

How Elastic are Preferences for Redistribution? Evidence from Randomized Survey Experiments

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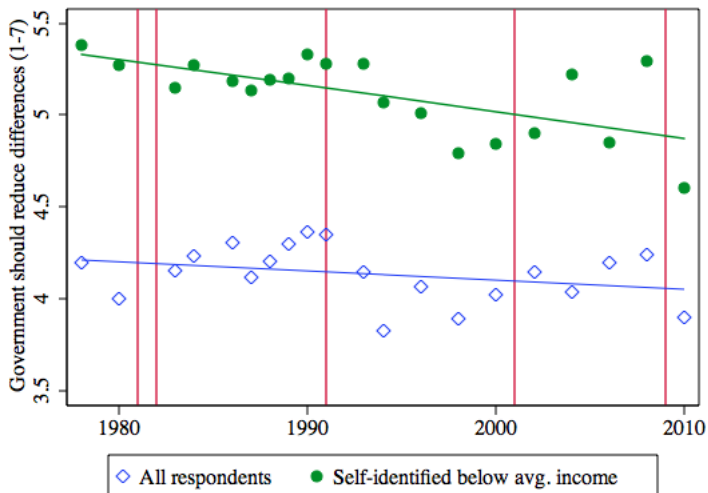
Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Main Experiment: Treatment, Data, Results
- 3 Explaining the Estate Tax Result
- 4 Manipulating Trust in Government
- 5 Emotional Poverty Treatment
- 6 Create explicit link to Policies
- 7 Conclusion

Motivation: Rising inequality, no Demand for Redistribution

- Focus in media on growing income share of “one percent” (23% in 2012).
- More recent focus on *wealth* inequality increase (top 1% has 35% of wealth).
- Classic Richard-Meltzer model: demand for redistribution is increasing in inequality.
 - ▶ But: top income and inheritance taxes in US have fallen during period.
 - ▶ Voter demand for redistribution has been flat or falling during this period.
- Do Americans simply not care about inequality?
 - ▶ Newsweek (2001): *“If Americans couldn’t abide rising inequality, we’d now be demonstrating in the streets.”*

Motivation: Lack of Support for Redistribution



The government should reduce income differences (scale from 1–7, GSS)

Our project explores what drives redistributive preferences

- Use online experiments ($\geq 10,000$ obs) to examine how info affects redistributive demand.
 - ▶ Income tax rates, transfer policies, and inheritance taxes.
 - ▶ General structure: treatment group sees info, control doesn't.
 - ▶ Info highly salient and customized (upper bound?)
- Main “omnibus” experiment documents effects of comprehensive info (ineq & taxes).
- Then, series of experiments teasing out mechanisms.

Summary of Main Results

- Main omnibus treatment ($N = 4,000$):
 - ▶ Large “first stage” effects on perceptions of inequality.
 - ▶ Very small effects on policies: min wage, food stamps, EITC support.
 - ▶ Big exception: increases support for estate tax a lot.
 - ▶ Decreases trust in government.
- Follow-up with subset of respondents 1 month later: many treatment effects persist— estate tax effect remains very large.
- Real responses: treatment increases likelihood of sending petitions to raise estate tax to respondents’ Senator.
- Preferences about tax and transfer policies “stubborn” to info, preferences about estate tax “malleable” and persistent.
- Could be due to lack of trust in government and lack of connection to policies.

Related Literature

- Public fails to connect concern for inequality with public policy preferences, which are “sticky” (Bartels, 2005, Luttmer and Singhal, 2011)
- Determinants of social preferences from political science, sociology, economics and psychology (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004, Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005, Luttmer, 2001, Singhal 2008)
- Effects of framing and priming on policy preferences (Hite and Roberts, 1991, McCaffery and Baron, 2004, 2005, 2006, Savani and Rattan, 2012)
- Randomized info treatments’ effects on policy preferences (Sides, 2011, Cruces et al., 2013, Kuklinski et al., 2003)

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Structure of the Omnibus Experiment

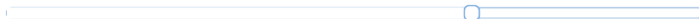
- Common structure of all our surveys:
 - ① background socio-economic questions
 - ② randomized info treatment
 - ③ questions on views on inequality, tax and transfer policies, government.
- Treatment, comprehensive customized:
 - ▶ Interactive info on current income distribution with sliders [▶ Ineq1](#)
 - ▶ Counterfactual income distribution if growth equally spread. [▶ Ineq2](#)
 - ▶ Redistributive policies: income taxes and econ growth. [▶ Taxes](#)
 - ▶ Estate tax: only top 0.1% of estates pay it. [▶ Estate](#)

Where are you in the income distribution?

