



The Associated Press-NORC
Center for Public Affairs Research



As an increasing number of policymakers identify inequality as a problem in the United States, the public is divided on government policies addressing inequality in America, according to an analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center and the GSS. Inequality is a complex concept that encompasses many issues, and the survey results show that Americans' attitudes are nuanced and vary across policies.

Just under half of all Americans believe the government should reduce income differences, and the level of support for government reducing inequality has remained relatively stable for the last three decades.

When it comes to providing assistance to lower-income Americans, the public has conflicting opinions on whether Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of the poor (28 percent agree and 28 percent disagree).

The data show that Americans are sensitive to different policy approaches to reducing inequality. For example, half of Americans believe the country spends *too much* on welfare; however, at the same time, 6 in 10 Americans report the country spends *too little* on assistance to the poor.

There are significant differences in opinions based on political partisanship, with 60 percent of Democrats, 51 percent of independents, and 24 percent of Republicans reporting government should reduce income differences. Among Republicans, support for government reducing income differences and providing assistance to the poor are at record lows.

Beliefs about inequality also vary depending on income, age, race, and gender.

Three Things You Should Know

From the 2014 GSS
Questions on inequality:

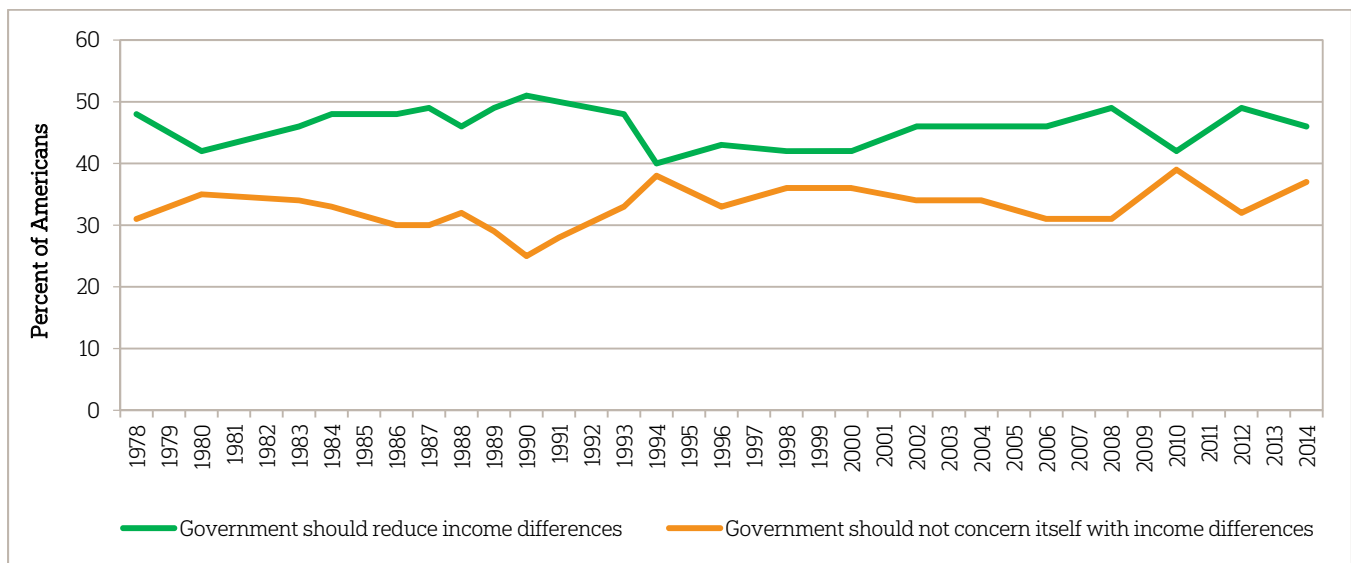
- 1) There is no clear majority when it comes to government's role in reducing income disparities, with 46 percent supporting and 37 percent opposing government action.
- 2) Democrats and independents are twice as likely as Republicans to report the government should reduce income differences.
- 3) Younger Americans are more supportive of the government reducing inequality than older Americans.

AMERICANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD POLICIES TO REDUCE INCOME DISPARITIES HAVE CHANGED LITTLE IN RECENT YEARS.

Forty-six percent of Americans say the government ought to reduce income differences between the rich and poor, compared to 49 percent in 2012. At the same time, 37 percent of adults report the government should not concern itself with reducing income disparities, an increase from 32 percent in 2012.¹

Public opinion toward reducing income differences has remained relatively stable for the last three decades, with between 40 percent and 50 percent of Americans favoring government action toward reducing inequality.

