

# Does inequality hurt economic performance?

By [Francesco Saraceno](#)

Economic theory has long neglected the effects of income distribution on the performance of the economy. Students were taught right from Introduction to Economics 101 that the subject of efficiency had to be separated from considerations of equity. The idea is that the size of the cake had to be expanded to the maximum before it is shared. It was implicit in this dichotomy that economists should address the issue of efficiency and leave the question of distribution (or redistribution) to the politicians. In this framework, the economist's role is simply to ensure that choices about the channels for redistribution through taxation and public spending do not affect growth by interfering with the incentives of economic agents. Echoes of this view can be found both in the debate about the taxation of very large incomes envisaged by the French Government as well as in authors like [Raghuram Rajan](#) who justify inequality with references to technical progress and international trade, a view refuted by [Paul Krugman](#).

Since the work of Simon Kuznets in the 1950s, some economists have of course questioned whether excessive inequality might not inhibit economic growth, in particular by blocking the accumulation of human capital. But this has long been a minority view among economists. Indeed, the dramatic increase in inequality documented among others by [Atkinson, Piketty and Saez](#) as well as by institutions such as the [OECD](#) and the [IMF](#) failed to give rise to a deep-going reflection about the relationship between inequality and economic performance.

It was the crisis that revived this concern. Growing inequality [is now suspected](#) of being a source of increasing

household debt and speculative bubbles, leading to the accumulation of internal and external imbalances that have set off the current crisis. This is the argument developed by authors like [Joseph Stiglitz](#) and [James Galbraith](#).

Today the dichotomy between efficiency and distribution is no longer tenable. Inequality is becoming an essential theme in economic analysis, for both the short and long terms. To stimulate discussion on this topic, the OFCE and the SKEMA Business School are holding a workshop on “[Inequality and Economic Performance](#)” in Paris on 16 and 17 October 2012.

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## Obama 2012: “Yes, we care!”

By Frédéric Gannon (Université du Havre) and [Vincent Touzé](#)

On Thursday, 28 June 2012, the United States Supreme Court [delivered its verdict](#). The principle that individuals are obliged to take out health insurance or else face a financial penalty, a central plank in the 2010 reform [1] of the health insurance system (the Affordable Care Act [2]), was held to be constitutional. This reform had been adopted in a difficult political context. It includes a variety of measures intended to significantly reduce the number of Americans without health coverage. Although it will increase federal spending, new revenues and spending cuts will make it possible to reduce the deficit.

From September 2009 to March 2010, there was a lengthy process of drafting and approving the law, with an uncertain outcome due to the lack of a majority in the Senate [3]. Since the law passed by the House of Representatives and signed on 23 March

2010 by President Obama differed from the version passed by the Senate, amendments were introduced in a Reconciliation Act that was passed on March 30th. Opponents of the reform (26 states, numerous citizens and the National Federation of Independent Business) then decided to take the fight to the US Supreme Court. Their hopes rested mainly on the possible unconstitutionality of the law, which centered on the individual's obligation to take out health insurance, called the "individual mandate", and on the expansion of the Medicaid public insurance program.

The favourable judgment of the Supreme Court was obtained with a narrow majority: five judges voted for [4] and four against [5]. The political inclinations of the judges did not seem to have worked against the law, since Chief Justice John G. Roberts, an appointee of George W. Bush, gave his approval. The Supreme Court majority considered that the financial penalty for a failure to take out insurance is a tax [6] and that it had no cause to rule on the merits of such a tax. It passed this responsibility to Congress (the upper and lower houses) which, in this case, has already debated and approved the law. Consequently, this point of law is valid.

According to the Supreme Court, the financial penalty for failing to purchase health insurance could be viewed as an individual obligation to purchase [7], and "the Commerce Clause does not give Congress that power". But from a functional standpoint, this penalty can be regarded as a tax, in which case Congress has discretion to "lay and collect Taxes" (Taxing Clause). Hence the positive verdict of the Supreme Court. However, the Court believes that "the Medicaid expansion violates the Constitution" because the "threatened loss of over 10 percent of a State's overall budget is economic dragooning that leaves the States with no real option but to acquiesce in the Medicaid expansion".