Please enter your annual household income* in the box below:

\$

39% of US households earn less than your household



We now encourage you to move the blue slider above (by clicking on the line) to explore the US income distribution on your own and to answer the questions below.

79% of households earn less than **\$73,000** .

https://hbs.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_77fSvTy12ZSBihn

Where would you have been in the income distribution?

Income Inequality has increased dramatically in the United States since 1980.

Incomes of poorer and middle-income families have grown very little while top incomes have grown a lot.

How would YOU be doing if inequality had not increased?

The slider below shows how much each group would make if incomes had grown by the same percentage since 1980 for all groups: the poor, the middle class, and the rich. Use the slider to answer the questions below.



A household making **\$25,800** today would instead be making **\$35,200** if inequality had not changed since 1980.

In other words, if growth had been evenly shared, this household would have earned **37% more.**

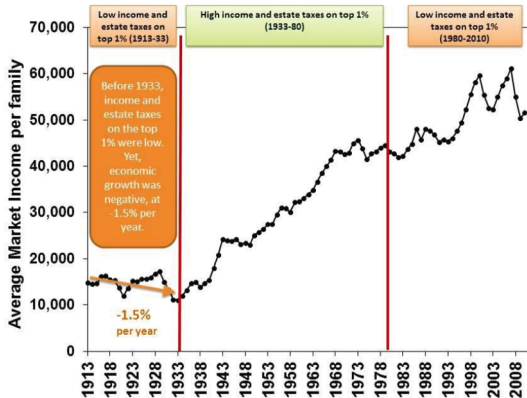
https://hbs.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_77fSvTy12ZSBihn

Correlation Taxes and Growth

Increasing the federal income tax rate and the estate tax rate on very high incomes can raise tax revenue without hurting economic growth.

The following slides describe both income and estate taxes on high incomes and economic growth over three historical periods: (1) Before the New Deal of 1933, (2) Between 1933 and 1980, (3) Since 1980.

Economic growth is measured as the growth in the average family market income.



https://hbs.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_77fSvTy12ZSBihn

Estate Taxes

Besides the income tax, the government can also level the playing field with **the federal estate tax**.

The **Federal Estate Tax** (also known as the **Death Tax**) applies when a deceased person leaves **more than \$5 million** in wealth to his or her heirs. Wealth left to a spouse or charitable organizations is exempt from estate tax.



Only 1 person out of 1000 is wealthy enough to face the estate tax.

Average Americans do not have anything close to \$5 million in wealth, so the estate tax does not affect them and they can pass on their property to their children tax-free.

Eliminating the estate tax would allow the very richest families to pass down all of their wealth to their children tax-free. Hence, children of rich people would also start off very rich themselves.

Increasing the estate tax is a way to level the playing field between the children of wealthy parents and children of middle-class parents.

https://hbs.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_77fSvTy12ZSBihn

Strong First Stage on Inequality Perceptions

	Ineq. v. serious		Ineq. increased		Rich deserving	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	0.102*** [0.0154]	0.104*** [0.0144]	0.119*** [0.0130]	0.120*** [0.0128]	-0.0500*** [0.0119]	-0.0526*** [0.0114]
Cont gp. mean	0.285	0.285	0.738	0.738	0.180	0.180
Scaled Effect	0.357	0.365	0.539	0.540	0.173	0.182
Covariates?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Obs.	3703	3703	3704	3704	3690	3690

- Knowledge about inequality and concern for inequality seems very malleable.

Weak Effects on Income Taxes, But Very Strong Effect on Estate Tax

	<u>Top tax rate</u>	<u>Millionaire tax</u>	<u>Estate tax</u>	<u>Petition, est. tax</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treated	0.931* [0.549]	0.0463*** [0.0125]	0.357*** [0.0140]	0.0648*** [0.0156]
Cont gp. mean	30.21	0.745	0.171	0.234
Scaled Effect	0.0914	0.106	2.043	0.394
Obs.	3741	3741	3673	3060

- Estate tax result very strong: 40% of cons-lib gap.
- Translates into real effect: Treatment increases likelihood of sending petition to Senator.