Percent of Americans who report that government ought to reduce income differences between rich and poor has remained relatively stable



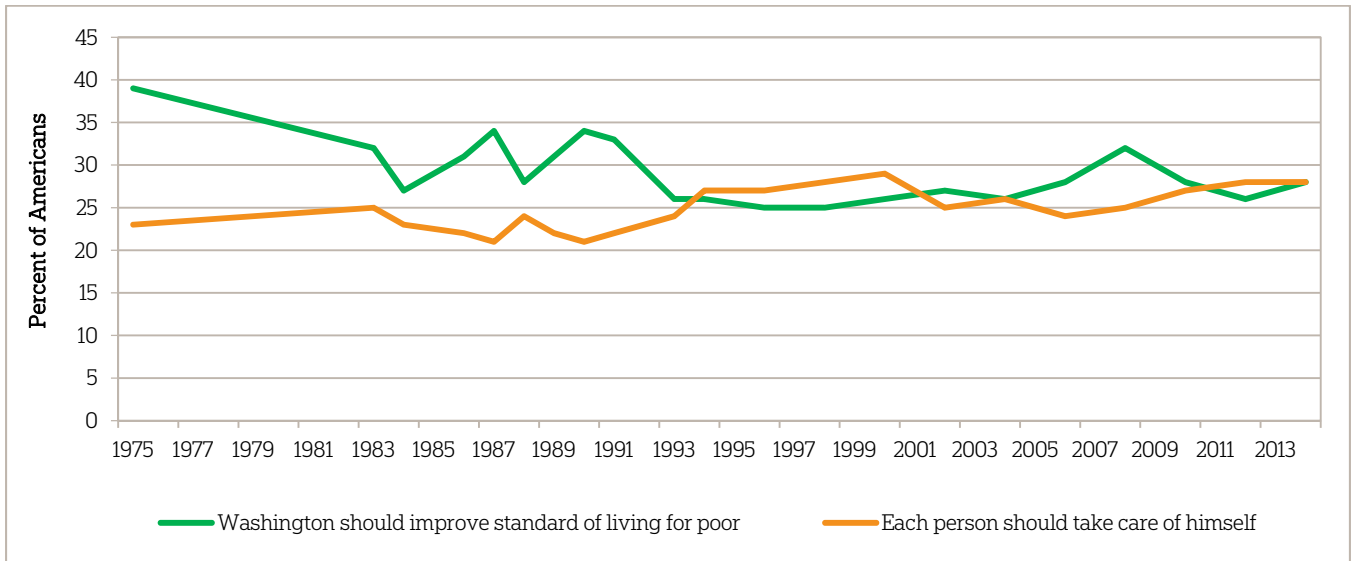
Question: Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor. Here is a card with a scale from 1 to 7. Think of a score of 1 as meaning that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor, and a score of 7 meaning that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences. What score between 1 and 7 comes closest to the way you feel?

Americans have mixed opinions on government assistance for the poor. Twenty-eight percent report Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living for all poor Americans, and 28 percent report it is not the responsibility of the government and that individuals should take care of themselves.² Public opinion has changed little in recent years, with about 1 in 4 Americans reporting since the early 1980s that Washington should do everything possible to help the poor.

¹ Respondents were asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale, with 1 "meaning that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor," and 7 "meaning that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences." Answer choices 1, 2, and 3 were coded as ought to reduce differences, and answer choices 5, 6, and 7 were coded as should not concern self with income differences.

² Respondents were asked to place themselves on a five-point scale, with 1 representing people who think "government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans," and 5 representing people who "think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself." Answer choices 1 and 2 were coded as should improve standard of living. Answer choices 3 and 4 were coded as people should take care of themselves.

