

On Government, Agency, and the Violence of Inaction

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Abstract

In this piece, Eppard and Chomsky argue that government is crucial to the realization of true agency for millions of Americans. They also explore the manner in which political and cultural factors work to curtail the U.S. government's ability to address social problems like poverty and economic inequality, thus limiting opportunity and freedom for many.

Keywords

Agency, economic inequality, government, individualism, OECD, poverty, racism, social welfare

'True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.' – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.²

'We need to make red and blue understand freedom in a much fuller way. How free are we really if we are an extremely unequal society? I think inequality—whether it is class inequality, racial inequality, or gender inequality—makes us less free.' – Arlie Hochschild³

'We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.' – Franklin D. Roosevelt⁴

Introduction

Suppose you and a handful of your friends or colleagues decided to form a small functioning democratic society together. You would likely debate how the society should be governed and then structure the government accordingly. You would also have to decide on the things that were of value to the group and that were therefore crucial to have in your society—things such as roads, schools, defense, clean water, breathable air, etc. Then you would need to decide how your government would pay for and administer those things.

A fair measure of whether your democracy—and any other democracy for that matter—is functioning is how the citizens feel about their government and about paying their taxes. On

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² From King's *Beyond Vietnam* speech on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City. For more: <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>.

³ From Eppard, Hochschild & Wilkinson 2018, p. 144.

⁴ From Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union Message to the U.S. Congress. For more: <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/addresstext.html>.

tax day each year, for instance, when each member of your fictional society contributed their share in order to fund the things that the group valued, would it be a day of mourning or a day of celebration? When your government administered the programs you considered vital, would you view them positively or negatively? If the system the group had developed was truly democratic, taxes and government programs would represent the collective interests and preferences of the group. Because of this, wouldn't these things be celebrated? After all, you came together and collectively identified the things that were most important to the group, things that benefited both you personally as well as your society more broadly, and agreed upon a reasonable way to pay for them and share the burden. Only in a flawed democracy would a faction emerge that was opposed to the government, its programs, and its funding mechanisms.

The United States, it seems, is one such flawed democracy.⁵ Large numbers of Americans are not only skeptical of many government programs and their recipients, but have lost faith in government more generally. This is especially true among non-Hispanic Whites, political conservatives, older Americans, and the more affluent.

Fifty-one percent of Americans prefer a smaller government with fewer services, compared to 40 percent who prefer a bigger government with more services (Pew Research Center 2014a). Sixty-four percent of Americans are in favor of cutting government spending in order to improve the economy (ISSP 2016). Confidence in government institutions is low: only 11 percent of Americans express confidence in Congress, 24 percent in the criminal justice system, 38 percent in the Supreme Court, and 38 percent in the presidency (Gallup 2019). Only 32 percent of Americans believe they have a say concerning what their government does, and just 21 percent believe most civil servants can be trusted (ISSP 2016). Fifty-six percent of Americans believe the government is almost always wasteful and inefficient (Pew Research Center 2019).

Only 43 percent of Americans believe that conditions for the poor (including opportunities in education, housing, employment, and healthcare) are bad. When asked who has the greatest responsibility for helping the poor—between government, individual poor Americans themselves, families, churches, and charities—only 35 percent chose government (Lauter 2016). A mere 40 percent of Americans believe the government needs to do more to assist people in need (Pew Research Center 2019). When asked whether government is responsible for the well-being of all its citizens and has an obligation to take care of them, or whether this responsibility should fall on people themselves, 70 percent of the non-poor said people themselves. Sixty-one percent of non-poor Americans believe that welfare benefits make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor. Forty-eight percent of Americans say government anti-poverty efforts have had some positive impact (43%) or a big positive impact (5%), while a nearly identical 47 percent say they have either had no impact (13%) or made things worse (34%). Almost three-quarters (73%) of Americans say that even if the government were willing to spend whatever is necessary to eliminate poverty, it could not be accomplished (Lauter 2016). Sixty-one percent of likely voters believe Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, commonly referred to as food stamps) applicants should be drug tested, 82 percent support SNAP work requirements, and 56 percent of Americans believe too many people are receiving welfare who should not be getting it (Rasmussen 2017a, 2017b; Dickerson 2019).

⁵ In fact in 2019, the U.S. did not qualify as a 'full democracy' but as a 'flawed democracy' on The Economist's Democracy Index. For more: <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

To be clear, Americans also have many structuralist beliefs and social democratic preferences. Many Americans want government involved in their lives in a number of ways, often saying so in response to different questions on these same surveys.⁶ But these aforementioned beliefs regarding skepticism of government, social programs, and program recipients, along with racist and individualistic beliefs, are also widespread and compete with social democratic preferences when Americans consider the merits of government and social policies. If beliefs rooted in racism, individualism, and government skepticism are not activated by political or public discourse, Americans' social democratic tendencies shine through. But when activated, racism, individualism, and government skepticism can undermine support for policies that Americans might otherwise favor.

Good Government Works

Freedom from the government telling you what you can and cannot do is of course an important aspect of liberty. But an equally important aspect is the freedom to live the life that you wish to lead, and government is vital in helping to enable this aspect of freedom.

True freedom requires agency, or the ability to freely choose the life that you want to lead and to be able to think and act autonomously in pursuit of that desired life. To do this, one needs to (a) have their abilities developed and (b) have unobstructed access to important resources and opportunity pathways. Government is crucial to ensuring that the conditions exist which allow all Americans to possess true agency.

Americans have every right to criticize their government for failing to do more to enable true freedom for all citizens. But the solution is not the absence of government, but government administered in the most democratic, equitable, and effective fashion possible. And there is good evidence from across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to suggest that, when well designed and effectively implemented, government social policies help to *enable* freedom for millions.

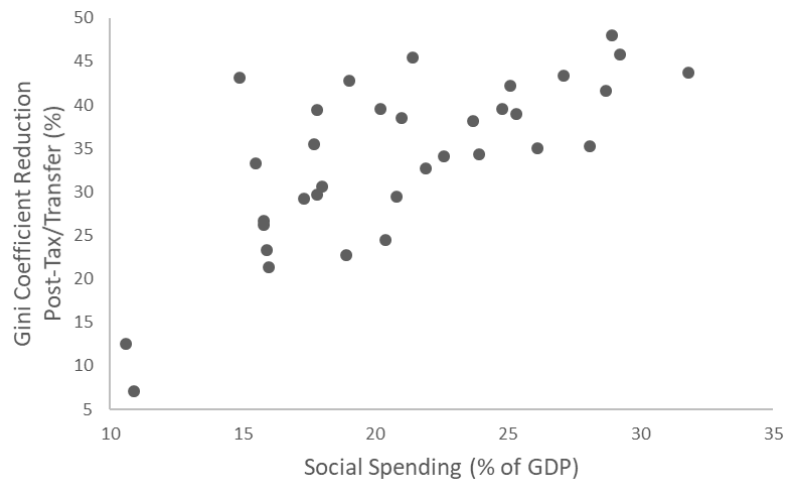
As one example, Figure 1 demonstrates the association between social spending and income inequality reduction post-tax/transfer among OECD countries. The positive correlation between these two variables is strong ($r = 0.72$, $p < .001$). This association represents a 6.4 percent reduction in a country's Gini coefficient for every 5 percent increase in social spending (as % of GDP). Countries most committed to equality achieve significant income inequality reduction,⁷ while less-committed countries fail to do so. The median Gini coefficient reduction across the other non-U.S. countries is 35 percent, with countries like Finland (48%) performing even better. In comparison, the U.S., whose social spending is below the OECD average,⁸ achieves only a 23 percent reduction. This leaves income inequality in the U.S. at the top end among OECD countries, or in the words of David Brady, 'iconically unequal' (2009, p. 4) (see Table 1).

