



DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

# VOTERS THINK THE EXISTING ECONOMIC ORDER IS STACKED AGAINST WORKERS

---

Kelsey Wright  
Ethan Winter

---

July 2020

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Voters think that Americans want to work and that structural unemployment causes high unemployment, supporting this idea by a margin of 21 percentage points.
- ▶ Sixty-eight percent of voters, including 58 percent of Republicans, agree that most people living in poverty are poor because of low wages and limited opportunities, not because of individual choices.
- ▶ The majority of voters think that the existing economic order is unfair. For example, by a margin of 48 percentage points, voters think the economic system favors the wealthy and powerful.

Unemployment has skyrocketed due to the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout, with 38.6 million jobless claims filed in the past nine weeks. Food insecurity is significantly higher than at any time in the past twenty years, and many Americans may be falling into poverty.

As lawmakers consider additional economic stimulus to help the economy and labor force recover, it is important for them to understand voters' opinions on unemployment, poverty, and the structure of the economy more generally. It allows lawmakers to fashion policies that are in line with public opinion. For progressives, it points to potentially useful rhetorical strategies for advancing their causes.

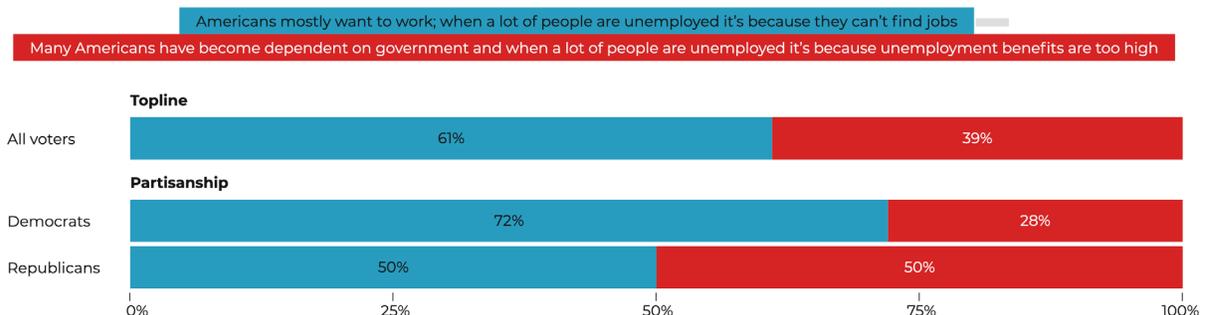
As part of a May 2020 survey, Data for Progress polled registered voters about their opinions on the cause of unemployment, the cause of poverty, and the existing economic order.

To understand what voters think causes unemployment, we began by asking them which view came closer to their opinion:

- ▶ *Americans mostly want to work; when a lot of people are unemployed, it's because they can't find jobs*
- ▶ *Many Americans have become dependent on government and when a lot of people are unemployed, it's because unemployment benefits are too high*

## Voters Think That Americans Want To Work

Which view comes closer to your opinion:



Data for Progress

DATA FOR PROGRESS

Overall, voters think that Americans want to work and that high unemployment is caused by being unable to find a job, supporting this view by a 22-percentage-point margin. Self-identifying Democrats are more likely to think Americans want to work, endorsing that view by a 44-point margin, while self-identifying Republicans are split evenly between the two views. This shows that while there is a partisan difference in opinion, most voters understand unemployment as a structural issue and don't necessarily blame unemployment on the personal choices of a worker.

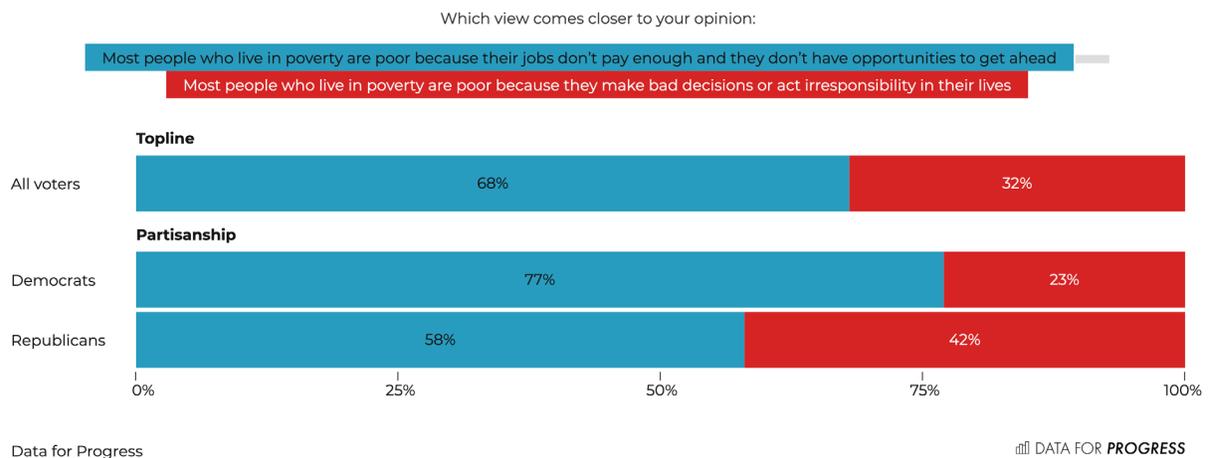
A long-standing Republican narrative claims that people are poor because of their bad choices and irresponsibility. To test how common this view is among voters, and to see what voters understand as the causes of poverty, we asked voters which

opinion came closer to their view. The two responses we provided are:

- ▶ *Most people who live in poverty are poor because their jobs don't pay enough and they don't have opportunities to get ahead*
- ▶ *Most people who live in poverty are poor because they make bad decisions or act irresponsibly in their lives*

Sixty-eight percent of voters think that most people living in poverty are poor because of low wages and limited opportunities, while only 32 percent think it's because people living in poverty make bad decisions or act irresponsibly. These results indicate that a strong majority of voters—including a majority (58 percent) of Republicans— understand poverty to be the result of systematic forces rather than individual shortcomings.