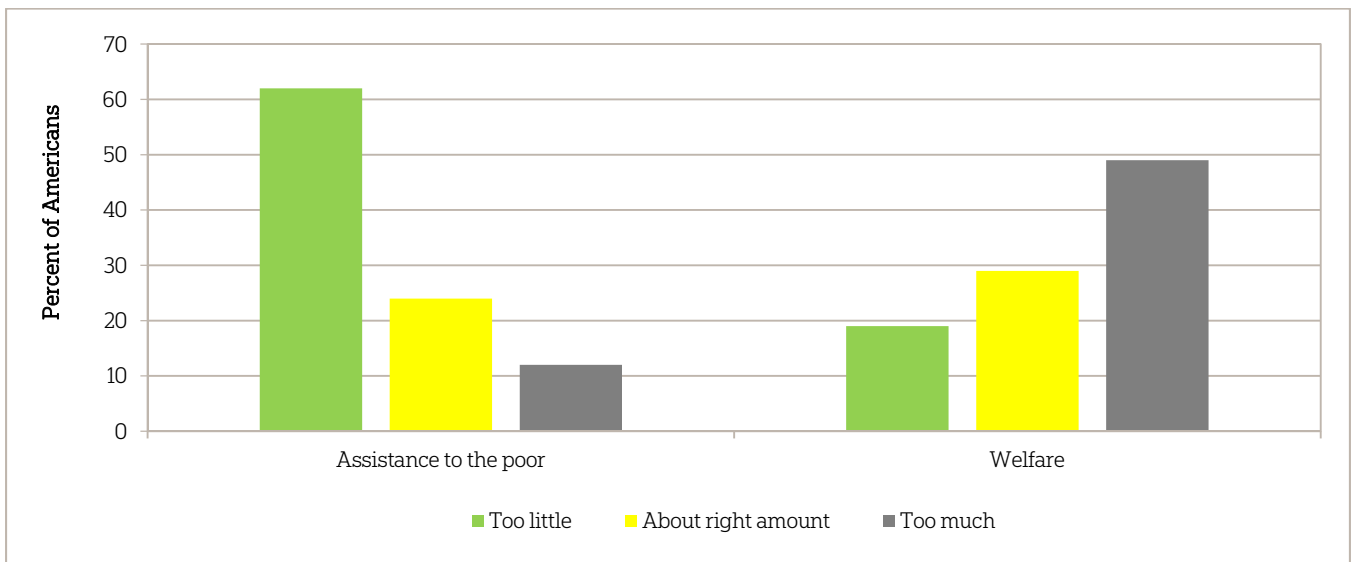
Americans have become more divided in recent years about whether Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans



Question: Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans; they are at Point 1 on this card. Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself; they are at Point 5. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?

A majority of Americans (62 percent) say the country spends too little on assistance to the poor, 24 percent believe about the right amount, and 12 percent report too much. In contrast, 49 percent of adults report the country is spending too much on welfare, 29 percent say about the right amount, and 19 percent say too little.

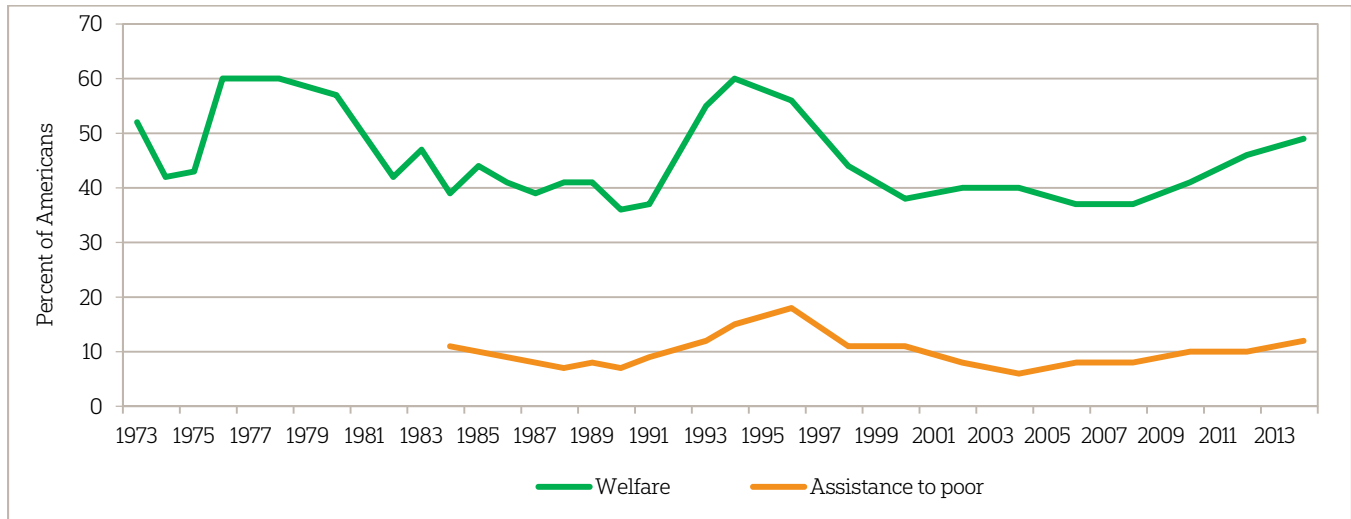
Majority of Americans report country spends too little on assisting poor, but in 2014 half say it spends too much on welfare



Question: We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on [Welfare/Assistance to the Poor]?