The Supreme Court decision represents a major victory for President Barack Obama, who had made a reform to ensure more

equal access to the health insurance system one of the spearheads of his 2008 election campaign. His Democratic predecessor in the White House, Bill Clinton, previously had to abandon a similar reform due to fierce opposition from the Republicans and growing divisions among the Democrats. In order to give himself every chance of success, Obama has had to be more strategic in the programming of both the reform and the way it was presented [8]. To do this, he also assembled a team of experienced specialists [9].

The Act represents a real cultural revolution in a country where the health insurance system excludes nearly 50 million people. Besides the individual mandate requiring Americans to purchase health insurance, the ACA's main measures are:

- The creation of “exchanges” for insurance contracts where people can buy health coverage, with a government subsidy that depends on the level of income;
- Expansion of the Medicaid public health insurance program [10] (public coverage for all households with incomes below 133% of the federal poverty level) and financial penalties on states that choose not to implement this expansion (elimination of all federal funding of the Medicaid program);
- A requirement that employers offer health insurance to their employees (application of financial penalties if the obligation is not met, with exceptions for small businesses);
- New regulations on the private insurance market (obligation to offer coverage to all individuals, with no conditions on their health status).

Beginning in 2014, millions of uninsured American households should benefit from the expansion of Medicaid, which the Supreme Court has now ruled unconstitutional – this raises numerous questions [11]. How many States will be tempted not to expand Medicaid? What are the consequences for the poor households [12] who were to benefit from this expansion? Will

they have the means to afford subsidized private insurance [13]? Will they be penalized financially if they do not buy insurance? Will they be encouraged to migrate to States that have adopted the expansion [14]? It is reasonable to expect that few States [15] will boycott the expansion of Medicaid, as the ACA offers them other strong incentives (federal assumption of 100% of the additional cost from 2014 to 2016, then 95% after 2017, and 90% after 2020; loss of some federal funds if no expansion). However, adjustments in the law will likely be useful if policymakers want to avoid excluding those who are too poor to afford subsidized private insurance.

The law will come into force gradually, with the various measures to apply from 2014. According to the latest [report by the Congressional Budget Office](#) (2012), annual government expenditure (expansion of Medicaid and private insurance subsidies) should rise by about \$265 billion per year [16] by 2022 (the estimated total cost between 2012 and 2022 is \$1,762 billion), and the number of uninsured should fall by about 33 million [17]. The reform also provides for an increase in tax revenue (higher compulsory levies and new taxes) and a reduction in federal spending (primarily substitutions between the expanded Medicaid program and the old program). This will result in amply offsetting the cost of the reform. In a previous [report in March 2011](#), the CBO estimated that the total reduction in the deficit over the period 2012-2021 will come to \$210 billion. In the name of hallowed liberties, however, there is still strong opposition to the individual mandate [18], but over time it can be hoped that this mandatory principle will come to be viewed first and foremost as a basic right that protects all citizens.

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[1] For an overview of the health insurance system and the reform, see Christine Riffart and Vincent Touzé, “La réforme du système d’assurance santé américain”, [Lettre de l’OFCE, n°321](#), 21 June 2010. Also see the [Wikipedia article on this](#)

[subject](#).

[2] This legislation reconciles the two laws, the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* and the *Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act*.

[3] “Health Care Reform: Recent Developments”, [The New York Times, June 29](#), 2012.

[4] Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Sonia Sotomayor, along with Chief Judge John G. Roberts.

[5] Clarence Thomas, Anthony Kennedy, Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito.

[6] Floyd Norris, “Justices Allow the Term ‘Tax’ to Embrace ‘Penalty’”, [The New York Times, June 28](#), 2012.

[7] The legal position of the Obama administration has been to argue that the portion of the obligation to purchase insurance tantamount to a tax is the penalty paid by those who do not meet this requirement. This penalty has a regulatory function: it is designed based on the logic of an incentive, and not from the perspective of new tax revenue. Judge Jeffrey Sutton explained that if the government had clearly specified that the obligation to buy insurance was a tax, it would have been easier to justify in terms of its constitutionality. Most tax allowances or tax rebates are positive incentives (tax breaks on the acquisition of cleaner vehicles, for example). The health insurance requirement acts instead as a negative incentive by imposing a penalty / fine on those who decide not to buy insurance. Faced with these alternatives, they will choose in all rationality – according to a Pigouvian perspective – the option that they consider the most profitable or the least costly.