### Most Voters Think That Those Who Live In Poverty Do So Because Of Structural Forces



We were also interested in voters' broader views about the economy. First, we had voters read eight different statements, then we offered them a four-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." (Full question wording can be found in the methodology section below.)

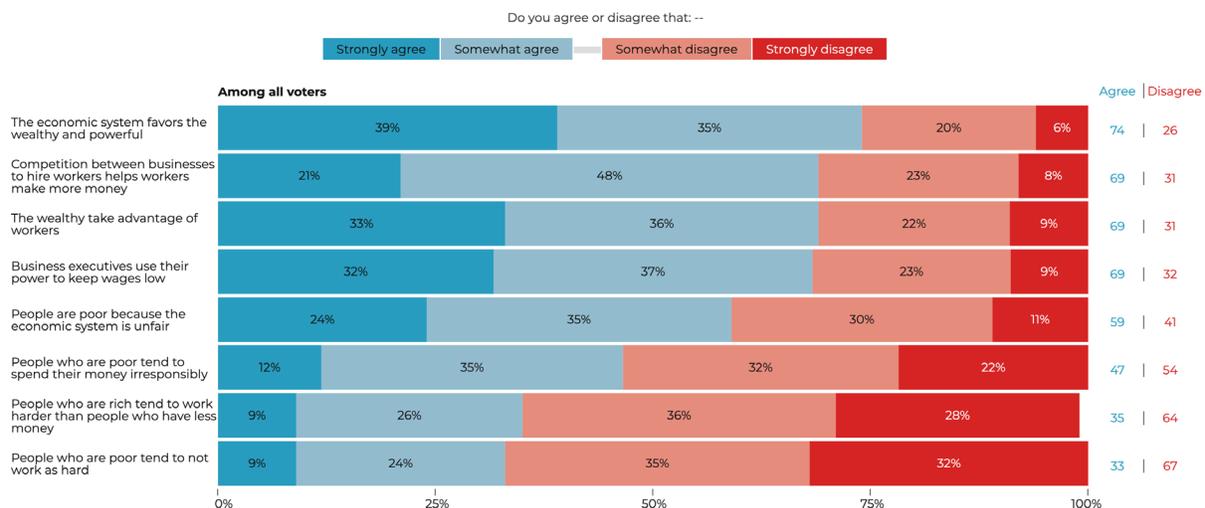
For all statements, a majority of voters indicate that they think the existing economic order is unfair. The most supported view among voters is that they think that the economic system favors the wealthy and powerful, supporting this idea by a 48-point margin (74 percent agree, 26 percent disagree). The second-most supported view was a tie: By a 38-point margin, voters think both that competition between businesses to hire workers helps workers make more money, and that the wealthy take advantage of workers. Very closely behind this was the view that business executives use their power to keep wages low, which voters support by a 37-point margin (69 percent agree, 32 percent oppose) Next, by an 18-point margin, voters agree that people are poor because the

economic system is unfair (59 percent agree, 41 percent oppose).

A majority of voters (54 percent) disagree that people who are poor tend to spend their money irresponsibly. By a 29-point margin, voters disagree that people who are rich tend to work harder than people who have less money. Lastly, by a 34-point margin, voters disagree most strongly that people who are poor tend to not work as hard.

Overall, our results show that a majority of voters understand unemployment and poverty as structural problems, and see the existing economic order as unfair. For lawmakers, these results strengthen previous findings that voters support an expansion of the welfare state, especially in the response to the coronavirus crisis. This finding also underscores that the fundamental inequality of our existing economic order can be leveraged as a useful rhetorical strategy of electoral mobilization.

### Most Voters Think The Existing Economic Order Is Unfair



Data for Progress

DATA FOR PROGRESS

# METHODOLOGY

---

From May 8 through May 9, 2020, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,235 likely voters nationally, using web-panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, urbanicity, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is  $\pm 2.7$  percentage points.

Due to rounding, some values sum to 99 or 101 percent.

## Question Wording

*Which view comes closer to your opinion:*

*1- Americans mostly want to work; when a lot of people are unemployed it's because they can't find jobs*

*2- Many Americans have become dependent on government and when a lot of people are unemployed it's because unemployment benefits are too high*

*Which view comes closer to your opinion:*

*1- Most people who live in poverty are poor because their jobs don't pay enough and they don't have opportunities to get ahead*

*2- Most people who live in poverty are poor because they make bad decisions or act irresponsibility in their lives*

*Do you agree or disagree that: --*

- ▶ People who are rich tend to work harder than people who have less money
- ▶ The economic system favors the wealthy and powerful
- ▶ The wealthy take advantage of workers
- ▶ People who are poor tend to not work as hard
- ▶ People who are poor tend to spend their money irresponsibly
- ▶ People are poor because the economic system is unfair
- ▶ Business executives use their power to keep wages low
- ▶ Competition between businesses to hire workers helps workers make more money

*1- Strongly agree*

*2- Somewhat agree*

*3- Somewhat disagree*

*4- Strongly disagree*