Very Weak Poverty Reduction Policy Effects

	<u>Min. wage</u>	<u>Food stamps</u>	<u>EITC</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treated	0.0325** [0.0141]	0.0149 [0.0141]	0.0212 [0.0151]
Cont gp. mean	0.690	0.686	0.611
Scaled Effect	0.0995	0.0369	0.0698
Obs.	3690	3690	3690

- Direct transfer policies (e.g.: min wage) seem different than direct transfer policies (e.g.: Food stamps, EITC).
- Could be explained by distrust in government (below).

Views of Government are Complicated but Trust Decreases

	Trust gov.	Scope gov.	Plan to vote Democrat 2012
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treated	-0.0253** [0.0112]	0.132*** [0.0339]	0.0152 [0.0125]
Cont gp. mean	0.155	3.076	0.529
Scaled Effect	1.105	0.110	0.0246
Obs.	3739	3704	3703

- Very low baseline trust in government.
- Treatment makes people see more areas where government intervention may be needed
- But also makes them trust government less (110% of lib-cons gap).

Persistence of Effects in Follow-up One Month Later

	Increase Estate Tax		Govt scope		Trust govt		Ineq v. Serious	
	(1) First	(2) Follow-up	(3) First	(4) Follow-up	(5) First	(6) Follow-up	(7) First	(8) Follow-up
Treated	0.295*** [0.0878]	0.177** [0.0845]	0.329* [0.187]	0.365* [0.186]	-0.0490 [0.0576]	-0.0339 [0.0532]	2.213 [3.169]	3.373 [3.239]
Cont gp. mean Obs.	0.181 168	0.184 168	2.995 168	2.874 168	0.123 168	0.126 168	32.61 167	29.99 167

- No differential selection into follow-up survey. [▶ Selection](#)
- Relatively low take-up, better technology developed by us later.

[▶ Full Results 1](#)[▶ Full Results 2](#)

Bounding the Effects of Attrition

- Assuming Attriters Answer like the Average C = Conservative or L= Liberal

	Ineq. v. serious		Increase Mill. Tax		Increase Estate Tax		Trust Gov	
	(1) C	(2) L	(3) C	(4) L	(5) C	(6) L	(7) C	(8) L
Treated	0.0666*** [0.0129]	0.0980*** [0.0128]	0.0194 [0.0118]	0.0518*** [0.0117]	0.284*** [0.0122]	0.310*** [0.0121]	-0.00692 [0.00979]	-0.0198** [0.00970]
Cont gp. mean	0.267	0.293	0.717	0.744	0.170	0.192	0.172	0.161
Obs.	4547	4547	4546	4546	4519	4519	4546	4546

- Estate Tax Result completely robust to attrition.
- Other Results highly consistent, despite extreme bounding assumption.

► Diff. attrition

► Attrition

Subsequent Surveys Tease Out Mechanisms

- Same structure as omnibus.
- Isolate particular treatment and develop new single treatment to test hypotheses.
 - ▶ Do respondents think ineq is a problem but don't trust govt to fix it?
 - ▶ Will emotional appeal to "plight of the poor" work better?
 - ▶ Do respondents not connect concerns with actual policies to address ineq?
- New, detailed outcome questions added (present only outcome questions of main interest for each survey – complete results in paper).

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Explaining the Very Robust Estate Tax Result

- Breaking off estate tax part from inequality info leaves effects unchanged.
- Stripped down “Neutral” version: mentions only tax incidence, no moralistic framing, but still has very large effect. ▶ Neutral ▶ Emotional.
- Effects persist almost unchanged one month later.
- Is widespread misinformation the source of strong effects?
 - ▶ Documented previously as well.
 - ▶ Only 12% of control group answered correctly (random guessing yields 14% correct).
 - ▶ 16% of liberals versus 6% of conservatives answered correctly.
- Potentially important policy implications given recent emphasis on wealth taxation (Piketty 2014).

