Public Opinion, the 1%, and Income Redistribution

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Abstract

Because of the skewed distribution of income and wealth, a majority of people could make significant financial gains by redistribution from the affluent minority. However, redistribution of this kind is not particularly popular. Moreover, the rapid increase in top salaries since the 1970s has not provoked a strong reaction from the public. This essay considers the paradox of public opinion on redistribution. There are many hypotheses, but until recently there has not been much empirical research. However, recent work on opinions about salaries suggests that most people have quite egalitarian standards of fairness, in which corporate executives would receive only a few times as much as average workers. At the same time, there is often a good deal of support for measures that make taxes less progressive, notably as the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003. That is, people seem to think that high salaries are unfair, but do not necessarily support government efforts to move toward a "fair" distribution. The essay discusses some ways to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Two of the most promising are a lack of trust in government and moral objections to redistribution. However, we must also consider the possibility that the pattern of opinions is in some sense irrational: the challenge is to specify a theory of irrationality to make positive predictions. Finally, the essay discusses the availability of data on public opinion, and identifies two major needs: historical and comparative data.

INTRODUCTION

"We are the 99 percent": the slogan of the Occupy Wall Street movement expresses the paradox examined in this essay. In an economic sense, the slogan was fairly accurate: in recent years, a small minority has pulled ahead of the rest of society. Saez (2013) estimates that, in the United States, the top 1% of earners received over 60% of the gain in national income between 1993 and 2011. But in a political sense, the slogan was inaccurate: There is little popular support for action to substantially reduce top incomes, whether in the form of high marginal tax rates or direct regulation. This is not a new situation:

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in 1939, a Fortune survey found that about three-fourths of the public was opposed to putting an upper limit on what a person could earn (Ladd and Bowman, 1998, p. 108).[1] It also is not unique to the United States, according to the limited amount of comparative information.[2] Most people seem to be satisfied with a very moderate degree of redistribution away from the rich.

The paradox arises from the shape of the characteristic shape of the income distribution: In all modern societies there are people whose incomes are dozens or even hundreds of times larger than the average. Jan Pen (1971, p. 54) imagines a parade of people whose height is proportional to their income: "during the last seconds the scene is dominated by colossal figures: people like tower flats .... the rear of the parade is brought up by a few participants who are measured in miles." In technical terms, the distribution of income (and, to an even greater extent, the distribution of wealth) is skewed to the right. This fact means that the majority could make substantial gains by redistribution at the expense of a small minority. As property restrictions on voting were weakened in the nineteenth century, many observers thought that the new voters might "throw... upon the larger incomes, an unfair share, or even the whole, of the burden of taxation; and having done so, add to the amount without scruple, expending the proceeds in modes supposed to conduce to the profit and advantage of the labouring class" (Mill, 1865 [1977], p. 442). Although the pace of change was slow, for many years the tide seemed to be moving in this direction: Governments established progressive income and inheritance taxes, even as pre-tax income inequality declined. Around the middle of the twentieth century, Downs (1957) and Lenski (1966) proposed that there was a historical tendency for democratic governments to redistribute income and wealth away from the top: Elites could delay this movement, but not reverse it. Since the 1970s, however, top incomes have risen in many countries; rather than taking action to stop this development, most governments have substantially reduced marginal tax rates on those incomes. These developments have directed attention to the question of public opinion about redistribution from the rich.

To begin, it is necessary to distinguish this issue from some related ones. First, support for redistribution is not equivalent to "class consciousness." For Marx and his followers, class consciousness meant going beneath the

1. For figures from opinion surveys, I give citations to published work when possible. All other survey data cited in this essay can be found in the iPOLL database maintained by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut.