⁶ There are many great sources of data on this topic. Visit the Pew Research Center's website (pewresearch.org), for instance, for a wealth of survey data on Americans' beliefs about government, agency, poverty, inequality, race, gender, and more.

⁷ A result of both taxation (which brings income groups closer together) and social spending (which increases household resources, particularly at the bottom of the income hierarchy).

⁸ OECD average social spending is 20.1% of GDP, versus 18.7% in the U.S. By comparison, social spending in the U.S. is only 65% of that in Finland (28.7% of GDP). For more: <https://data.oecd.org/social-exp/social-spending.htm>.

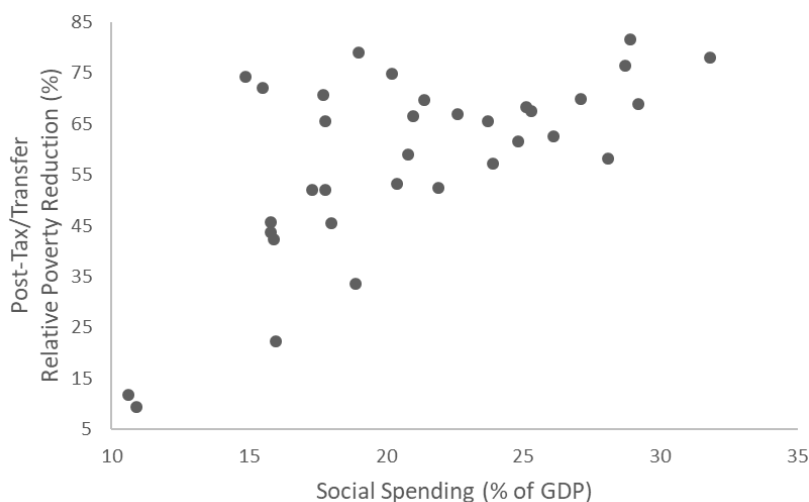
Figure 1. Association between Social Spending and Income Inequality Reduction Post-Tax/Transfer among OECD Countries.



Note: $r = 0.723$, $p < .001$. All data latest available between 2014-2017. All OECD countries with available and appropriate data included ($N = 34$).
 Source: Authors' calculations using OECD data (2020b).

In another example of the effectiveness of good government, Figure 2 demonstrates a similar association between social spending and relative poverty reduction. This positive correlation is also strong ($r = 0.65$, $p < .001$). This association represents an 11 percent reduction in a country's relative poverty rate for every 5 percent increase in social spending (as % of GDP). Countries most committed to reducing poverty, such as Finland, achieve impressive poverty reduction (82%), and the median reduction among non-U.S. OECD countries is 65 percent. In the U.S., poverty is reduced post-tax/transfer by only 34 percent, leaving it with a very high relative poverty rate among OECD countries (see Table 1).

Figure 2. Association between Social Spending and Poverty Reduction Post-Tax/Transfer among OECD Countries.



Note: $r = 0.649$, $p < .001$. All data latest available between 2014-2017. All OECD countries with available and appropriate data included ($N = 34$).
 Source: Authors' calculations using OECD data (2020b).

Table 1. Income Inequality and Poverty among OECD Countries.

OECD Country	Gini coefficient	Poverty rate	Child poverty rate
OECD median (excluding U.S.)	0.309	10.7	11.6
Chile	0.460	16.5	21.5
Mexico	0.458	16.6	19.8
Turkey	0.404	17.2	25.3
United States	0.390	17.8	21.2
Lithuania	0.374	17.3	18.4
United Kingdom	0.357	11.9	12.9
Latvia	0.355	16.6	11.1
South Korea	0.355	17.4	14.5
New Zealand	0.349	10.9	14.1
Israel	0.348	16.9	22.2
Japan	0.339	15.7	13.9
Italy	0.334	13.9	18.7
Spain	0.333	14.8	19.6
Luxembourg	0.327	12.2	13.9
Australia	0.325	12.4	13.3
Portugal	0.320	10.7	12.2
Greece	0.319	12.6	15.9
Canada	0.310	12.1	11.6
Estonia	0.309	15.8	9.8
Switzerland	0.296	9.1	9.5
Ireland	0.295	9.0	8.7
France	0.292	8.1	11.2
Germany	0.289	10.4	11.3
Hungary	0.289	8.0	9.9
Netherlands	0.285	8.3	10.9
Sweden	0.282	9.3	9.3
Austria	0.275	9.4	11.5
Poland	0.275	9.6	6.8
Finland	0.266	6.3	3.6
Belgium	0.263	10.2	13.2
Norway	0.262	8.4	8.0
Denmark	0.261	5.8	3.7
Iceland	0.257	5.4	5.9
Czech Republic	0.249	5.6	6.8
Slovenia	0.243	8.5	6.4
Slovak Republic	0.241	8.5	13.9

Note: All data latest available from OECD.

Source: OECD 2020a.

In one final example, consider single parent family poverty. In the U.S., it is often assumed that single parenthood is almost a guarantee of financial struggles, given how high single parent family poverty is in America.⁹ Yet single parent family poverty rates vary significantly across OECD countries, and the reduction post-tax/transfer is strongly correlated with family benefits public spending ($r = 0.50, p < .05$).¹⁰ This association represents a single parent family poverty rate reduction of 7.5 percent for every one percent increase in family benefits public spending (as % of GDP). Some countries, like Denmark (78%) and the U.K. (77%), achieve impressive reductions in single parent family poverty, while the U.S. (33%) lags far behind the median OECD reduction (50%).¹¹ This is perhaps not surprising, given that the U.S. is 35th out of 36 OECD countries in family benefits public spending, while the U.K. is second and Denmark is third (OECD 2020a). Post-tax/transfer, single parent family poverty rates fall below 10 percent in countries like Denmark, while remaining above 30 percent in countries like the U.S., whose poverty rate for single parent families is very high among OECD countries (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis 2015, p. 3).¹²

Richard Wilkinson argues that, ‘If Americans went to countries like Sweden and Norway they would feel more rather than less free’ (in Eppard, Hochschild & Wilkinson 2018, p. 143).¹³ This is hard to disagree with, given the lower levels of poverty and income inequality in each country (9% poverty, 9% child poverty, and 0.28 Gini coefficient in Sweden, 8%, 8%, and 0.26 in Norway) compared to the U.S. (18%, 21%, and 0.39) (OECD 2020a).

