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## ***Heading into the Election, Americans Divided on How to Achieve the American Dream; Agree Hard Work Is Essential, But Is It Enough?***

***Public says people need good work ethic, strong values and good schools to have a shot at the Dream; Americans have a nuanced definition of what Dream is***

Washington, DC – The American citizenry is largely divided on some fundamental questions regarding the American Dream, including the role of government versus the individual in helping achieve the Dream, according to new research from **Public Agenda** and the **GALEWILL Center for Opportunity and Progress**. The research was released at the National Press Club on Oct. 1 during a panel discussion moderated by Fox News political analyst Juan Williams.

The findings, based on a national survey of 2,000 respondents, suggest that the public is split right down the middle when it comes to the role of government in achieving the Dream: 42 percent of respondents agreed that "achieving the Dream is mainly something people do for themselves—what government and communities do doesn't matter," while 39 percent agreed with the statement "it's crucial for the government and communities to take steps so every child has a fair chance at the American Dream." Two in 10 (19 percent) said neither statement reflected their views.

Panelists Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution, Robert Samuelson of *The Washington Post* and Hedrick Smith, author of *Who Stole the American Dream?* provided insightful commentary based on their own research and writing. The new findings are part of the project, [The Invisible Dream: Creating a New Conversation about the American Dream and What It Takes to Achieve It](#), which aims to improve the nation's conversation on the American Dream by shedding light on what the Americans themselves have to say about achieving and living it.

"We do need a more nuanced conversation, and we need to get away from this sense that is being created in the political world right now that it's either all being a Horatio Alger or it's all having government support to help you," said Sawhill during the panel discussion. "It's not either/or, it's both."

The findings also indicate a strong level of consensus among all Americans when it comes to the foundation for achieving the Dream. Regardless of party affiliation, gender, income and race, respondents agreed that a strong work ethic, parents or other adults who instill values, and a good education are "absolutely essential" for helping people achieve the American Dream.

While Americans agree on the importance of a work ethic and values, the research suggests a deep rift over whether people with these traits have access to the American Dream. While 43 percent of respondents agreed that "one of the major dangers to the American Dream is the decline of a strong work ethic and values like honesty," virtually the same percentage agreed that "even people with a strong work ethic and good values are becoming increasingly shut out from the American Dream."

"There's a tendency to talk about the American economy and its performance in terms of GDP," said Smith during the panel. "When you're talking about the American Dream, what's useful, even though it's amorphous to some people, [is focusing] attention on what we're delivering to the individual."

### What is the American Dream, and who has achieved it?

Findings from the survey suggest that the public's definition of the American Dream is flexible and, often, personal; only 9 percent defined the Dream as rags to riches.

- Nearly 3 in 10 Americans (28 percent) said the American Dream is the opportunity for people from modest beginnings to live a **secure, middle-class life**.
- Only 9 percent said the American Dream is the opportunity for people to from modest beginnings achieve **great wealth and fame**.
- Just over half—51 percent—said the American Dream represents both of these ideas.

The research suggests that Americans have a variety of ideas regarding what the American Dream is. When asked for a word to describe the American Dream, open-ended responses reflected a broad definition of the American Dream, with a lot of individual variation. While there were a great variety of responses, most respondents mentioned either classic American ideals like freedom (31 percent cited ideals; 24 percent cited freedom), or things related to home and family, especially homeownership (16 percent).

Respondents were more likely to be on the way to achieving the Dream (40 percent said they are making progress but still have a way to go) than to have achieved it (24 percent). Fifteen percent said they are unlikely to achieve the American Dream, and 21 percent said the American Dream is not something they think about much in their lives.

Lower-income Americans—defined as having household incomes below \$35,000 a year—are significantly more likely than higher-income Americans to believe they are unlikely to achieve the American Dream (26 percent of lower-income Americans say this, versus 18 percent of those with household incomes between \$35,000 and \$75,000, and 4 percent of those with household incomes above \$75,000).

They are also much less likely to agree with the statement, "one of the major dangers to the American Dream is the decline of a strong work ethic and values like honesty" (37 percent of lower-income Americans agree, versus 42 percent of those with household incomes between \$35,000 and \$75,000, and 51 percent of those with household incomes above \$75,000).

## What Does it Take? Consensus and Division

Respondents were asked to rate 11 things as "absolutely important," "important but not essential," or "not important" when it came to the ability for most people to have a chance at the American Dream. Regardless of political party, there was a broad consensus on the top 3 things that are "absolutely essential" to helping people achieve the Dream:

- **A strong work ethic:** Almost 9 in 10 respondents say that a strong work ethic is "absolutely essential" to achieving the Dream. (86 percent of Democrats say this; 91 percent of Republicans)
- **Values:** Eighty percent identify parents or other adults who teach honesty, responsibility and persistence as "absolutely essential." (83 percent of Democrats say this; 85 percent of Republicans)
- **A good education:** Seventy-seven percent identify good schools and teachers that ensure that every child has a fair chance to get a good education as "absolutely essential." (89 percent of Democrats say this; 68 percent of Republicans)

Strong communities where people look out for one another are also important to both Democrats and Republicans. Fifty-nine percent of Democrats said this was "absolutely essential," and 58 percent of Republicans. Overall, 57 percent of respondents said this is absolutely essential.

