

# Association Between Family Income and Adults' Attitudes on Whether the Government Should Help the Poor

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## Research Questions

- Do adults in different social classes have varying views on whether the government should help the poor?
- Does this association differ by political affiliation?

## Significance

- Income inequality in the United States has widened since the 1990s (Semega, 2019).
- The public's views on government assistance for impoverished Americans are critical for the adaptation and creation of government policy to help the poor (Brooks & Manza, 2006).

## Background

- Individuals' support for government spending on antipoverty programs is related to social class (Campbell, 2016).
- Individuals in higher classes tend to oppose governments helping the poor because they believe that effort determines economic success (Alesina & LaRrerra, 2005).
- Politically liberal views reflect concerns for others' well-being, especially among higher-income Americans (Gilens & Thal, 2018).

## Hypotheses

- Respondents with higher incomes are less likely to report the government should help the poor than those with middle or low incomes.
- The association between family incomes and attitudes on the government's help for the poor is less pronounced among respondents who identify themselves as politically liberal.

## Data and Sample

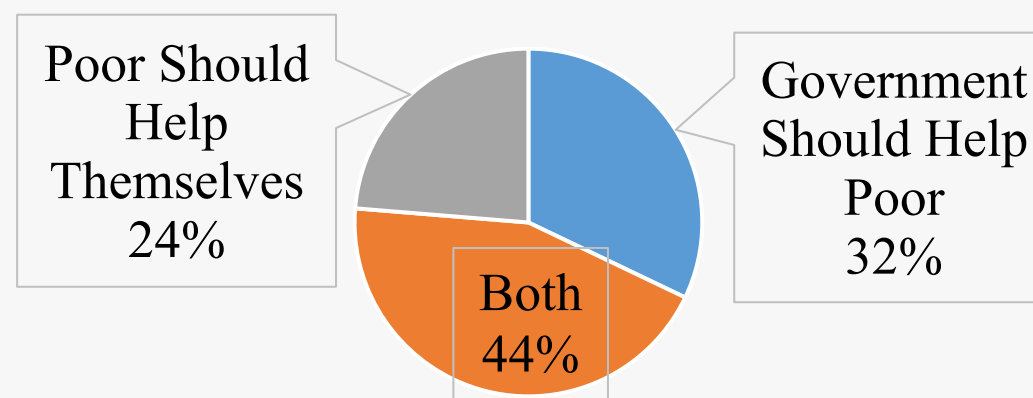
- General Social Survey, 2008 (N=2,023) and 2018 (N=2,348)
  - Most recent years the same question was asked.
- U.S. adults 18+
- Conducted by the National Opinion Research Center

## Dependent Measure

Attitudes on how to best help the poor

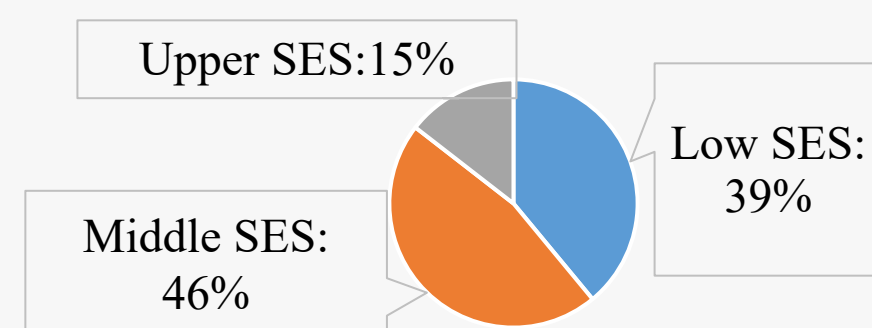
- "Some people think that the government should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans (= Point 1). Other people think that it is not the government's responsibility and that each person should take care of himself (= Point 5). Where would you place yourself on this scale?"

Figure 1. Attitudes on Government's Role in Helping the Poor



## Independent Measure

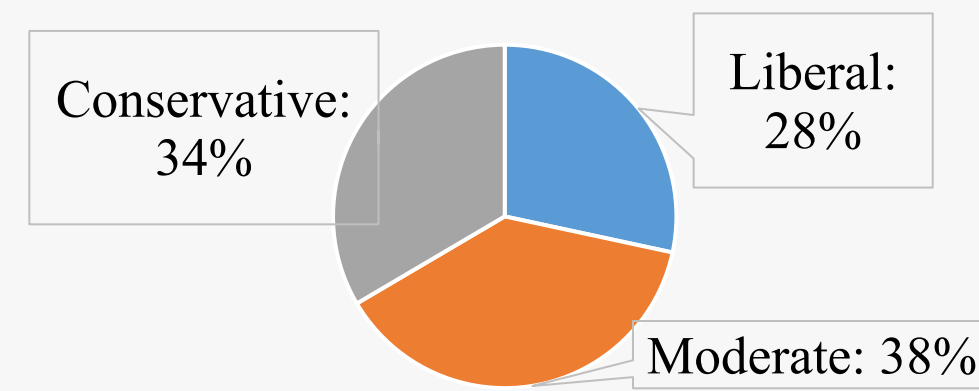
Figure 2. Family Annual Income Distribution