Despite lagging behind most OECD countries on a number of measures of government effectiveness, there is much about American government that works well. Take Social Security as an example. In a recent analysis, it was estimated that Social Security helped bring the

⁹ Forty-one percent of children in single-mother families live in poverty in the U.S., compared to only 8% in married-couple families. For more: <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/children-in-poverty>.

¹⁰ Authors’ calculations using data from OECD (2020a) and Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis (2015).

¹¹ Reduction among non-U.S. OECD countries. All data from 2010, except Hungary (2012) and Japan (2008).

¹² See appendix for associated figure and a related analysis of child poverty.

¹³ Wilkinson similarly states that, ‘I suspect a great many people think about freedom as if it is about freedom from government regulation. But things like health inequalities deprive large swathes of the population of more than ten percent of life expectancy. The effects of poverty and inequality are forms of structural violence and limitations on true freedom. These things affect the quality of life very deeply’ (Eppard, Hochschild & Wilkinson 2018, p. 143). In a related sentiment, Heather Bullock argues that, ‘There is a very negative and pervasive framing of the government equaling regulations, or bureaucracy, or red tape, instead of government as an engine of mobility, of potentiality. I think that we got to a place where the framing of the government is entirely negative and not the government as a potential launch pad for opportunity, or for freedom, or for the pursuit of individual dreams or goals’ (Eppard, Rank & Bullock 2020, p. 153). Jamila Michener posits that, ‘What we expect is a kind of negative liberty—you don’t stop me from doing X if I wanna do X—as opposed to a kind of positive and affirmative responsibility on the part of the government and other major social institutions and entities to create an environment that allows anyone to thrive. That’s not even really part of our discourse; it’s not something that we’re deeply committed to. I think part of that is because equality itself is not something that we’re deeply committed to. I think that’s part of the ideational change that would have to occur in order to think differently about the possibilities of social policy. Part of that ideational change will have to come from a more robust understanding of what life is like for people who are nothing like ‘us’’ (Eppard, Rank & Bullock 2020, p. 154). Sharon Krause argues that, ‘I think about freedom as the collection of conditions—social, political, economic, cultural—that make the exercise of agency possible. . . Providing freedom and protecting freedom for all of us means that as much as it means respecting other people’s rights to religious freedom or freedom of assembly. It means actively fighting against economic inequality and implicit bias and cultural values that stigmatize particular groups of people. Because those things stand in the way of individual freedom every bit as much as attacks on religious liberty or freedom of assembly. So none of us can enact our freedom by ourselves’ (Eppard, Rank & Bullock 2020, pp. 156-157).

elderly poverty rate down from close to 40 percent (39%) to below 10 percent (9%) (Romig 2019). This program is successful in helping to alleviate the burdens placed on the elderly by forces beyond their control, allowing them to lead longer, healthier, and happier lives.¹⁴ There are many groups in the U.S.—such as children, as but one important example—who could have their freedoms expanded in a similar fashion by better social policies.

If government social policies, when properly designed and funded, actually work quite well,¹⁵ why is the U.S. not doing more to reduce economic insecurity? Why are measures of poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. at the top end among wealthy countries? Why isn't the U.S. government attempting to enable true freedom for all its citizens?

There are a variety of factors which impact the design and generosity of American social policies, many of which involve the interplay between politics and culture. As David Brady argues, 'social equality results from the reciprocal relationships among welfare states, ideologies, and interests' (2009, p. 8). Brady's institutionalized power relations theory, which he outlines in *Rich Democracies, Poor People* (2009), holds that the ideologies and interests of different groups in a given society influence the types of coalitions that form to put pressure on politicians to develop more generous and effective social policies. The quantity and power of these coalitions help to determine how institutionalized leftist politics become and how consistently politicians are pressured to alleviate social inequality through social policy. The generosity and design of the resulting social policies then impact the level of economic insecurity in the society. Finally, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these policies feeds back, influencing both interests and dominant ideologies.

A variety of political and cultural factors are important to consider when determining the source of the American welfare state's relative minimalism. A few important factors that we want to focus on are dysfunctional features of the American political system, as well as widespread ideologies of racism and individualism.¹⁶

Dysfunctions in the American Political System

There are a number of features of the American political system which help to ensure that Americans' social democratic tendencies are underrepresented in social policy. These include the impact of money in American politics, the structure of the electoral system, aspects of the political system which encourage plurality rule,¹⁷ low voter turnout among the poor and

¹⁴ Social Security is popular and effective, and there is no reason why it should not be sustainable. The problem is not whether we have solutions, but whether our politicians are up to the task of implementing them. One very easy change, for instance, is simply removing the payroll cap on taxable earnings. For more: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/what-impact-would-eliminating>.

¹⁵ As David Brady's empirical work demonstrates, 'across all varieties and types of welfare states, there is a strong linear negative relationship between welfare generosity and poverty. The welfare state's influence is unmatched by any other cause. The effects of welfare generosity are always significantly negative regardless of what one controls for. . . The generosity of the welfare state is the dominant cause of how much poverty exists in affluent Western democracies' (2009, p. 166).

¹⁶ Alberto Alesina and his colleagues demonstrate that, 'Americans redistribute less than Europeans because (1) the majority believes that redistribution favors racial minorities, (2) Americans believe that they live in an open and fair society and that if someone is poor it is their own fault, and (3) the political system is geared towards preventing redistribution' (2001, p. 39).

¹⁷ In 2016, for instance, Republicans gained control of the presidency, the House, and the Senate, despite failing to win a majority of the votes for any of the three (Barnicle 2020). As Simon Barnicle points out, 'Democrats can routinely win the majority of votes cast in federal elections but fail to translate those votes into power

working class, a low level of unionization, weak leftist politics, numerous checks and balances, the decentralized nature of American government, and the disproportionately low percentage of elected government officials who are female, non-White, and/or marginalized in some other manner. While all of these factors are important, for the sake of narrowing our discussion to the confines of this piece, we will focus on one particularly important factor: the influence of money in American politics.

Massive economic inequalities in the U.S. are leaving ‘the American social fabric, and the country’s economic sustainability, fraying at the edges’ (Stiglitz 2013, p. 2). The top 10 percent owns almost three-quarters (73%) of all wealth and brings home nearly half (47%) of all income (WID 2020). As Joseph Stiglitz notes, the top one percent of Americans earns 40 percent more in one week than the bottom fifth earns over the entire year (2013, p. 5). The U.S. is dividing itself into a plutonomy and a precariat, each living in very different worlds.¹⁸ Over the last 40 years, real wages have stagnated, with many Americans earning now what they could have earned in the late 1960s before the current neoliberal period began. There has of course been economic growth since that time, but it has gone into very few pockets. As a result, many Americans end up angry, bitter, and resentful. And of course the concentration of wealth into very few hands automatically leads to an undermining of democracy.

A number of studies demonstrate the corrosive manner in which money helps to undermine democratic principles in the U.S. Some notable studies investigate a very straightforward question: whether Americans’ policy preferences correlate with the votes of their elected representatives. The votes are public, and people’s attitudes and beliefs are well documented by extensive and reliable polling, so it is a fairly easy question to answer. These studies reveal that for the vast majority of middle-, working-, and lower-class Americans, their preferences do not correlate with the votes of their elected representatives (Gilens 2012; Gilens & Page 2014). This means most Americans are quite literally disenfranchised, which is pretty striking. It is not until you get to the very top of the income hierarchy that you see a strong correlation. That tells you something about the state of American democracy.