2. The best comparative information comes from the International Social Justice Project, which asked whether there should be an upper limit on the amount of money that a person could make. Although support was lowest in the United States, but opposition also outweighed support in West Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Japan. The survey also included several postsocialist nations, most of which showed more support for an upper limit.

surface and developing some understanding of the fundamental divisions in society. The argument for redistribution from the rich, in contrast, requires no deep understanding, just the knowledge that some people have a lot of money. That is, the question is not the Marxist one of why ordinary people have not developed an understanding of their "true" interests, but the more difficult one of why they have not followed what Mill (1865 [1977], p. 443) called their "immediate and apparent interest." Support for redistribution from the rich must also be distinguished from egalitarianism. Egalitarians favor reducing all differences of income, usually with special emphasis on improving the position of the poor. Although egalitarians will favor redistribution from the rich, people who favor redistribution from the rich are not necessarily egalitarians. That is, the money taken from the rich might be directed partly or even entirely toward middle-income people rather than to the poor. There is certainly some overlap between the issues: poor people who oppose egalitarianism and middle-income people who oppose redistribution from the rich are both going against their apparent material interests. However, one of the important barriers to egalitarianism seems to be a belief that the poor, especially those who are not employed, are undeserving. In contrast, most people with moderate incomes are proud of themselves and think that they are deserving.[3] As a result, it seems that popular moral beliefs and self-interest should both encourage redistribution from the rich. To distinguish redistribution from the rich from more general egalitarian redistribution, I refer to it as "leveling."

Although the issue of public opinion on leveling was neglected for many years, since the 1970s it has received more systematic attention, particularly from economists building on Downs's (1957) theory of democracy. The large literature on class consciousness and egalitarianism also contains many relevant suggestions. As a result, there are many hypotheses about factors limiting support for leveling: Putterman (1997) and Weakliem and Biggert (2013) offer reviews. However, most of these hypotheses have not been adequately tested in empirical work.[4] A major reason for this situation is that the relevant survey evidence is scattered. Although there are many survey questions about aid to the poor or general inequality, questions about leveling are much scarcer. As McCall (2013, p. 231) observes, "the study of attitudes about the rich is in its infancy, certainly as compared to the study of attitudes about the poor." For example, in its 40-year history, the General Social Survey has only

3. In 2000, the General Social Survey found that 56% of respondents said they earned "much less than I deserve" or "less than I deserve," 34% said they earned what they deserved, and only 3% said they earned more than they deserved.

4. Weakliem and Biggert (2013) also attempt a preliminary assessment of a number of hypotheses.

once included a question on redistribution from the rich.[5] Moreover, many of the most relevant questions have appeared in commercial rather than academic surveys.

Rather than giving another survey of theories and hypotheses, this essay focuses on two lines of empirical research. The first is public opinion about what people in different occupations actually earn and should earn. The second is public opinion involving the 2001 cuts in income taxes and the estate tax. Taken together, these two bodies of work clarify the nature of the problem. I then discuss the implications of this perspective for future research.

RECENT RESEARCH

Public Opinion on Earnings

Beginning in the 1980s, the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) has offered a list of occupations and asked how much people in these jobs usually earn and how much they ought to earn. The list includes several occupations with low or moderate pay and several with high pay, including, a doctor, a lawyer, and "the chairman of a large national corporation." On the average, people offer fairly accurate estimates of the pay of "ordinary" occupations, but underestimate the pay of the top positions, particularly for the corporate chair (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006). Page and Jacobs (2009) ask an American sample about a slightly different list of occupations and find the same tendency to underestimate top salaries. In their sample, the median estimate of the salary of the CEO of a large national corporation was only $500,000.

Most people said that salaries in the low-paid occupations should be higher and that salaries in high-paid occupations should be lower. That is, the popular idea of a "fair" distribution is a very egalitarian one, in which a corporate chair would earn only a few times as much as an ordinary worker. This general pattern applied in every one of the 27 nations included in the 1999 ISSP, and the United States was not unusual with respect to either the perceived or ideal distribution. However, because the actual distribution of earnings in the United States is more unequal than the distribution in most other nations, the similarity of perceived differentials means that the tendency to underestimate top earnings is unusually strong in the United States (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006).

5. In 1993, it asked whether "people should be allowed to accumulate as much as they can even if some people make millions while others live in poverty"; 56 percent agreed while 30 percent disagreed (Ladd and Bowman 1998, p. 109). The GSS has also included a question on whether people with high incomes should pay a higher rate of tax. However, this question is not a pure measure of beliefs about how much they should pay, because it involves an implicit comparison with how much they are thought to pay.