- Low SES: \$0-\$34,999 in 2008, \$0-\$39,999 in 2018
- Middle SES: \$35,000-\$109,999 in 2008, \$40,000-\$129,999 in 2018
- Upper SES: \$110,000+ in 2008, \$130,000+ in 2018

## Control Measure

Figure 3. Political Affiliation

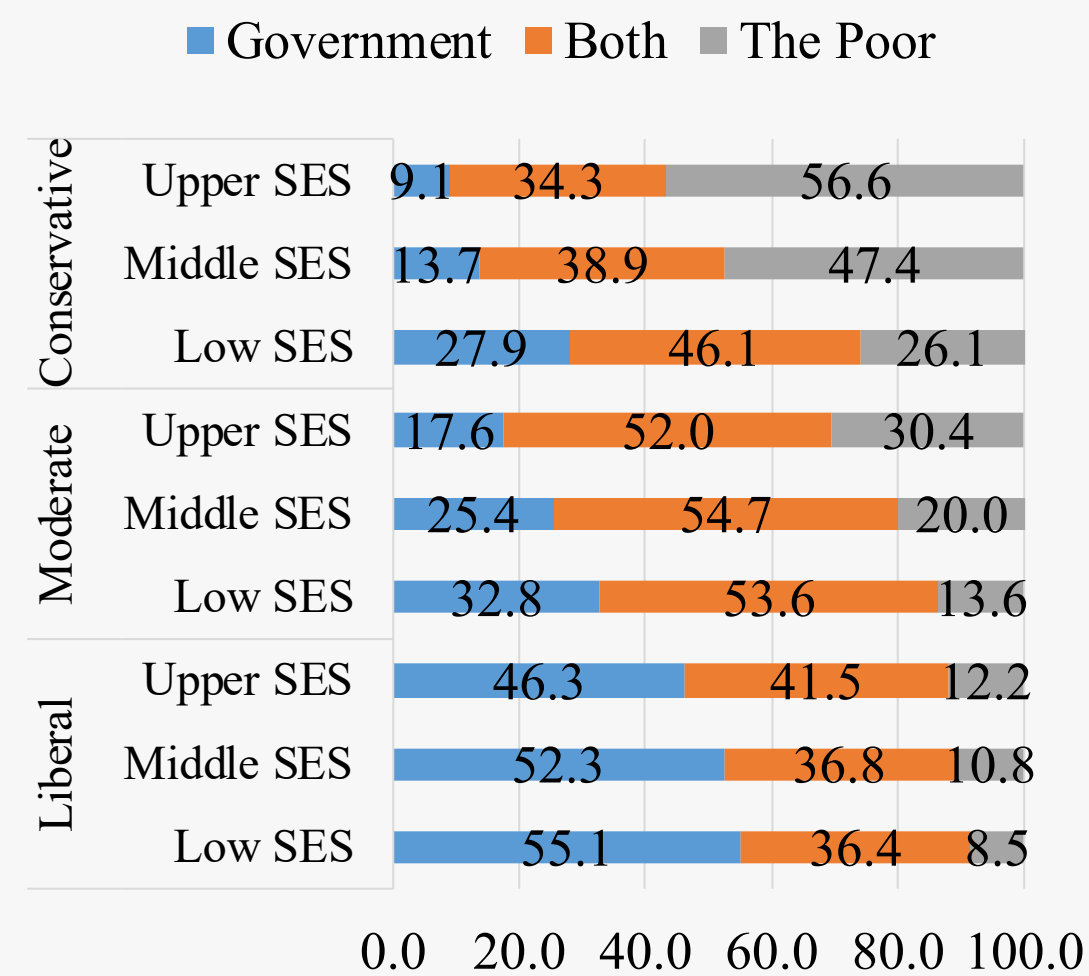


## Analysis

- Cross tabulation and Chi-square test using SPSS

## Results

Figure 4. % Views on Who Should Be Responsible for Helping the Poor by Family Income and Political Views



Note: Chi-square tests for differences by SES were not significant for liberals and significant at  $p < .001$  for moderates and conservatives.

Source: '08 and '18 GSS

## Summary and Conclusion

- Overall, the largest share (44%) of Americans believe that both the government and the poor are responsible for helping the poor.
- Respondents with higher incomes are the least likely to report the government should help the poor among moderates and conservatives.
- Upper-class conservatives are least likely to report that it is the government's responsibility (9.1%).
- Liberals across all income levels are more likely than moderates and conservatives to report that the government should help the poor.

## Policy Implications

- Policy makers and activists interested in creating or changing legislature for the government to help the poor should prioritize persuading moderates and conservatives in the upper class.
- Policy makers should consider holding both the government and the public accountable for helping the poor.

## References

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