Results of the Estate Tax Treatment

	Ineq v. serious (1)	Ineq inc. (2)	Deserving rich (3)	Estate increase (4)	Petition . (5)	Trust Govt (6)	Correct Estate Tax (7)
Treated	0.0381 [0.0258]	-0.00239 [0.0243]	-0.0312 [0.0328]	0.289*** [0.0258]	0.0313 [0.0208]	-0.0164 [0.0205]	0.316*** [0.0263]
Neutral T	0.0511** [0.0259]	-0.0501** [0.0244]	-0.0429 [0.0329]	0.109*** [0.0259]	0.0239 [0.0209]	-0.00558 [0.0205]	0.375*** [0.0264]
Cont mean	0.307	0.771	1.997	0.210	0.132	0.153	0.120
Scaled T	0.118	0.0106	0.0818	1.085	0.265	0.235	3.386
Scaled N	0.159	0.223	0.113	0.408	0.202	0.0803	4.014
Obs.	1777	1777	1777	1777	1762	1756	1773

- Separating estate tax info from inequality info: effects unchanged.
- Stripped down “Neutral” version still has very large effect.

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Negative Treatment to Directly Decrease Trust in Govt

- Negative trust treatment consisting of several multiple choice questions making respondents reflect on negative aspects of government:
 - ▶ Is govt “effective in limiting fraud, waste and abuse” in its programs? (88% disagree).
 - ▶ Do you agree that “Politicians in Washington work to enrich themselves and their largest contributors, instead of working for the benefit of the majority of citizens.”? (90% do).
 - ▶ Aso: Foreign Aid, Wall Street bailout, Citizens United campaign financing.
- Show results from ranking of OECD countries in terms of government transparency (U.S. is in bottom quartile). ▶ Treatment

First Stage Effects of Negative Trust Treatment

	Trust Govt	Scope Govt	No waste	Ineq. v. serious	Ineq. inc.	Pov. v. ser.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	-0.0582*** [0.0203]	0.0236 [0.0688]	-0.0278 [0.0346]	0.0547* [0.0311]	0.0119 [0.0289]	-0.00257 [0.0313]
Cont. mean	0.125	3.031	1.423	0.343	0.755	0.383
Scaled Effect	1.730	0.0170	0.109	0.182	0.341	0.00828
Obs.	899	899	898	899	899	899

- Successful in devising treatment that isolates effect of trust.
- Other first stages insignificant or very small.

Effects of the Negative Trust Treatment

	Mill. tax	Estate tax	Petition	Priv. Charities	Educ. Pol.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treated	-0.0421 [0.0275]	-0.00168 [0.0266]	-0.0602** [0.0236]	0.187** [0.0791]	0.0615 [0.0885]
Cont gp. mean	0.722	0.204	0.174	1.800	3.732
Scaled Effect	0.0949	0.00728	0.580	0.169	0.265
Obs.	899	895	899	850	874

- Decreases willingness to write to Senator.
- Increases reliance on private charities to redistribute.

Effects of the Negative Trust Treatment (cont.)

	<u>Min wage</u>	<u>Aid to Poor</u>	<u>Food stamps</u>	<u>Public Housing</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treated	-0.00428 [0.0902]	-0.139** [0.0616]	-0.153** [0.0673]	-0.163*** [0.0614]
Cont gp. mean	2.673	2.675	2.454	2.581
Scaled Effect	0.00531	0.128	0.119	0.133
Obs.	899	899	899	899

- Decreases respondents' support for direct govt transfer programs.
- No real effect on min wage, which is indirect transfer.
- Recall omnibus treatment didn't increase support for direct transfers, but did for min wage.

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Will emotional appeals produce larger changes?

- Omnibus treatment extensive, interactive and personalized, but:
 - ▶ factual and numeric info.
 - ▶ focus on relative inequality, not absolute poverty.
- New treatment to create empathy between respondent and low-income families:
 - ▶ *Think about a family of X_1 with X_2 parent(s) working full time at low pay and X_3 kids... What would be the minimal monthly expenses that such a family would have to make to afford living where you live? (Rent, food, utilities, transportation, child expenses).*
 - ▶ X_1 , X_2 , X_3 are customized to respondent's own family situation (without him knowing it).
 - ▶ Program computes surplus or deficit relative to poverty line.