Thomas Ferguson has studied the association between campaign funding and electability in the U.S. for many years. The implications of this work, Ferguson and his colleagues argue, is that campaign finance ‘follows the basic axiom of the investment theory of politics,’ which holds that, ‘Campaigning isn’t free. . . either everyone pays a little to fund campaigns or a few pay for nearly everything—and control the system’ (2018). Ferguson’s work has shown a remarkably close correlation between the amount of campaign funding a candidate receives and their likelihood of being elected.

because their voters are in the wrong places. For example, in the 2018 midterms, Democratic Senate candidates collectively beat Republican candidates by nearly twenty percentage points. But because of where those votes were cast, Republicans didn’t just hold on to their majority in the Senate, they actually *increased* it, picking up two seats. . . By 2040, it is estimated that 40 percent of Americans will live in just five states. Half the population will be represented by 18 Senators, the other half by 82’ (2020).

¹⁸ As Noam Chomsky notes, ‘For the general population, the 99% in the imagery of the Occupy movement, it’s been pretty harsh—and it could get worse. This could be a period of irreversible decline. For the 1% and even less—the .1%—it’s just fine. They are richer than ever, more powerful than ever, controlling the political system, disregarding the public. And if it can continue, as far as they’re concerned, sure, why not? . . . Plutonomy refers to the rich, those who buy luxury goods and so on, and that’s where the action is. . . As for the rest, we set them adrift. We don’t really care about them. We don’t really need them. . . These days they’re sometimes called the ‘precariat’—people who live a precarious existence at the periphery of society. Only it’s not the periphery anymore. It’s becoming a very substantial part of society in the United States. . . the world is now indeed splitting into a plutonomy and a precariat.’ For more: <https://chomsky.info/20120508/>.

In order to be able to run in the next election and keep their jobs, representatives in Congress end up spending many hours a day simply appealing to donors. That's the effect of bought elections. While they are raising money, well-resourced lobbyists are meeting with representatives' staffs and writing legislation. This is not hard to see if you look back through American legislative history.

While your average American citizen may not read political science journals, they are well aware that their preferences are not being represented in the political system. The popularity of Congress, for instance, is often extremely low, as we documented earlier. Many people think Congress would be better off if it was picked randomly. Huge numbers of Americans simply do not vote. There is an intuitive understanding that those in power are not working for regular people, but for somebody else.

Take the working class as an example. Neither of the parties represents them. The Democratic Party used to have the working class as a large part of its constituency, but not anymore. Republicans say they are committed to the working class, but that is pure rhetoric. If you look at their actual policies, they are dedicated (even more so than the Democrats) to the welfare of corporations and the wealthy. In Donald Trump's campaign, for instance, there was a lot of talk of solidarity with workers, but the actual programs called for sharp tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, along with new burdens for the rest.

Much of the population has been essentially cast aside by policies which are harmful to them and have threatened their economic security, dignity, and hopes for the future. They are resentful and want to change it. That is showing up in many ways both in the U.S. and in Europe, some of which are rather frightening.

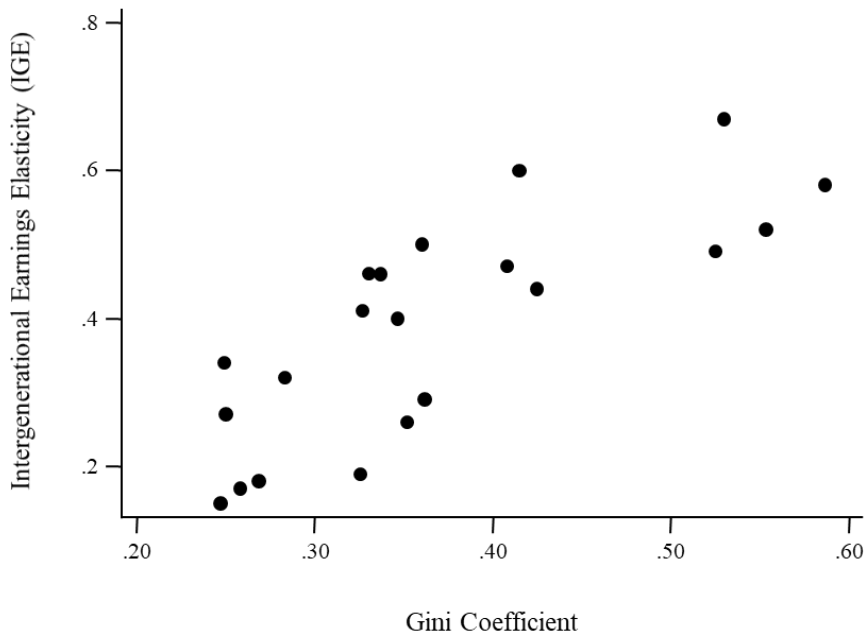
If you look at OECD statistics, the U.S. ranks very poorly on a number of measures of social justice, including infant mortality, social mobility, poverty, and economic inequality. The intergenerational earnings elasticity (IGE) in the U.S. today has been estimated to be as high as 0.60 or higher,¹⁹ compared to as low as 0.20 or lower in some wealthy countries. As OECD researchers note, these differences in social mobility are associated with differences in income inequality: 'Across countries, higher levels of income inequality are associated with less social mobility, and hence lower equality of opportunities' (2014, p. 1). Figure 3 is the famous 'Great Gatsby Curve' from Miles Corak, which demonstrates the strong association between Gini coefficients and IGEs cross-nationally ($r = 0.77$).²⁰ Raj Chetty and his colleagues found a similar relationship within the U.S., demonstrating a -0.58 correlation between income inequality and upward mobility across American communities (2014, Online Appendix Figure XI).

¹⁹ Economist Bhashkar Mazumder estimates that it is likely higher than 0.60. For more:

http://conference.iza.org/conference_files/inequality_2015/mazumder_b3665.pdf.

²⁰ See p. 161: <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/subjects/mobility/index.html%3Freader.html>.

Figure 3. The Great Gatsby Curve.



Source: Authors' reproduction of Corak 2016, p. 12.

Why doesn't the U.S. have better social policies to address these unnecessary inequalities in opportunity? Why is it one of the rare advanced societies which does not have guaranteed universal healthcare, but instead a highly complex and inefficient system which has twice the per capita costs of comparable societies? Why does the U.S. have astronomical college tuition and a student debt crisis, rather than something resembling affordable systems in places like Finland, France, Germany, and Mexico—or even the U.S. earlier in its history? One reason is that, to an unusual extent, the U.S. is run by business and economic elites. These studies we have mentioned, among many others, underscore this point. Business and economic elites do not support many of the social policies which aid and/or are popular among the middle- and lower-classes. Disproportionate elite influence in the American political system ensures that, most of the time, those with more power and influence get what they want when their preferences and interests diverge from the rest of the population (Gilens 2012; Gilens & Page 2014).