Norton and Ariely (2011), using an American sample, elicit opinions about the distribution of wealth by quintiles, and come to a parallel conclusion: The perceived distribution is more egalitarian than the actual distributions, and the "ideal" distribution is even more egalitarian. A number of other surveys have asked about whether people in certain occupations are overpaid or underpaid. These questions show the same pattern: Most people say that salaries in the low-paying occupations are too low and salaries in the high-paying occupations are too high. One of the most interesting examples is a series of questions by the Harris Poll asking people whether "most successful people on Wall Street deserve to make the kind of money they earn." In 1997, 51% agreed with the statement, but the number fell steadily in the twenty-first century, and was at 32% in 2012.

Questions about the amount of money it would take to be "rich" provide another source of information about popular perceptions of income distribution. These estimates are typically very modest. For example, in a 1996 Gallup Poll, the median answer to a question on the income that it would take to be "rich" was only $100,000, equivalent to about $150,000 at present (Weakliem and Biggert, 2013, pp. 78–79). People with lower incomes generally offer lower figures.

The evidence discussed shows that people underestimate the amount of inequality at the top of the income distribution. Runciman (1966), who provided some of the first evidence of this pattern, explained it as the result of a tendency to generalize from one's own experience. As Shapiro (2003, p. 120) summarizes this view, people "see the world as an enlarged version of their—comparatively homogeneous—local reference groups." The fact that the tendency to underestimate income differences is found in many countries suggests that this explanation has a good deal of truth. However, unusual strength of the tendency in the United States suggests that it is also influenced by other factors: possibilities include the nature of media coverage or political debate.

The ISSP questions all involve pre-tax earnings, not income after taxes and transfers. Although there appear to be no survey questions on the fairness of the distribution after taxes and transfers, there have been a number about the tax burden for different groups. These show a consensus that people with high incomes pay too little in taxes while people with low and moderate incomes pay too much. For example, a 2013 Gallup Poll found that 61% said that "upper income people" paid too little in federal taxes, 26% said they paid their fair share, and only 11% said that they paid too much. For "middle-income people," the corresponding figures were 3, 53, and 42%. I know of only one question about the distributional effects of government spending: in a Los Angeles Times Survey, 48% said that most spending by the federal government goes to help rich people (25% said poor people and only

10% said middle class people). Putting this information together, it seems clear that people do not think that the distribution after taxes and transfers is fair.

Public Opinion on Tax Policy

A tendency to underestimate earnings at the top would help to reduce the demand for redistribution. At the same time, the popular idea of a fair distribution is considerably more egalitarian than the perceived distribution, so one would expect strong support for measures to redistribute from the top. However, in reality, support for redistribution is rather weak. For example, in 2012 a survey sponsored by CNBC asked about the maximum percentage that "individuals and families with incomes of over 1,000,000 dollars a year should pay in income taxes." The mean was only 31%, which is not very different from the amount that they actually pay, as estimated by the Congressional Budget Office (2012).[6] Moreover, proposals to reduce taxes on high incomes are often quite popular. Bartels (2005) provides a detailed analysis of public opinion on the tax cuts proposed by George Bush in 2001 and 2003. A clear majority supported the cuts, both before and after they became law. At the same time, most said that the major benefits would go to the rich. In a 2001 Harris Poll, 51% thought that "you and your family" would benefit "only a little" from the cuts, while 34% did not expect to benefit at all. Support for the tax cuts was not related to opinions about whether the different income groups paid too much or too little in taxes, but was related to opinions about one's own tax burden (Bartels, 2005). Most people thought that economic inequality had been increasing and that this was a bad thing, but opinions on these points were related to support for the tax cut only among well-informed respondents. One factor that did affect support for the tax cuts was opinions about one's own tax burden: People who thought they paid too much in taxes tended to support the cuts, regardless of their views about inequality. Bartels (2005, p. 21) labeled the dominant pattern as "unenlightened self-interest" in which people focused on the immediate benefit to themselves and ignored the larger implications.

Another component of the Bush tax cuts was the gradual reduction and eventual elimination of the estate tax, and this was even more popular than the reductions in income tax rates. An obvious hypothesis is that many people mistakenly believed that the estate tax would affect their own family. While this was true, proposals for repeal received strong support even if the question included correct information about the incidence of the tax (Weakliem and Biggert, 2013, pp. 69–70). Moreover, Graetz and Shapiro (2005)

6. Note that the CNBC question also asked for the *maximum* tax rate. The income tax rates offered by the public are arguably less progressive than the current system. See Gallup (1951) for an earlier example.

make a convincing case that public opinion did not shift over the course of the public debate, even as opponents repeatedly noted that the tax applied to only a small minority and offered to raise the limit for eligibility or to exempt family businesses. Their interpretation is almost the opposite of Bartels's: they argue that support for repeal the inheritance tax was based on principle, and that opponents of repeal were ineffective because they focused on appealing to self-interest.

