

The 2025 Essay Question

Do income inequality and wealth inequality impact the health of representative democracy in the United States?

If your answer is yes, what is the impact? How is it manifested?

If the impact is negative, do we have mechanisms in the U.S. Constitution to address it? If so, what are they, and why are they not working effectively?

If the constitutional mechanisms to deal with this issue are inadequate, should the Constitution be amended to limit wealth inequality and income inequality, and if so, what would your proposed amendment be and what would it do?

Conversely, if you contend that wealth and income inequality do not impact the health of U.S. democracy, explain why, and defend your answer with evidence.

BACKGROUND

The United States Constitution relies on the concepts that political disagreements will be resolved through legislation and that legislators will represent the interests of their constituents by engaging in good faith discussion and compromise. It also presumed that the country would be governed by the rule of law, and that the three branches of government would act as checks on each other.

In 1787, in [The Federalist Papers](https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text) they wrote to encourage ratification of the original Constitution, founders James Madison and Alexander Hamilton identified “factions” as a potentially terminal threat to an effective government and to peaceful society. See <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text> (Library of Congress, [The Federalist Papers](#)).

Madison recognized factions as “this dangerous vice,” writing that “[t]he instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished.” He defined a “faction” as “a number of citizens, whether . . . a majority or a minority . . . who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed <sic> to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” See [The Federalist No. 10](#).

Turning to the causes of factions, he explained that “[t]he latent causes . . . are . . . sown in the nature of man,” and explained that citizens can become “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good,” with “the most common and durable source of factions” being the “unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.” [The Federalist No. 10](#).

Madison also predicted that “enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm” of government. [The Federalist No. 10](#). He believed that having a large republic would protect against “factious leaders” who “may kindle a flame in their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.” Hamilton, quoting Montesquieu, made a similar argument in [The Federalist No. 9](#). See also [The Federalist No. 51](#), in which Madison discusses the role of a republican government with checks and balances in protecting against the power of factions and preserving the rights of a minority against tyrannical majorities.

Madison and Hamilton, however, could not have envisioned the modern political ecosystem in which we operate. At the time the Constitution was drafted, there were no political parties, the election system and the impact of money in that system was not yet tested, and there was not the modern media environment, where the internet enables misinformation and disinformation to spread more widely and quickly than ever before, amplified by algorithms and AI social media bots, and impacting a voting populace with differing levels of information and civic literacy. We are living in a highly polarized political environment.

Income inequality and wealth inequality in the United States have increased over the last 40 years. See, e.g., October 2, 2024 [Report of the U.S. Congressional Budget Office: “Trends in the Distribution of Family Wealth, 1989 to 2022,”](#) see also [“A Guide to Statistics in Historical Trends in Income Inequality,”](#) published by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated Dec. 11, 2024.

People around the world, including majorities in the United States, view such inequalities as challenging. See, e.g., *Pew Research Center Report* [“Economic Inequality Seen as Major Challenge Around the World,”](#) published January 29, 2025; see also [“America’s Never Been Wealthier. Here’s Why it Doesn’t Feel that Way,”](#) by Talmon Joseph Smith, March 31, 2025, *The New York Times*.

Are these circumstances impacting democracy in the United States? Explain why or why not, how, and support your conclusions with research and evidence.