Widespread Racism and Individualism

Beyond the political dysfunctions which limit the American welfare state, there are important cultural factors as well, including racism and individualism. Much like a doctor cannot prescribe the proper treatment plan without knowing what afflicts their patient, Americans cannot solve social problems if they cannot first identify their causes. Widespread ideologies of racism and individualism cause Americans to misrecognize the causes of many social problems. As a result, such ideologies help to ensure that politicians in the U.S. do not face the same degree of pressure as their European counterparts to develop and/or maintain robust and structurally-oriented social policies. In the absence of racism and individualism, American politicians might face such pressure, given the many social democratic tendencies of the general population.

Prejudice toward African Americans is widespread in the U.S. Experimental studies routinely find the existence of pervasive bias against Black Americans—so much so that researchers often find that real-world employers respond as positively to White applicants with a criminal record as they do to equally-qualified Black applicants with a clean record (Pager, Western & Bonikowski 2009).²¹ Less than half of Whites (47%) and only 28 percent of Republican-leaning respondents agree that White Americans benefit from advantages that Black Americans do not have (Pew Research Center 2019). Sixty-six percent of Americans and 75 percent of White Americans report that race is not an important factor in the availability of the American Dream (*Atlantic/Aspen* 2015). Fifty-four percent of Whites report that African Americans who cannot get ahead have mostly themselves to blame, compared to only 35 percent who cite discrimination (Pew Research Center 2017). Only 43 percent of Americans say the U.S. needs to go further to give Black Americans equal rights (Pew Research Center 2019). Majorities of Whites report that African Americans are treated fairly compared to Whites in getting healthcare (77%), in getting a good education (75%), at work (74%), in getting housing (73%), while shopping (72%), in hiring for jobs they are qualified for (67%), and in dealing with the police (52%) (Gallup 2020). Sixty-two percent of Whites say their race has not had much of an impact on their ability to succeed (Pew Research Center 2016).

As Ibram Kendi argues, ‘When you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of racial discrimination’ (2016, p. 11). Americans’ ignorance—or worse, rejection—of the structural causes of racial inequality on surveys is clearly a sign of their negative judgements of African Americans. And yet survey results, as damning as they are, likely *understate* the amount of prejudice and racial ignorance among White Americans. In one important study, for instance, only 30 percent of White interview participants expressed outright support for interracial marriage, even though 90 percent of these same participants had claimed to have approved of interracial marriage on a previous survey (Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000, pp. 57-59). Additionally, the widespread real-world discrimination demonstrated by experimental studies would not exist without widespread racial prejudice, suggesting that survey results are masking Americans’ true degree of racial bias.

In her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Arlie Hochschild (2016) documents working-class Whites’ racist claims about non-Whites supposedly ‘cutting in line’ in order to unfairly pass Whites on their way to the American Dream. It seems that improvements in the standard of living of non-Whites relative to Whites over the last few decades, despite still leaving non-Whites far behind on a number of measures of well-being, were perceived as unjust and something akin to ‘reverse discrimination’ by Hochschild’s participants:

‘In the right-wing deep story, you are standing in line, as in a pilgrimage. At the top of the hill in front of you is the American Dream. You have been standing there a long time, your feet haven’t moved, and you’re tired. You feel a sense of deserving for that American Dream. You’re middle-aged or older, you’ve worked hard, and you feel you have played by the rules. Then, in another moment of this deep story, it looks like people are cutting ahead of you in line. And you think, ‘Well, who are they?’ And they are African Americans. There are women cutting in line. There are undocumented immigrants and refugees.

²¹ In the experimental study cited here, Devah Pager and her colleagues found that 17% of employers responded positively (either a callback or job offer) to White *ex-felons*, compared to lower positive response rates for equally-qualified Latino (15%) and Black (13%) applicants *with clean records* (2009, p. 786).

You feel like you have been moved back in line, and that something unfair has been done to you. In another moment you have Barack Obama, who you believe should be impartially supervising the line, but who is instead waving to the line cutters. He is sponsoring them and pushing you back. You've been forgotten' (Eppard, Hochschild and Wilkinson 2018, p. 137).

Racism in America, which we have only briefly outlined here, is a major influence on Americans' individualism and skepticism about government. This is something that has been known for some time. Writing in 1870, for instance, Karl Marx wrote that, 'the working class is *split* into two *hostile* camps' in the U.S., with native-born White workers occupying a more privileged position which distorted their perceptions of social inequality (Lipset & Marks 2000, p. 29).²² Today, widespread racist notions of poverty as a 'Black problem,' combined with racist assumptions about the supposed immorality and laziness of African Americans, reinforce individualism and government skepticism among White Americans.

Welfare is a prime example. Welfare has been demonized, especially by Ronald Reagan with his tales of Black 'welfare queens' supposedly driving around in their limousines to steal Americans' hard-earned money at the welfare office. Now most of the poor are not Black and most Black Americans are not poor, and neither a majority of the poor, nor of African Americans, are immoral or lazy. But if these racist and individualistic (and sexist, in the case of welfare queens) notions are activated, regardless of their veracity, support for social policies can be effectively undermined.

Perhaps the classic statement on this phenomenon was the book *Why Americans Hate Welfare* by Martin Gilens (1999). If you take a look at Table 2, based on his work, you will see how influential racism is in Americans' thinking about poverty and welfare. When Americans think most welfare recipients are White (a more 'moral,' 'hard-working,' and 'deserving' group in their minds), they are much less critical of recipients' morality, work ethic, and deservingness. When they believe most recipients are Black (supposedly more 'immoral,' 'lazy,' and 'undeserving'), however, they are much more critical.

Table 2. Race and Americans' Perceptions of Welfare Recipients.

	Think most welfare recipients are Black	Think most welfare recipients are White
In your opinion, what is more to blame when people are on welfare?		
Lack of effort on their own part	63%	40%
Circumstances beyond their control	26%	50%
Do most people on welfare want to work?		
Yes	31%	55%
No	69%	45%
Do most people on welfare really need it?		
Yes	36%	50%
No	64%	50%

Source: Gilens 1999, p. 140. Reprinted with permission of The University of Chicago Press.

²² The authors note that, 'Marx and Engels pointed to the role of ethnic diversity in undermining class consciousness by giving native-born white workers a privileged position' (Lipset & Marks 2000, p. 29).

A second cultural factor limiting social policies, American individualism, has also been well-documented. In a recent cross-national survey of 44 countries, for instance, the U.S. was much more individualistic than most other countries concerning the role that forces outside of one’s control play in determining their success in life (see Table 3). Sixty-percent of Americans say that most people can get ahead if they are willing to work hard (Pew Research Center 2019). When asked which is more important to achieving the American Dream—when given the choice between hard work, circumstances of birth, and luck—61 percent of Americans cite hard work, 28 percent circumstances, and 11 percent luck. Almost three quarters of Americans (72%) say they are either living the American Dream (50%) or believe they can (22%) (*Atlantic/Aspen* 2015).

Table 3. Individualism across 44 Countries.