Implications

Taken together, the research discussed in the previous sections shows that many people do not approve of the existing distribution of income, but often do not support measures that would change it. One possible explanation for this paradox is that people think that they are likely to reach the top themselves: It is easier to tolerate injustice if you expect to benefit from it someday. There is almost certainly some tendency to overestimate the chance of upward mobility, because most people exaggerate their control over events and chances of achieving their goals (Lane, 2001). However, it appears that opinions about the chance of becoming rich are only moderately optimistic. For example, a 1998 survey found that only 24% of people agreed with the statement "feel that you will become a millionaire in your lifetime" (Weakliem and Biggert, 2013, p. 78). Several Gallup polls have asked about the chances of becoming "rich": about 10% said that it was "very likely," and 20–25% said it was "somewhat likely." Weakliem and Biggert (2013) argue that, when combined with the moderate standards that most people have for the income needed to be "rich," these estimates are fairly accurate. DiPrete (2007) offers a different interpretation, suggesting that people overestimate their chances of reaching top positions, but underestimate the amount of money that is made in those positions. Regardless of the positive answers are interpreted, however, a clear majority says that it is "not very likely" or "not likely" that they will ever be rich.

Another possibility is that people think that raising taxes on the rich would hurt economic growth by reducing investment and innovation. That is, people may see a conflict between fairness and efficiency (Okun, 1975). Despite the importance of the issue, there is little direct evidence about public opinion on this point. A survey by ABC News and the Washington Post found that 83% of respondents agreed that "it's important to allow people to make as much money as they legally can because that's what makes the country's economy grow." On the other hand, the ISSP asks if "large income differences are necessary for [the country's] prosperity," and finds majority disagreement in almost all nations, including the United States (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006). However, the hypothesis that people tolerate high incomes as the price of economic growth implies that the pressure for leveling will vary depending on the actual rate of growth and income distribution. Specifically, the combination of high inequality and slow growth, by reducing the credibility of the argument that inequality promotes growth, should increase the pressure for leveling. Although this combination has prevailed in the United States during the twenty-first century, public opinion does not seem to have changed substantially. Thus, historical evidence casts doubt on this explanation, although more research is necessary.

Where does this leave us? There are several potentially promising explanations of the apparent discrepancy between opinions on a fair distribution and opinions on concrete measures. One is that people lack confidence in the willingness or ability of the government to bring about change. Slemrod (2006) observes that proposals to replace the progressive income tax with a "flat tax" or a general sales tax are often fairly popular. He argues that one reason for this popularity is a widespread belief that the current system is not actually progressive: that the rich find a way to pay at very low rates. Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, and Stantcheva (2013; see Kuziemko and Stantcheva, 2013 for a summary) designed an on-line survey that provided a randomly selected fraction of their sample with a "tutorial" on trends in economic inequality. They found that respondents who were exposed to the information were more likely to agree that inequality was a serious problem, but less likely to agree that the government could be trusted at least some of the time. That is, rather than concluding that the government should do more, some people seem to have concluded that it meant that the government was unable or unwilling to do anything. As a result, increased awareness of inequality did not result in increased support for government action. Lack of confidence in government may help to account for the pattern found by Bartels (2005).[7] In thinking about policy proposals such as the Bush tax cuts, people may not have paid much attention to reductions in top marginal tax rates because they assumed that the rich would find a way to turn *any* reform to their advantage. In effect, they focus on their own tax rate because that is all that they are sure about.