The percent of Americans who think the country spends too much on welfare has risen steadily since 2008, but remains lower than the mid-1990s when around 6 in 10 adults said the country spent too much on welfare. Likewise, the percent of Americans who think the country spends too much on assistance to the poor (12 percent) has doubled since 2004 (6 percent).

Percent of Americans who say country is spending too much money on welfare has increased in recent years



In comparison to assisting the poor, Americans are more supportive of government helping pay for people's medical care. However, support for government assistance with medical bills is at a record low. Forty-two percent of Americans report that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctor and hospital bills, compared with 45 percent in 2012 and down from 52 percent in 2008.³

Twenty-three percent say these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves, which is an all-time high and compares with 21 percent who said the same in 2012 and 16 percent in 2008.

Americans' attitudes toward spending on Social Security, the largest government entitlement program, has changed little in recent years. Fifty-three percent say the country spends too little on Social Security, which is unchanged from 2012 and down from an all-time high of 64 percent in 2004. Thirty-six percent say the government spends about the right amount on Social Security, and 6 percent say the government spends too much on the program.

DEMOCRATS ARE MOST LIKELY TO WANT GOVERNMENT TO REDUCE INEQUALITY AND REPUBLICANS ARE LEAST LIKELY.

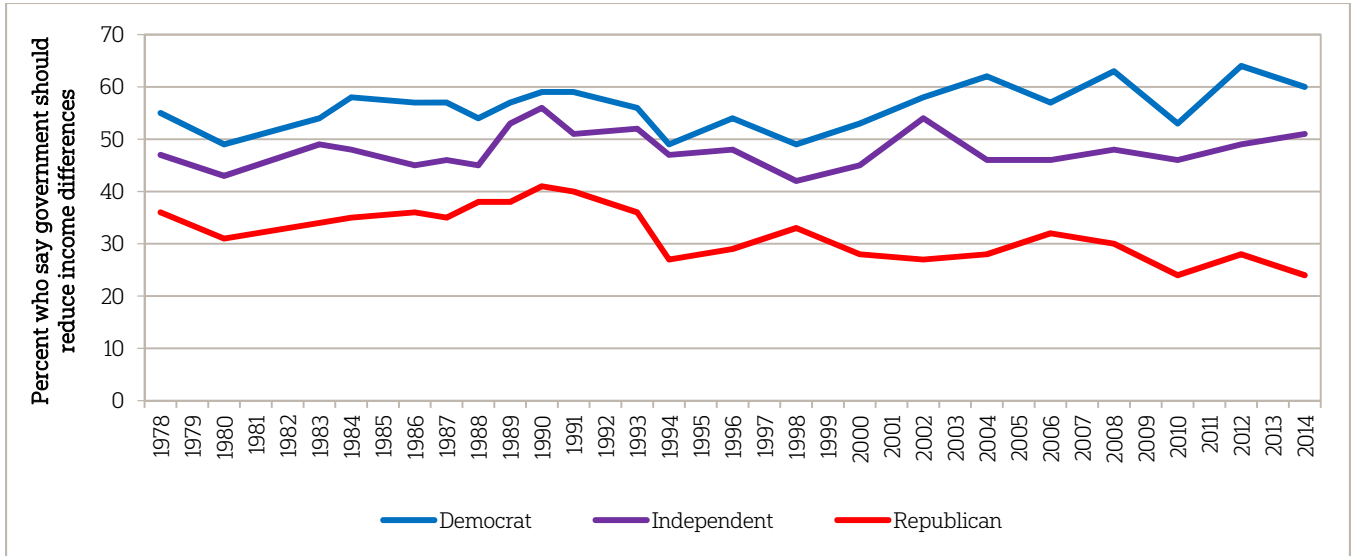
Within each party and among independents, there has been little change in support for government action to reduce inequality since 2012. However, Republicans are less likely to support programs to reduce income disparities than either Democrats or independents.

Twenty-four percent of Republicans believe the government should reduce income differences, equaling an all-time low from 2010, and compared to 28 percent in 2012. Six in 10 Democrats report the government should address income differences, also a 4 percentage point drop compared to 64 percent in 2012. Fifty-one percent of independents favor government reducing inequality, compared with 49 percent in 2012.

³ Respondents were asked to place themselves on a five-point scale, with 1 labeled "government help," 3 labeled "agree with both," and 5 labeled "people take care." Answer choices 1 and 2 were coded as government should help. Answer choices 4 and 5 were coded as people should help themselves.

