these differences and make inequality and the role of government a central part of the campaign.

Key Findings from The Maxwell Poll

- Inequality in the distribution of income continues to increase.
- A plurality of Americans think inequality will continue to increase.
- Over 40 percent of Americans see inequality as a serious problem.
- Over 50 percent of Americans think government should do more about the problem of inequality.
- Republicans and Democrats differ significantly in their views about inequality and the obligation of government to try to do something about it. Those differences will likely play a role in creating a debate about the issue of inequality during the 2008 presidential campaign.
Additional Information
For the Maxwell Poll database and reports visit the Institute web site
http://www.campbellinstitute.org

The Campbell Public Affairs Institute

The Campbell Public Affairs Institute is an endowed research institute at The Maxwell School of Syracuse University. Its mission is to examine the ideal of citizenship, its evolution, and the conditions under which it thrives. Institute researchers explore the relationship among citizens, private organizations, and government in an effort to understand the development and implementation of effective leadership, management, and policy. The Institute reveals the connections among citizens, media, nonprofit groups, and the law; and responsiveness to individual and group interests in the shaping of public institutions and decisions.

Further Readings on the Subject


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