Effects of Emotional Poverty Treatment

	<u>Inequality v. serious</u>	<u>Poverty v. serious</u>	<u>Min. wage</u>	<u>Aid to Poor</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treated	0.0778*** [0.0278]	0.0971*** [0.0315]	0.0280 [0.0993]	0.147 [0.0936]
Cont. mean	0.307	0.316	2.529	2.127
Scaled Eff.	0.211	0.293	0.0283	0.0689
Obs.	1825	1204	899	899

	<u>Food stamps</u>	<u>Public Housing</u>	<u>Trust Government</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treated	0.189* [0.101]	0.0473 [0.0944]	-0.0132 [0.0215]
Cont. mean	1.811	2.064	0.144
Scaled Eff.	0.0973	0.0249	0.264
Obs.	899	899	1825

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Draw Very Explicit Link between Low-Income and Policies

- Ask respondents to estimate budget of family earning min wage for basic needs such as rent, food, utilities, transportation, child care.
- Family composition customized to fit the respondent's own situation.
- Program shows surplus or deficit relative to budget of a min wage earning family.
- Respondents are also told that *"The Food stamps program helps many low income families, such as those earning only minimum wage. It provides \$150/month per person to help with food expenses."*
- Highly explicit prime in favor of these poverty reduction policies.

Effects of Policy Treatment

	Min. wage	Aid	Food st	Housing	Charities	Trust
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	0.304*** [0.0960]	0.149 [0.0909]	0.299*** [0.0977]	0.244*** [0.0906]	-0.130* [0.0704]	-0.0349* [0.0206]
Cont. mean	2.529	2.127	1.811	2.064	2.026	0.144
Scaled Eff.	0.308	0.0698	0.154	0.128	0.0731	0.698
Obs.	906	906	906	906	1266	1835

- No first stage on poverty, inequality (not shown)
- Policy preferences react, although economically small effects. Still min wage strongest.
- Treatment does not increase support for actually sending money to Washington (no effect on income or estate tax) (not shown).
- Effect on trust remains negative: respondents still blame govt after thinking about challenged for low-income families, but less so now.

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Conclusion

- Series of mTurk online experiments ($\geq 10,000$ obs) to explain disconnect between historic inequality rise and lack of support for redistribution.
- Greater info increases concerns and perceptions, but not necessarily support for policies.
- Reducing (the already low) trust in govt reduces support for policies.
- Showing concrete link to poverty policies improves support, still largely for programs that do not involve govt collecting and redistributing tax dollars.
- Estate tax is big exception: widespread misinformation or different moral implications?
- Online Appendix has methodological material for online surveys.

Appendix

Full Follow-up Results

	Ineq. v. serious		Ineq. inc.		Deserving rich		Top tax rate	
	(1) First	(2) Follow-up	(3) First	(4) Follow-up	(5) First	(6) Follow-up	(7) First	(8) Follow-up
Treated	-0.00715 [0.0708]	0.0407 [0.0741]	0.0581 [0.0626]	-0.0161 [0.0712]	0.112 [0.0943]	0.0883 [0.112]	2.213 [3.169]	3.373 [3.239]
Cont gp. mean Obs.	0.288 169	0.230 169	0.785 169	0.747 169	1.986 168	1.885 168	32.61 167	29.99 167

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Full Follow-up Results (cont.)

	Mill. tax		Estate tax		Trust govt		Govt scope	
	(1) First	(2) Follow-up	(3) First	(4) Follow-up	(5) First	(6) Follow-up	(7) First	(8) Follow-up
Treated	-0.00661 [0.0705]	0.0385 [0.0749]	0.295*** [0.0878]	0.177** [0.0845]	-0.0490 [0.0576]	-0.0339 [0.0532]	0.329* [0.187]	0.365* [0.186]
Cont gp. mean Obs.	0.756 168	0.770 168	0.181 168	0.184 168	0.123 168	0.126 168	2.995 168	2.874 168

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Selection into the Follow-up

Variable	Coefficient	P-value
Voted for Obama in 2008	-0.012	0.605
Age	0.003	0.005
Liberal policy view	-0.015	0.149
Household income	0.006	0.097
Married	0.051	0.027
Education	0.012	0.143
Male	-0.014	0.539
Black	0.060	0.163
Hispanic	0.067	0.242
Native	-0.077	0.093
Employed full time	0.015	0.506
Unemployed	-0.006	0.843
Not in labor force	0.074	0.051
Student	-0.066	0.019

Differential Attrition

		Attrition		
Survey round	Obs. (completed)	Control	Treatment	Differential
Omnibus survey	4045	0.094	0.208	0.114
Estate survey	1760	0.06	0.03	-0.03
Trust survey	901	0.03	0.02	-0.01
Poverty survey	1825	0.06	0.02	-0.04
Policy survey	1837	0.06	0.04	-0.02

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What Drives Attrition?