*Survey question: Please tell me whether you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the following statement:
Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.*

Countries	% mostly/completely disagree
Global Average (excluding the U.S.)	38%
United States	57%
Advanced Economies	
Advanced Economy Average (excluding the U.S.)	41%
United Kingdom	55%
Israel	51%
France	50%
Spain	47%
Japan	44%
Greece	37%
Italy	32%
Germany	31%
South Korea	23%

Source: Pew Research Center 2014b.

Furthermore, surveys suggest that even among Americans who acknowledge unjust barriers faced by some groups and not others, there is still an insistence that these barriers can be overcome with hard work, ambition, and smart choices. If agency requires abilities, opportunities, and resources, as we have argued, these survey results suggest that Americans want the disadvantaged to grasp opportunities they do not have access to, with underdeveloped abilities, and without the necessary resources. This is an extremely flawed view of how the American stratification system functions. As Amartya Sen argues, ‘Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it’ (1999, p. 284).

Unfortunately, a number of studies suggest that the more one supports individualistic beliefs, the less likely they are to support many government programs (Hunt & Bullock 2016).²³

In the spring of 2020, Lawrence Eppard and his colleagues conducted a survey with 353 American college students enrolled in introductory sociology courses at universities in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia (publication forthcoming 2020).²⁴ Table 4 displays their answers to questions regarding agency, meritocracy, and government in the U.S., while Table 5 displays their beliefs concerning the causes of American poverty. Table 6 demonstrates the manner in which racial prejudice and individualism associated with government support among the sample.²⁵

White participants' responses to questions regarding racial inequality were mixed. Only 29 percent of White participants identified race-based school inequalities as a problem, and only 32 percent of Whites identified discrimination against Black Americans in hiring as a problem. Only about a quarter of Whites (24%) responded that they were not very concerned about the negative impacts of undocumented immigration. However, 83 percent of Whites placed blame mostly on society, not African Americans themselves, for Black/White inequalities, and a slight majority of Whites (53%) agreed that the criminal justice system is biased against Black Americans. These results suggest that while most of our sample espoused support for structural explanations of racial inequality in abstract terms, they were unable (or unwilling) to identify important aspects of the racial stratification system in the U.S., signifying a rather empty definition of racism that likely allows for prejudiced assumptions and discriminatory behavior in their everyday interactions.

²³ Matthew Hunt and Heather Bullock note that 'dominant ideology beliefs (e.g., individualism) generally decrease support for redistributive policies, while system-challenging beliefs (e.g., structuralism) generally increase support for such initiatives. Feagin (1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986) both document that individualistic beliefs about poverty reduced support for welfare spending, while structuralist beliefs increased such support. Numerous studies have replicated and expanded on these basic findings' (2016, p. 106). David Brady argues that 'the welfare state is the culmination of a society's beliefs for how economic resources ought to be distributed' (2009, p. 8).

²⁴ Sample characteristics: 74% non-Hispanic White, 10% African American, 6% other, 4% Hispanic/Latino, 4% two or more races, and 2% Asian-American; 58% female, 41% male, and 1% other; 3% poor, 13% working class, 18% lower middle class, 44% middle middle class, 22% upper middle class, and 1% wealthy; 44% Democrat-leaning, 56% Republican-leaning; 19% very religious, 42% somewhat religious, 24% not very religious, and 16% not at all religious.

²⁵ In this piece we summarize only some of the highlights and major findings of a much larger peer-reviewed quantitative study forthcoming in *The New York Sociologist* by Eppard, Nazarene, Everidge, and Matesun: <https://www.newyorkstatesociology.net/journal> (forthcoming Summer/Fall 2020).

Table 4. Beliefs about Agency, Meritocracy, and Government among College Sample.

Belief	% agreement
Despite the fact that some Americans may face barriers to success that others do not, most could succeed, despite these barriers, if they really tried.	87%
Factors beyond the control of women are mostly to blame for gender inequality.	87%
Most Americans get back from life what they put into it—success or failure generally matches how much effort they put into life and how smart their choices are.	84%
The differences between American adults (income, wealth, career, etc.) are due mostly to the choices people make for themselves and things they personally control.	78%
With ambition, hard work, and smart choices, most Americans can succeed, even if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds.	78%
Most Americans are free to make their own decisions and free to choose the life they want to live.	77%
60% or more of Americans' outcomes in life are the result of their efforts and choices.	73%
America is the land of opportunity where most people who work hard end up succeeding.	73%
Most Americans can get a college degree if they want to.	72%
Adults should have to pass drug tests in order for their family to receive SNAP benefits.	71%
Government assistance programs have a mostly positive impact on society.	70%
Higher-income Americans should pay higher taxes than middle- and lower-income Americans.	66%
Adults should have to work in the paid workforce in order for their family to receive SNAP benefits.	62%
70% or more of Americans' outcomes in life are the result of their efforts and choices.	59%
It is unfair that Americans with more money can afford better education than those with less money.	51%
Support for national government single-payer healthcare	46%
SNAP should be expanded.	46%
It is unfair that Americans with more money can afford better healthcare than those with less money.	43%
It is the responsibility of the American government to reduce income inequality.	38%

Table 5. Beliefs about the Causes of American Poverty among College Sample.

Causes of poverty	Rank (most to least important)	% who ranked cause #1 or #2
Bad family upbringing	1	41%
Lack of effort or laziness	2	39%
Poor choices	3	30%
Poor morals and/or values	4	13%
Racism	5	25%
Poor quality schools	6	14%
Low intelligence	7	6%
Not enough good jobs	8	11%
Sexism	9	13%
Bad genes	10	4%
Bad luck	11	3%

Note: In order to understand the rankings, note that #1 was the most important, and #11 the least important, meaning #1 had the lowest mean ranking, while #11 had the highest mean ranking.

As Tables 4 and 5 demonstrate, a majority of our participants were very individualistic, blamed families and individuals for their own poverty, viewed the U.S. in meritocratic terms, and believed all Americans have agency. While a majority supported progressive taxation, most were skeptical of the social welfare functions of government and suspicious of recipients of government assistance. Table 6 demonstrates significant gaps in government support based on one's degree of racial prejudice and individualism.

Table 6. Association between Racial Prejudice/Individualism and Government Support among College Sample.

