

CONSENSUS THAT AMERICA SHOULD BE LIKE SWEDEN

A number of people are circulating this video, graphically showing that Americans don't know how unequal our society has become.

But I wanted to point to a few details about the underlying study, which not only shows that most Americans have no clue how unequal it has become, but asks them to describe what an ideal wealth distribution ought to be. It shows a real consensus that an ideal distribution would look like Sweden, and even agrees that that distribution ought to be effected by redistributing money from the very wealthy to the three lowest quintiles of wealth.

All groups—even the wealthiest respondents—desired a more equal distribution of wealth than what they estimated the current United States level to be, and all groups also desired some inequality—even the poorest respondents. In addition, all groups agreed that such redistribution should take the form of moving wealth from the top quintile to the bottom three quintiles. In short, although Americans tend to be relatively more favorable toward economic inequality than members of other countries (Osberg & Smeeding, 2006), Americans' consensus about the ideal distribution of wealth within the United States appears to dwarf their disagreements across gender, political orientation, and income.

The study does reflect a bit on why this isn't driving political change, citing other studies; Americans' ignorance about the inequality of our society is just one part of it.

Given the consensus among disparate groups on the gap between an ideal distribution of

wealth and the actual level of wealth inequality, why are more Americans, especially those with low income, not advocating for greater redistribution of wealth? First, our results demonstrate that Americans appear to drastically underestimate the current level of wealth inequality, suggesting they may simply be unaware of the gap. Second, just as people have erroneous beliefs about the actual level of wealth inequality, they may also hold overly optimistic beliefs about opportunities for social mobility in the United States (Benabou & Ok, 2001; Charles & Hurst, 2003; Keister, 2005), beliefs which in turn may drive support for unequal distributions of wealth. Third, despite the fact that conservatives and liberals in our sample agree that the current level of inequality is far from ideal, public disagreements about the causes of that inequality may drown out this consensus (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005; Piketty, 1995). Finally, and more broadly, Americans exhibit a general disconnect between their attitudes toward economic inequality and their self-interest and public policy preferences (Bartels, 2005; Fong, 2001), suggesting that even given increased awareness of the gap between ideal and actual wealth distributions, Americans may remain unlikely to advocate for policies that would narrow this gap.

But educating Americans about our inequality is one step in that process.