Table: Differential Attrition

Variable	Coeff	P-val
Voted for Obama in 2008	0.014	0.227
Age	-0.003	0.000
Liberal policy view	0.002	0.676
Household income	0.001	0.449
Married	0.008	0.480
Education	-0.001	0.724
Male	0.018	0.105
Black	-0.006	0.765
Hispanic	0.072	0.007
Native	-0.011	0.624
Employed full time	-0.008	0.483
Unemployed	0.024	0.145
Not in labor force	-0.029	0.055
Student	0.023	0.137
Treatment Group	-0.113	0.000

Estate Taxes: Neutral Treatment

The **Federal Estate Tax** applies when a deceased person leaves **more than \$5 million** in wealth to his or her heirs. Wealth left to a spouse or charitable organizations is exempt from estate tax.

Only 1 person out of 1000 is wealthy enough to face the estate tax.

Average Americans have far less than \$5 million in wealth when they die, so the estate tax does not affect them and they can pass on their property to their children tax-free.

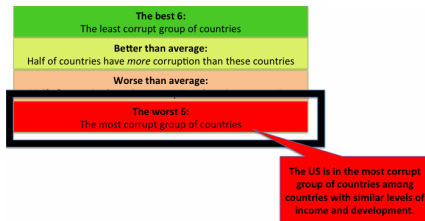
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Trust Treatment Illustrated

Each year, the non-partisan organization Transparency International rates countries based on the amount of government corruption. When the US is compared to countries with similar levels of income and development, how do you think it ranks?



These are the actual results from the report:



Poverty Treatment Illustrated

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The picture of poverty in a rich country like the United States is striking.

16% of Americans live in **poverty**.

20% of American **children** live in poverty.



25% of the **disabled** Americans live in poverty.



Think about a family of four with two parents working full time at low pay and two kids.

What would be the minimal monthly expenses that such a family would have to make to afford living in your city?

Please enter numbers only, with no "\$" sign and no commas, e.g., 1000.

Rent

Utilities (electric, heating,
cable/phone)

Car payment + car insurance + gas
to go to work

Food

Child care while working

Policy Treatment Illustrated

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Think about a family of two with only one person working full time at the minimum wage and with kids.

What would be the minimal monthly expenses that such a family would have to make to afford live where you live?

Please enter numbers only, with no "\$" sign and no commas, e.g., 1000.

Rent

Utilities (electric, heating,
cable/phone)

Transportation (public transit fare
and/or car payments, insurance,
gas...)

Food

Table: Comparing the mTurk sample to the CBS sample

	(1) mTurk (unwgted)	(2) CBS
Male	0.428	0.476
Age	35.41	48.99
White	0.778	0.739
Black	0.0758	0.116
Hispanic	0.0443	0.0983
Asian	0.0758	0.0209
Married	0.396	0.594
Has college degree	0.433	0.318
Unemployed	0.124	0.104
Not in labor force	0.148	0.309
Voted for Obama in 2008	0.675	0.555
Pol. views, 1 (Cons) to 3 (Lib)	2.176	1.586
Observations	3746	808

Table: Summary Statistics

	(1) Liberals	(2) Conservatives	(3) All
Male	0.407	0.472	0.422
Age	32.618	39.823	35.557
White	0.752	0.838	0.776
Black	0.090	0.063	0.085
Hispanic	0.039	0.027	0.037
Asian	0.090	0.053	0.078
Married	0.302	0.543	0.402
Has college degree	0.462	0.455	0.430
Unemployed	0.140	0.076	0.121
Not in labor force	0.093	0.208	0.144
Voted for Obama in 2008	0.914	0.303	0.674
Ineq. has increased	0.836	0.615	0.738
Ineq. v. serious	0.414	0.129	0.285
Top Tax Rate	34.181	23.996	30.205
Increase Millionaire Tax	0.904	0.469	0.745
Increase Estate Tax	0.254	0.080	0.171
Increase min wage	0.822	0.496	0.690
Support food stamps	0.850	0.446	0.686
Support EITC	0.722	0.418	0.611
Trust Govt	0.168	0.145	0.155
Purpose of Govt is broad	3.552	2.349	3.076
Said would petition for higher inc taxes (early rounds only)	0.288	0.118	0.238