Since the 1970s, Democrats are the most likely group to report that government ought to reduce income differences and Republicans least likely to say it, and the difference between the percent of Democrats and Republicans saying the government should reduce inequality in 2014 (36 percentage points) remains at the record-high level set in 2012.

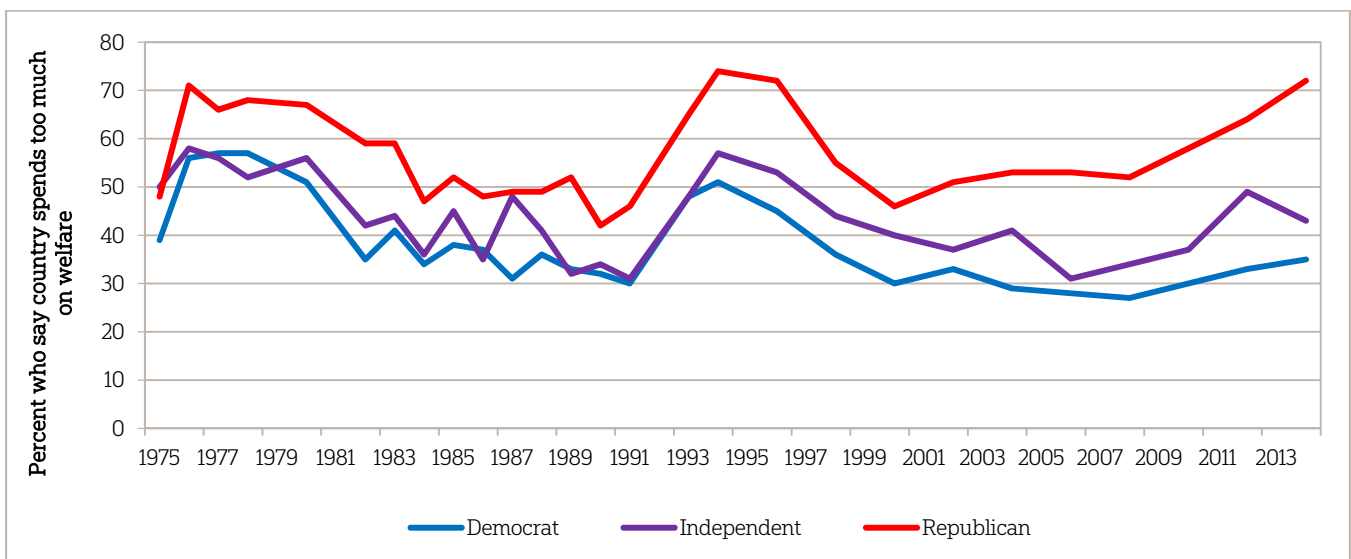
Gap between percent of Democrats and Republicans who report that government ought to reduce income differences is at record high



Republicans are more likely than Democrats and independents to say the government spends too much on welfare. Seventy-two percent of Republicans report the government spends too much on welfare, up from 52 percent in 2008. In comparison, 35 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of independents report the government spends too much on welfare, levels that have remained relatively stable in recent years.

The gap between the percentage of Republicans and the percentage of Democrats who report the country spends too much on welfare has grown wider in recent years and reached an all-time high in 2014 (37 percentage points).

Republicans more likely than Democrats or independents to say country spends too much on welfare