[8] Ezra Klein, “Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and Health-Care Reform”, [The Washington Post, July 26](#), 2009.

[9] Robert Pear, "Obama Health Team Turns to Carrying Out Law", [\*The New York Times\*, April 18](#), 2010.

[10] Medicaid is a public health insurance program for the poorest households (about 35 million beneficiaries). The numerous criteria (income, age, degree of invalidity, state of health, etc.) lead to excluding a non-negligible portion of society's poorest. Hence more than 20 million people living below the federal poverty level do not have access to Medicaid. On the other hand, Medicare, the other public health insurance program, which is only for those aged 65 and over, broadly covers this age group.

[11] Urban Institute-Health Policy Center, "Supreme Court Decision on the Affordable Care Act: What it Means for Medicaid", [\*Policy Briefs\*, June 28](#), 2012.

[12] Genevieve M. Kenney, Lisa Dubay, Stephen Zuckerman and Michael Huntress, "Making the Medicaid Expansion an ACA Option: How Many Low-Income Americans Could Remain Uninsured?", [\*Policy Briefs, Urban Institute – Health Policy Center\*, June 29](#), 2012.

[13] In the absence of an expansion of *Medicaid*, their health insurance spending will be capped at 2% of their income.

[14] This notion of voting with their feet was put forward in an article by Charles M. Tiebout (1956): "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures", *The Journal of Political Economy*, 1956, vol. 64/5, pp. 416-424.

[15] Brett Norman, "Lew: 'Vast majority' of states will expand Medicaid", [\*Politico\*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2012](#).

[16] In 2022, 136 billion dollars will finance public health insurance for 17 million poor people (expansion of Medicaid) and 127 billion dollars will go to subsidies for the purchase of private insurance by 18 million people.

[17] In 2022, the 27 million uninsured remaining will consist of illegal immigrants (ineligible for public and private insurance programs) and those eligible for Medicaid who do not want to take out insurance as well as those ineligible for Medicaid who also do not want insurance.

[18] Susan Stamper Brown, "Time To Clean Up The Obamacare Mess", [\*The Western Center for Journalism\*, June 26, 2012](#).

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# Financing higher education: Should students have to pay?

By [Guillaume Allègre](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

Is it necessary to ensure that a greater portion of the cost of higher education is borne by students in the form of higher tuition fees, which might or might not be coupled with loans? It is often argued that financing higher education through taxes is anti-redistributive. We show in a [working document](#) that from a life cycle perspective proportional taxation is not anti-redistributive.

While raising higher education fees is not on the political agenda in France, it is a subject of intense fighting, not only in Quebec, but also in Spain and Great Britain, where student protests erupted at the end of 2010. Reports in France regularly propose raising tuition fees: recently (2011), in a note by the [Institut de l'Entreprise](#) [in French] on the role of business in financing higher education, Pierre-André



Chiappori proposes “lifting the taboo on tuition fees”. In a [contribution to Terra Nova](#) [in French] published in 2011, Yves Lichtenberger and Alexandre Aïdara propose raising annual university tuition fees by about 1000 euros. Paradoxically, the authors also propose creating a study allowance that could be used anytime in a person’s life. The authors are attempting to deal with two contradictory economic dynamics. On the one hand, a study allowance would help raise the general level of education, a factor in innovation and growth, while simultaneously fighting against social self-selection in higher education:

In countries that have adopted it [the study allowance], disadvantaged social strata may have an opportunity to undertake lengthier studies even though their social origins have predestined them to short-term courses that provide quick entry into salaried employment. This is an important means of raising the general level of education and the qualifications of young people, which is a central concern of this report. (Lichtenberger and Aïdara, [p.82](#))

But on the other hand, education benefits better-off strata, and being free makes it anti-redistributive:

The fact that public higher education is virtually free leads, first, to a transfer of resources (the public cost of education) to young people who are in education the longest. This overwhelmingly means young people from better-off strata. This transfer is reflected ultimately in private returns to the beneficiaries: higher wages and then pensions, which benefit the most highly educated throughout their lives... As things stand, higher education’s free character has no redistributive value and even aggravates inequalities. (Lichtenberger and Aïdara, [p.84](#))

Indeed, even if the anti-redistributive character of free higher education is not the only argument made by advocates of higher tuition, it is one of their main arguments. This argument relies on a static and familialist vision of redistribution. We adopt a life cycle perspective instead.