Government/social policy belief	% agreement
<i>SNAP should be expanded</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	27%
Low-prejudice individuals	80%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	35%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	89%
<i>Government assistance has a mostly positive impact on society</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	57%
Low-prejudice individuals	81%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	62%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	89%
<i>Government is responsible for reducing income inequality</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	25%
Low-prejudice individuals	62%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	26%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	83%
<i>Adults need to pass drug tests to receive food stamps/SNAP for themselves and their families</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	90%
Low-prejudice individuals	45%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	82%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	28%
<i>Adults need to work in the paid work force to receive food stamps/SNAP for themselves and their families</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	81%
Low-prejudice individuals	42%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	73%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	39%
<i>High-income Americans should pay higher taxes than middle- and low-income Americans</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	51%
Low-prejudice individuals	88%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	50%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	100%
<i>U.S. should adopt government single-payer healthcare system</i>	
High-prejudice individuals	29%
Low-prejudice individuals	77%
Strongly-individualistic individuals	33%
Weakly-individualistic individuals	100%

Our prejudice and individualism index variables were strongly correlated with each other ($r = 0.63$, $p < .001$), as well as strongly correlated with our government support index variable (prejudice $r = -0.55$, $p < .001$; individualism $r = -0.60$, $p < .001$). We also ran a regression model with prejudice and individualism as our independent variables—along with

race/ethnicity, social class, gender, religiosity, and political orientation—and government support as our dependent variable. Prejudice, individualism, and Republican political orientation were each associated with less government support, while none of the other variables were statistically significant. Our model explained 54 percent of the variance in the dependent variable.²⁶

As our survey and a number of other studies demonstrate, racism and individualism both play major roles in Americans' 'skeptical altruism' (Eppard, Rank & Bullock 2020) toward disadvantaged groups. What is meant by this term is that many Americans are indeed bothered by many aspects of inequality, are morally committed to helping the poor, and have many social democratic tendencies. But they are also suspicious of the morality, work ethic, and deservingness of many recipients of government assistance (especially Black recipients), believe Americans possess a high degree of agency regardless of background, are skeptical of government, and prefer individualistically- rather than structurally-oriented social policies. Because of this, they are overly concerned with whether a social program rewards a truly 'deserving' recipient who is worthy of aid (a person who works hard, makes smart choices, has 'responsible' fertility, etc.), or whether it rewards an 'underserving' recipient who does not merit aid.

Support for or opposition to a given social policy often hinges not on whether Americans agree with the structuralist and/or social democratic principles which inform the particular policy, but whether policy opponents can successfully frame the policy in racist and/or individualistic terms. In the absence of the activation of prejudice and individualism in political and popular discourse, a policy which aligns with Americans' social democratic tendencies might expect support. But if a program can be sufficiently linked to racist and/or individualistic fears, it can be defeated.

As an example, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey revealed that a slight majority of Americans supported a national government healthcare plan which covered all Americans. When the question was worded differently, however, responses changed. While 63 percent expressed a positive reaction to 'Medicare-for-All,' only 46 percent reacted positively to 'socialized medicine.' Likewise, 71 percent of respondents supported a Medicare-for-All plan that would guarantee health insurance coverage as a right for all Americans, but only 37 percent if it led to an increase in taxes (KFF 2020). These changes in support seemed to be driven less by opposition to government-run healthcare generally, but whether such a program violated critical beliefs concerning government and individualism.

The same type of relationship exists between race and social policies: when a program is framed in a manner which conjures images of African Americans, the policy in question typically receives less support than it would otherwise. Fifty-eight percent of Americans believe government spends too much on 'welfare,' compared to 15 percent who say too little. But only 16 percent believe government spends too much on 'assistance to the poor,' compared to 56 percent who say too little (Jardina 2018). The wording of these questions makes a big difference in whether racist and individualistic fears are triggered in respondents' minds. When such fears are not activated, their social democratic preferences are more likely to inform their answers. As Ashley Jardina notes, anti-poverty policies can be made popular by 'avoiding racialized terms, like welfare. . . otherwise popular policies may be dragged down' (2018). Here she explains further:

²⁶ Model $p < .001$, prejudice $p < .05$, individualism $p < .001$, and Republican political orientation $p < .001$.

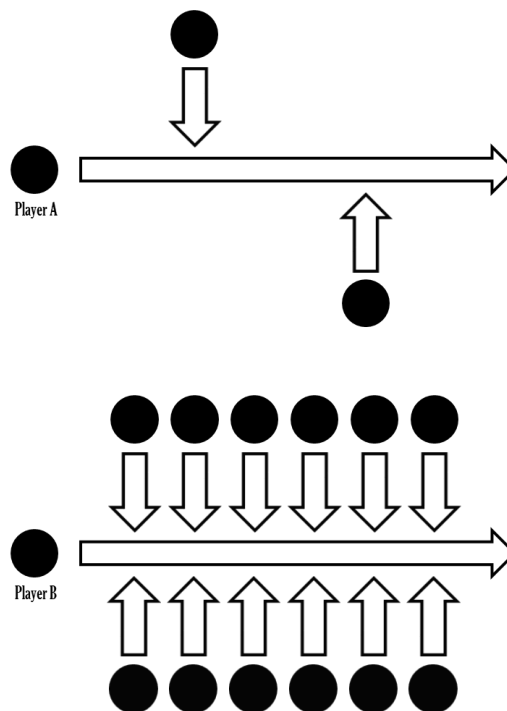
‘Despite the fact that white Americans benefit more from government assistance than people of color, means-tested aid is primarily associated with black people and other people of color—particularly when the term welfare is used. For many Americans, the word welfare conjures up a host of disparaging stereotypes so strongly linked to stigmatized beliefs about racial groups that—along with crime—it is arguably one of the most racialized terms in the country. . .

. . . part of why Social Security is so relatively popular compared to welfare is because of how both policies are racialized. Social Security. . . has been framed as a policy that is both universal—that is, it benefits all groups—and as one that has been contrasted with welfare as an earned reward for hard work (stereotypes associated with white people), rather than a handout for the lazy and dependent (stereotypes associated with black people)’ (Jardina 2018).

The Violence of Inaction

In the sport of American football, there is a drill that many coaches use in practice called a ‘gauntlet drill.’ The objective of the drill is to help players become better at staying on their feet and maintaining possession of the football amidst the chaos and physical contact of the game. Figure 4 demonstrates how this drill works. One player starts with the football and must run between two rows of players and make it to the other side. They must accomplish this without falling down or losing the ball. As the ball carrier passes through this gauntlet, the opposing players attempt to swipe the ball away and/or knock the ball carrier down.

Figure 4. The Unequal Gauntlet of Life.



The American stratification system works in a similar fashion. We are each born with different (either more or less challenging) gauntlet configurations based on our starting social position

(our race/class/gender, family, neighborhood and community, region, country, historical period, etc.). In Figure 4, Player B faces far more opposing players than Player A, not unlike the likelihood that somebody born at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy will face more obstacles to success than somebody born at the top. Does this guarantee that Player B will fail and Player A will succeed? No, but the risk of failure is much higher for Player B, and neither player is truly responsible for the different configurations that they face. Furthermore, if this is truly a metaphor for society, the *abilities* of these players to confront these challenges would likely be unequal and heavily influenced by forces beyond their control. Neither the challenges (both in number and severity) they face, nor the abilities and resources they possess to overcome them, are primarily the result of choices they have made for themselves. As Raoul Martinez argues:

‘We do not choose to exist. We do not choose the environment we will grow up in. We do not choose to be born Hindu, Christian or Muslim, into a war-zone or peaceful middle-class suburb, into starvation or luxury. We do not choose our parents, nor whether they’ll be happy or miserable, knowledgeable or ignorant, healthy or sickly, attentive or neglectful. The knowledge we possess, the beliefs we hold, the tastes we develop, the traditions we adopt, the opportunities we enjoy, the work we do—the very lives we lead. . . This is the lottery of birth’ (2016, p. 3).