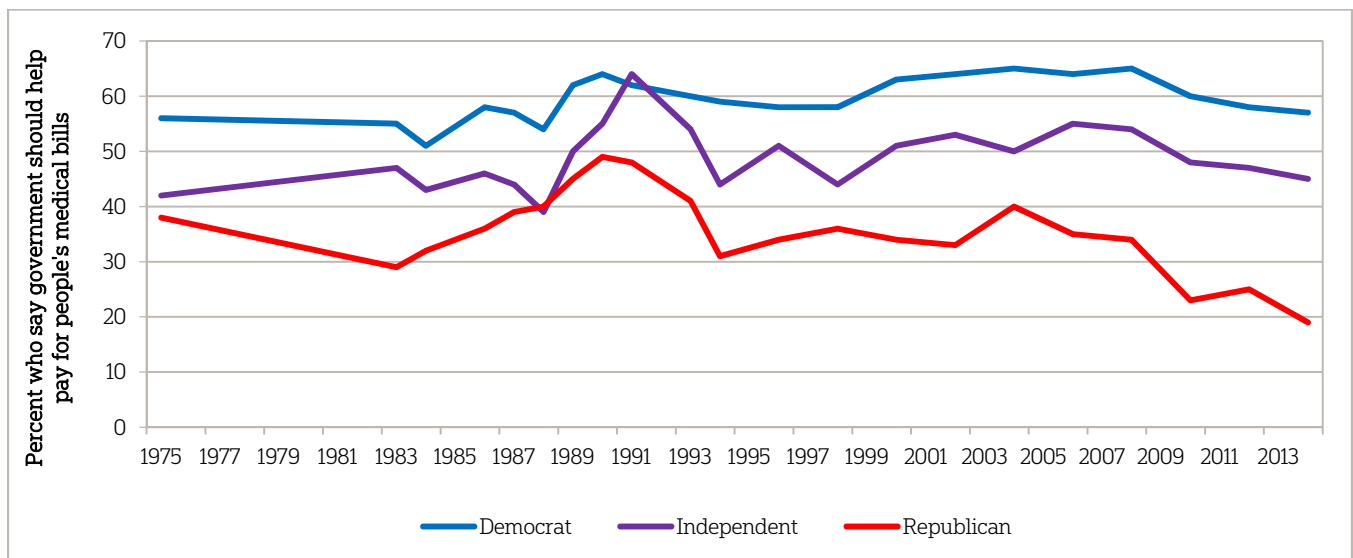


Similarly, Republicans are more likely to say the government spends too much on assistance to the poor (21 percent) than either Democrats (5 percent) or independents (12 percent).

The number of Republicans who report Washington should do everything possible to help the poor hit an all-time low of 10 percent in 2014. In comparison, 38 percent of Democrats and 34 percent of independents say the government should do everything possible to help the poor.

Republican support for government helping people pay for medical bills has also declined in recent years. A record low 19 percent of Republicans say it is the responsibility of the government to help pay for medical bills, down from 34 percent in 2008. In contrast, support for government helping pay for medical bills has declined slightly less in recent years among Democrats (57 percent in 2014 vs. 65 percent in 2008) and independents (45 percent in 2014 vs. 54 percent in 2008).

Republican support for government helping people pay for medical bills is at record low



Question: In general, some people think that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?

AMERICANS WITH LOWER HOUSEHOLD INCOMES ARE MORE SUPPORTIVE OF PROGRAMS TO REDUCE INEQUALITY THAN THOSE WITH HIGHER INCOMES.

Since the 1970s, support for government policies to reduce inequality has consistently differed across socioeconomic groups. People with lower household incomes are more likely than those with higher incomes to say the government should address inequality. In the most recent survey, 55 percent of those with household incomes of less than \$30,000 a year say the government should reduce income differences, compared with 48 percent of those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$75,000 a year and 36 percent of those with household incomes of more than \$75,000 a year. Support for the government addressing inequality dropped for all three groups in the last two years.

Americans with lower incomes are more supportive of the government reducing income differences



People with household incomes under \$30,000 a year are more likely to say it is the responsibility of the government to help pay for medical bills (53 percent) than those who have family incomes of \$30,000-\$75,000 a year (41 percent) and people with household incomes or more than \$75,000 a year (32 percent).

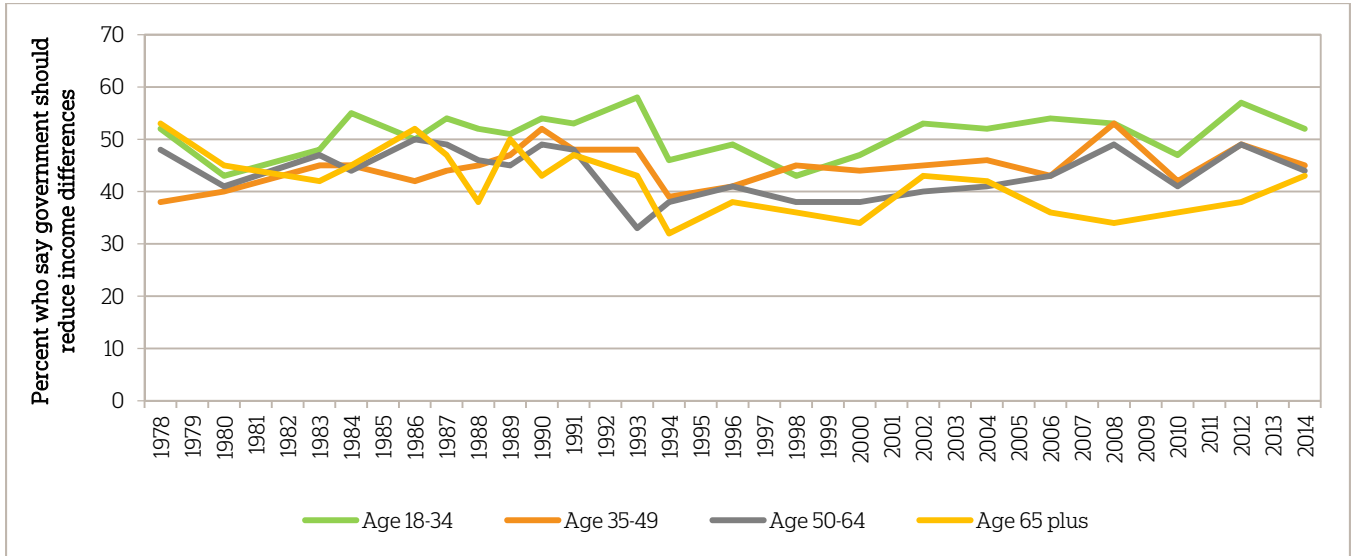
Household income is also associated with attitudes toward spending on assistance for the poor. Seventy-six percent of people with incomes under \$30,000 say the country spends too little on assistance for the poor, compared with 62 percent of those with household incomes between \$30,000-\$75,000 a year and 51 percent of those with household incomes over \$75,000 a year.