Consensus on these top items extended beyond divisions of class, education, and race and ethnicity as well, though there was considerably more disagreement about other items on the list, including access to basic health care and a free enterprise system.

"While partisan rhetoric would have us believe that Americans are sharply divided when it comes to what they need to achieve the dream, this research suggests that there is actually a surprising level of consensus, crossing party lines, geography, education level, race and social class," said Will Friedman, president of Public Agenda. "There is a real opportunity for the nation to have a healthier and more robust national dialogue about the American Dream, one that will truly allow us to weigh our options and figure out what it will take to help more Americans find success in this country."

### Differences of Opinion

While there is amazing consistency among many groups of respondents when it comes to what they think is essential to achieve the dream, there are differences based on political party, gender and income.

***While Democrats and Republican agree on the top 3 factors essential for achieving the Dream—work ethic, values and education—there do exist divisions in how members of each party weigh and prioritize other elements of what it takes:***

- **A free enterprise system that encourages people to take bold risks without too much regulation:** A full 60 percent of Republicans say this is absolutely essential. Only 27

percent of Democrats say the same, and 21 percent say it's not important at all. Fifty-three percent of Democrats say it's important but not essential.

- **Access to basic health care and nutrition so that families can stay healthy and pursue their dreams:** Seventy-seven percent of Democrats say this is absolutely essential. Only 44 percent of Republicans say the same.
- **A government that creates opportunities for people to get ahead:** Nearly 6 in 10 Democrats—58 percent—say this is absolutely essential. Just under 4 in 10—39 percent—of Republicans say the same.
- **A government that helps people recover when they're down on their luck.** This is absolutely essential for 55 percent of Democrats, and only 25 percent of Republicans.

***Women are also slightly more likely than men to believe that the following are essential:***

- A government that helps people recover when they're down on their luck (45 percent of women say this is absolutely essential, versus 32 percent of men)
- A government that creates opportunities for people to get ahead (53 percent of women say this is absolutely essential, versus 38 percent of men)
- Access to basic healthcare and nutrition so that families and children can stay healthy and pursue their dreams (68 percent of women say this is absolutely essential, versus 52 percent of men)
- Good schools and teachers to insure that every child has a fair chance to get a good education (83 percent of women say this is absolutely essential, versus 70 percent of men)

***Lower-income Americans are more likely than higher-income Americans to believe that the following are essential:***

- A government that helps people recover when they're down on their luck (53 percent of lower-income Americans say this is absolutely essential, versus 42 percent of middle-income and 26 percent of higher-income Americans)
- A government that creates opportunities for people to get ahead (62 percent of lower-income Americans say this is absolutely essential, versus 46 percent of middle-income and 31 percent of higher-income Americans)
- Access to basic healthcare and nutrition so that families and children can stay healthy and pursue their dreams (72 percent of lower-income Americans say this is absolutely essential, versus 64 percent of middle-income and 48 percent of higher-income Americans)
- Good transportation and communication systems so businesses and people can work efficiently (62 percent of lower-income Americans say this is absolutely essential, versus 55 percent of middle-income and 45 percent of higher-income Americans)

- A strong community where people look out for one another (68 percent of lower-income Americans say this is absolutely essential, versus 59 percent of middle-income and 47 percent of higher-income Americans)

Lower-income Americans are defined in the survey as having household incomes under \$35,000 a year. Middle-income Americans are defined as having household incomes from \$35,000 up to \$75,000 a year, and higher-income Americans are defined as having household incomes over \$75,000 a year.

### **Improving the Conversation on the American Dream**

This new research supplements past findings from national focus groups conducted across the country as part of the Invisible Dream initiative. The Invisible Dream, in development for over a year, aims to facilitate a more nuanced national dialogue around the American Dream and will continue with the development of products and tools to help improve the conversation.

"We need a better national conversation on the American Dream and what it takes to achieve it—one that moves beyond the black and white divide over 'who built this'" says Bob McKinnon, Executive Director of the GALEWILL Center. "Americans have a strong consensus on what the foundation of the American Dream is. How can we build on that foundation to make sure that as many people as possible can overcome challenge and access the Dream? The question shouldn't be, 'who built this?,' it should be, 'how do we build this together?'"

For more information on the project, visit [www.invisibledream.org](http://www.invisibledream.org).

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### **Join the Conversation**

Use hashtag #InvisibleDream on Twitter.

### **About the Survey**

This data comes from a nationally representative survey study of 2041 adults, conducted between August 15 and August 29, 2012, through online interviews. The data was collected by Harris Interactive Service Bureau (HISB). HISB was responsible for data collection only. Public Agenda, with the GALEWILL Center, designed the survey and analyzed the results.

### **About Public Agenda**

Public Agenda is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and improving people's lives. Through research and public engagement, we help leaders, citizens and stakeholders build common ground on solutions to tough public problems like education reform, the environment and healthcare. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by the social scientist and public opinion expert Dan Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and is based in New York City. Public Agenda can be found online at [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org).

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## About the GALEWiLL Center for Opportunity & Progress

The GALEWiLL Center for Opportunity & Progress is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to create and promote research, content and programs with the potential to move the world forward. It is established as a private operating foundation that will invest in ideas, people and organizations that empower others to improve their station in life. The GALEWiLL Center can be found online at <http://galewill.org/>.