These unequal gauntlets that we face are a form of ‘structural violence,’ or the:

‘avoidable limitations society places on groups of people that constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. . . Because of its embedding within social structures, people tend to overlook them as ordinary difficulties that they encounter in the course of life. . . Unlike the more visible forms of violence where one person perpetrates physical harm on another, structural violence occurs through economically, politically, or culturally driven processes working together to limit subjects from achieving full quality of life. . . Structural violence directly illustrates a power system wherein social structures or institutions cause harm to people in a way that results in maldevelopment or deprivation’ (Lee 2016, p. 110).

Government policies can help to mitigate or even eliminate structural violence. Unfortunately, the dysfunctional U.S. political system hinders the development of more generous and effective social policies, making government inaction itself a form of structural violence.

Ideologies infused with racism, individualism, and government skepticism can cause, exacerbate, and/or help to perpetuate structural violence, constituting a second form of violence: symbolic violence. Symbolic violence refers to ‘power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force’ (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990, p. 4). When dominant culture ignores or misrecognizes structural violence, it reinforces it and helps to perpetuate it.²⁷ As Johan Galtung

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu argues that symbolic domination is ‘something you absorb like air, something you don’t feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult’ (Bourdieu & Eagleton 1992, p. 115). Further explaining this point, Dan Schubert argues that, ‘[Symbolic violence] is everywhere in that we all live in symbolic systems that, in the process of classifying and categorizing, impose hierarchies and ways of being and knowing the world that unevenly distribute suffering and limit even the ways in which we can imagine the possibility of an alternative world. It is nowhere because, in its gentleness and its subtleness, we

notes, ‘The object of personal violence perceives the violence, usually, and may complain—the object of structural violence may be persuaded not to perceive this at all’ (1969, p. 173).

Luckily, Americans have many social democratic tendencies. To allow them their full impact, we need to continue to fight against ideologies of racism and individualism. As Henry Giroux contends, ‘Politics often begins when it becomes possible to make power visible, to challenge the ideological circuitry of hegemonic knowledge’ (2008, p. 113). We need to build upon the momentum of Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Occupy, the activism of countless young people²⁸ and teachers, and the efforts of many others, all of which have helped Americans develop a more structural and critical vocabulary of inequality. In the aftermath of the deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, public outrage over systemic racism has exploded into the open, which could lead to meaningful change.

We need to give power to all Americans, regardless of race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or any other social categorization unnecessarily undermining our solidarity. We need to highlight the importance and effectiveness of good government. And we desperately need to strengthen our democracy—get money out of politics, reform our political system, get out the vote, bolster the power of unions, and just generally make our elected representatives more responsive to the preferences and interests of the majority of the population.

These are all tall tasks, and yet it seems that a generation of young people has emerged which is not only committed to achieving these things, but has already realized many successes. Let us commit ourselves to ensuring that they achieve many more. This may be a major inflection point if we are unrelenting in our demands for change.

Author/Contributor Bios

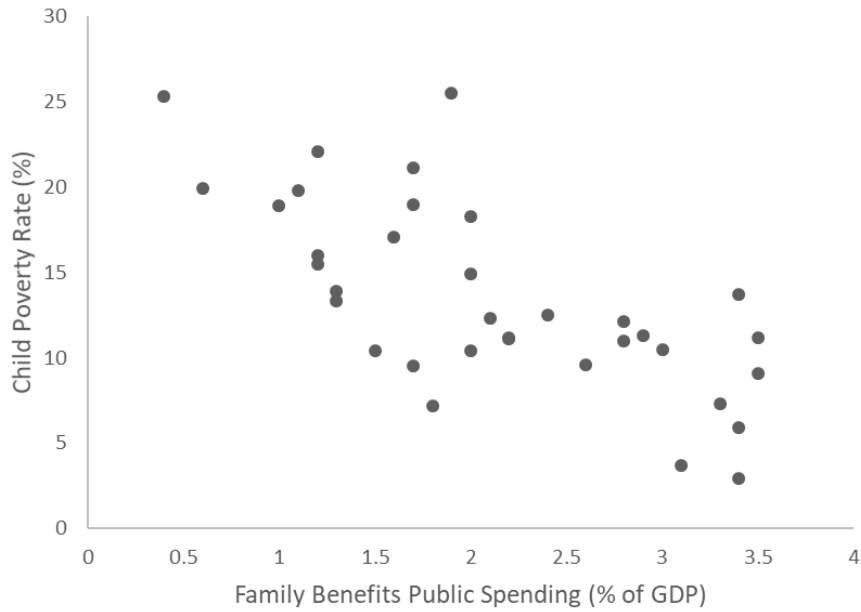
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fail to recognize its very existence, let alone the way it is at the root of much of violence and suffering. . . If [social] worlds are constructed, then they can be re-constructed in other ways’ (2008, pp. 195-196). Symbolic violence helps to ensure that ‘a misrecognized vision of the social world is legitimated—a vision that reproduces, with the complicity of the dominated, a stratified social order’ (Appelrouth & Desfor Edles 2008, p. 693).

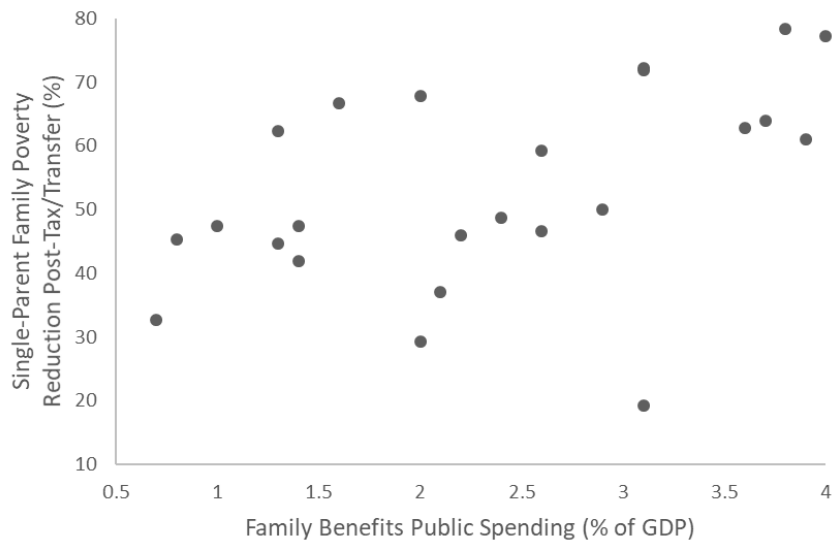
²⁸ Including people like Greta Thunberg (<https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2019-greta-thunberg-choice/>) and the student activists from Parkland, FL (<https://time.com/collection/most-influential-people-2018/5217568/parkland-students/>).

Appendix Figure 1. Association between Family Benefits Public Spending and Child Poverty among OECD Countries.



Note: $r = -0.705$, $p < .001$. All data latest available for countries with matching family spending and child poverty data ($N = 35$).
Source: Authors' calculations using OECD data (2020b).

Appendix Figure 2. Association between Family Benefits Public Spending and Single-Parent Family Poverty Reduction Post-Tax/Transfer among 24 OECD Countries.



Note: $r = 0.495$, $p < .05$.
Source: Authors' calculations based on data from OECD (2020b) and Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis (2015:3).

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