YOUNGER ADULTS ARE MORE SUPPORTIVE OF POLICIES TO REDUCE INEQUALITY THAN ARE OLDER ADULTS.

Younger adults are more likely than older adults to favor policies designed to reduce inequality. Fifty-two percent of adults age 18-34 support the government addressing income differences, compared with 45 percent of those 35-49 years old, 44 percent of those 50-64 years old, and 43 percent of those 65 years and over.

Younger Americans are also more supportive than older Americans of policies designed to help the poor. Adults 18-34 years old are more likely to say the government ought to help the poor (35 percent) than are those 35-49 years old (27 percent), 50-64 years old (26 percent), and those age 65 and over (24 percent). Likewise, 71 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds say the country spends too little on assistance for the poor, compared with 61 percent of those 35-49 years old, 57 percent of those 50-64 years old, and 56 percent of adults age 65 and over.

Younger adults more likely than older adults to say government should reduce income differences



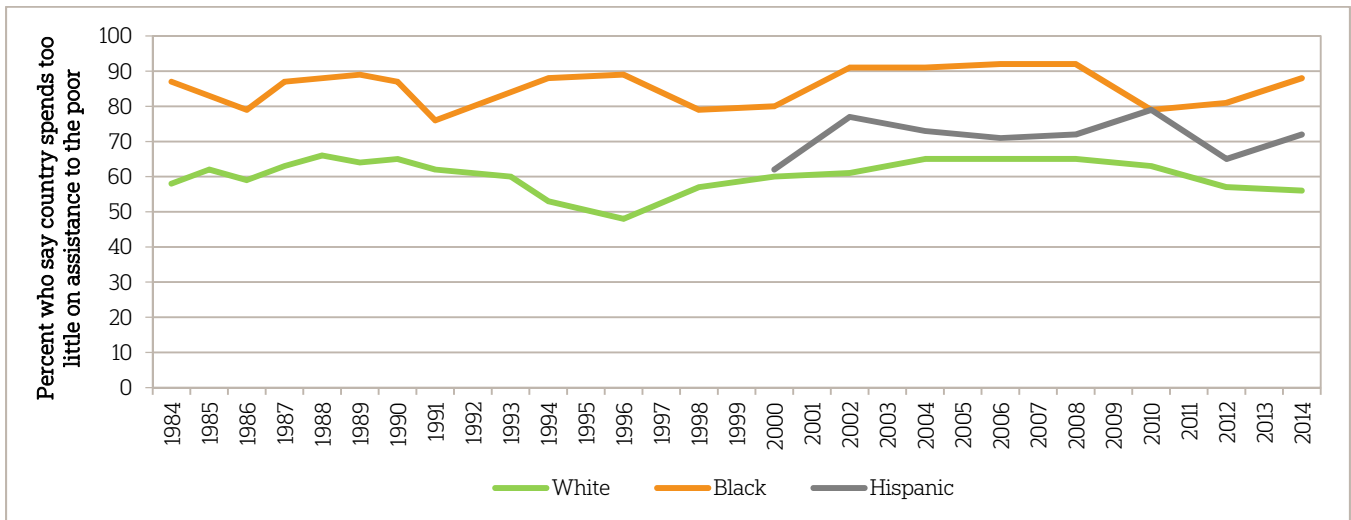
There are also significant age differences in attitudes toward the government paying for medical bills. Adults 18-34 years old are more likely to report it is the responsibility of the government to help pay for medical bills (52 percent) than 35-49 year olds (41 percent), 50-64 year olds (40 percent), and adults age 65 and older (32 percent).