A second possibility is that even though people regard high incomes as unfair, they have moral objections to measures that would reduce them. Hayek (1960 [2011], p. 150) argued against "all attempts to impose on society a preconceived pattern of distribution." In his view, the market distribution results from free choices, while redistribution requires coercion, and minimizing coercion is the most important principle of a free society. Although the argument is well known in social philosophy, it has not received much

7. Bartels (2005) finds that opinions about whether the government wastes a lot of money do not help to explain attitudes toward the tax cuts. The most relevant issue, however, is not waste but whether the government would or could reduce high incomes.

attention in empirical research. However, it may help to make sense of public opposition to the inheritance tax: Graetz and Shapiro (2005) suggest that many people saw the issue in terms of the right to give property to one's children. Lane (1986) makes a related point: The market distribution of income appears "objective" in the sense that it is not based on any direct decision to take from one person and give to another. Redistribution, however, necessarily involves taking from people who have committed no wrong, and that violates the popular sense of justice. Leveling is unpopular because "the government comes second in the distribution process" (Lane, 1986, p. 392).

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Data

As mentioned previously, the main barrier to empirical research has been the scarcity of information, not a lack of interesting hypotheses. Recently there have been signs of change. One promising development is the use of web surveys, which have made it possible to ask more complex questions and to include elements of experimental design, as in the work of Norton and Ariely (2011) and Kuziemko *et al*. (2013). Web-based surveys are particularly useful for understanding how people react to new information or arguments. They are also useful for getting more precise estimates on questions such as the probability of upward or downward mobility.

At the same time, it is important to make use of existing data in order to get a better sense of when and how public opinion has changed. There is a moderate amount of information, but as Piketty (1996) observed more than 15 years ago "this data is typically dispersed across many institutions, some of it is publicly available and some of it is not, and so on. It would be very useful to put together these different data sets so that scholars working on redistributive politics can do serious quantitative research." Identifying relevant questions from older surveys would also make replication possible. For example, on several occasions during the 1940s and 1950s the Gallup Poll asked about the amount that families with certain incomes should pay in federal income taxes (Gallup, 1951). On at least one occasion, it asked a separate sample about how much they thought that various families actually paid. The questions do not seem to have been asked in at least 50 years, but repeating them would provide valuable information about historical change in public opinion.

Another important need is for more comparative data. Many discussions implicitly or explicitly suggest that the United States is distinctive, and that support for leveling is considerably stronger in other countries. However, it is not clear that this is actually the case. There is some evidence of "American exceptionalism" in terms of aid to the poor, especially the nonworking poor, but views about leveling do not necessarily run parallel to views of the poor. An important issue for future research is to identify and explain national differences in opinions about concrete measures that would affect high incomes. This will probably require the collection of new data, but a search of existing data might uncover relevant questions for at least a few nations.

Theoretical Questions

Most hypotheses about public opinion on leveling are based on the assumption that opinions are rational, in the sense that conclusions follow logically from moral or factual beliefs. Bartels (2005) challenges this assumption, arguing that many people simply do not attempt to reconcile their various opinions. For example, some people simultaneously believed that rising inequality was a serious problem, that the Bush tax cuts would make the problem worse and would not benefit them personally, and that the cuts should be enacted. Although it might be possible to offer an account that reconciles these opinions, it would seem more straightforward to conclude that people who hold them are not thinking clearly. The possibility that people are not rational deserves to be taken seriously: There is a great deal of evidence that people frequently make errors in reasoning, especially when numbers and probabilities are involved. However, as Stigler (1986, p. 340) observed, "Unless a theory is presented of the kinds of mistakes that will be made, there is no possible test of the mistake hypothesis." Qualitative research based on in-depth interviews provides some promising suggestions in this direction. One of the most fully elaborated accounts that did not assume rationality was offered by Lane (1959), who argued that thinking about wealth was potentially damaging to the self-esteem of people with low and moderate incomes. As a result, they avoided the issue, and their opinions were marked by contradictions. The more recent accounts of Hochschild (1981) and Deane and Melrose (1999) also emphasize the ambivalence of popular views of wealth. However, there has not been much effort to derive testable implications from such accounts, and this is an important task for future work.[8]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study of public opinion on leveling promises to make substantial progress in the next few years. It has attracted the attention of economists, political scientists, social psychologists, and sociologists. Moreover, there is

8. See Weakliem and Biggert (2013, pp. 89–91) for an attempt to evaluate Lane's account using survey data.

an unusually high degree of interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. However, recent research has focused heavily on the contemporary United States. In order to realize its potential, future research should add a historical and comparative dimension.

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