WHITES SHOW LESS SUPPORT FOR SPENDING ON POOR THAN EITHER BLACKS OR HISPANICS.

Whites are nearly half as likely as blacks and Hispanics to favor spending on assistance to the poor. Twenty-three percent of whites say the government should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans, compared with 41 percent of Hispanics and 42 percent of blacks.

Likewise, fewer whites report the country spends too little on assisting the poor (56 percent) than Hispanics (72 percent) or blacks (88 percent).

Whites are less likely than Hispanics and blacks to say the country spends too little on assisting the poor

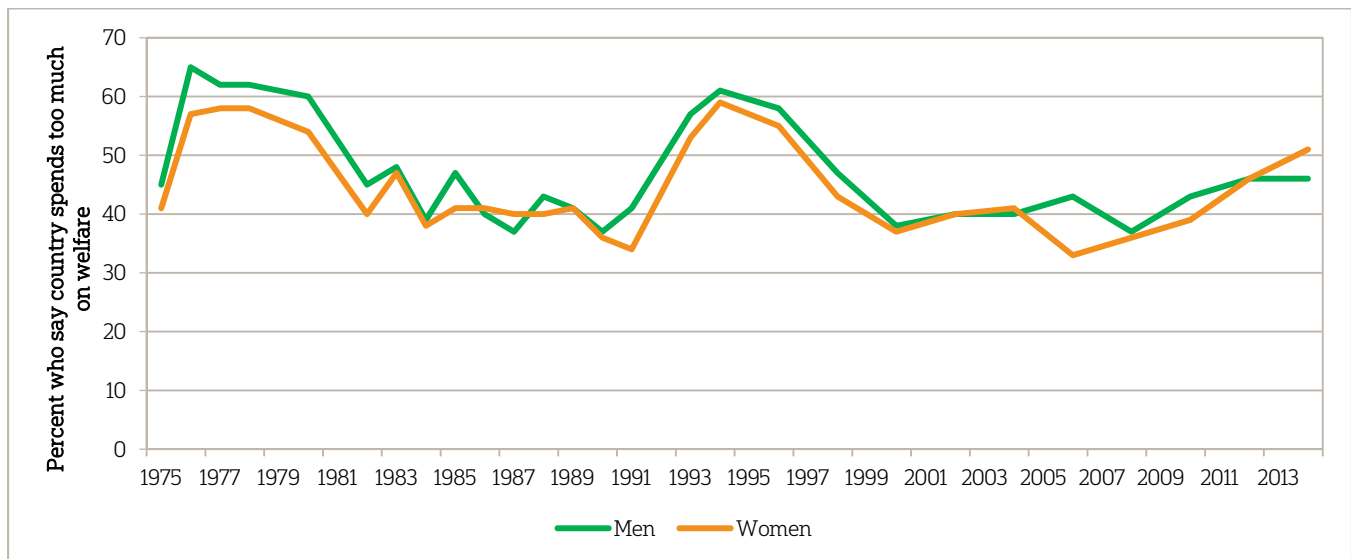


Attitudes toward spending on Social Security also vary by race. Blacks are more likely to say the country spends too little on Social Security (70 percent) than either whites (51 percent) or Hispanics (49 percent).

WOMEN AND MEN DIFFER ON ATTITUDES TOWARD WELFARE AND SOCIAL SECURITY SPENDING.

In the last four years, there has been a larger increase in women who report the country is spending too much money on welfare than men. The percent of women who report the country spends too much on welfare rose from 39 percent in 2010 to 51 percent in 2014, while the percent of men who say the country spends too much has remained relatively stable (43 percent in 2010 vs. 46 percent in 2014).

More women than men report the country spends too much on welfare in 2014



In contrast, women are more supportive of spending on Social Security. Fifty-eight percent of women say the county spends too little on Social Security, compared with 46 percent of men.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The GSS is administered by NORC at the University of Chicago, primarily using in-person interviewing. The GSS started in 1972 and completed its 30th round in 2014. For the last 40 years, the GSS has been monitoring societal change and the growing complexity of American society. The GSS is the largest project funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. The typical sample size was 1,500 prior to 1994, but increased to 2,700-3,000 until 2008 and decreased to 2,000-2,500 for the most recent surveys. Resulting margins of error are between +/- 3.1 for the smaller sample sizes and +/- 2.2 percentage points for the larger sample sizes at the 95 percent confidence level. The GSS 1972-2014 Cumulative File was utilized to produce the statistics presented.