As highlighted in the second excerpt above, on average the

beneficiaries of education spending enjoy a significant private benefit: they will have higher wages and pensions throughout their lives. Even assuming that tax (on income) is proportional to income (which is not the case: in reality, it is progressive), they will pay much more tax, in absolute terms, than individuals who have completed shorter studies. Above all, tax allows for the financing of education by individuals who actually receive significant private benefits, and in proportion to this benefit. People who suffer discrimination in the labour market or who were oriented towards less profitable sectors and benefit from low returns to education reimburse society a lesser amount through their taxes than those who benefit more. Financing through income tax leads people with higher incomes to contribute even when they have not had a lengthy education. The injustice would therefore lie in the transfer between persons with high incomes who are not highly educated and those who are highly educated. But if education is characterized to a great extent by significant social returns, thanks to its impact on growth ([see Aghion and Cohen](#)), then people with high incomes are actually beneficiaries of spending on education, whether or not they are highly educated themselves (for instance, self-taught entrepreneurs benefit from the availability of skilled labour).

Adopting a life cycle perspective, we show in a [working document](#) that financing spending on non-compulsory education (beyond 16 years) by a proportional tax represents a net transfer from those with higher incomes during their careers to those with lower incomes during their careers. From a life cycle perspective, free non-compulsory education financed by taxes does not benefit individuals with more affluent parents (the transfer from individuals from better-off households to those from poorer households is not significantly different from zero). If individuals from the poorest households react to the increase in tuition fees by reducing their investment in education, even when this is financed by loans, then there can be little doubt that they will be the first victims of

this type of reform. Advocates of tuition increases generally argue for small increases in tuition fees and exemptions based on means-testing the parents. But recent developments in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada show that, once the fees have been introduced, it is difficult to prevent governments that are seeking new funds from increasing the fees and reducing the exemption thresholds.

In higher education, the leading injustice is the lack of access to people from modest backgrounds. The surest way to ensure equity in education is still to fund it through income tax and to reform education so that it is targeted at academic success for all rather than at selection.

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## **A boost for the minimum wage or for income support?**

By [Guillaume Allègre](#)

The government has made a commitment to an exceptional, “reasonable” boost to the French minimum wage, the “SMIC”, and to indexation based on growth, and no longer just on workers’ purchasing power. In [Les Echos](#), Martin Hirsch has argued for strengthening the RSA [the French income support scheme] rather than the SMIC. The point is not to oppose the working poor, the target of the RSA, and low wages: redistribution policies need to attack, not just poverty, but inequality throughout the income chain.

In terms of reducing inequalities, there are several strategies: one strategy aims to reduce inequality in individual earnings; a second aims to reduce inequalities in living standards between households, the level at which people

are presumed to live in solidarity. There are legitimate grounds for both these strategies. The RSA *activité* [the income supplement for the working poor] and the SMIC are thus not substitutable (see also [“le SMIC ou le RSA?”](#) in French). Unlike the RSA, the fight against poverty is not the objective of the SMIC. The SMIC aims “to ensure that employees with the lowest salaries share in the country’s economic development”. A high minimum wage has the effect of reducing inequalities across the bottom of the wage scale, with increases in the minimum wage [impacting up to two times the SMIC](#). Given the increase in unemployment, in precarious jobs and in part-time work, full-time employees on the minimum wage are certainly not the poorest in society, but they are far from well-off. The SMIC reduces the income gap between the working class and the middle class, which is an objective in itself (though some in the middle class may take a dim view of this: by its very nature, reducing inequality isn’t going to satisfy everyone). In particular, it is not the same thing to receive a high salary or to receive a low salary supplemented by targeted social benefits. These benefits do not confer any rights to a pension or to unemployment benefits. In terms of dignity, the minimum wage level is the value that a society places on work. Social benefits targeted at the poorest people put them in a position of being assisted, which has consequences in terms of social representations (individual and collective). As work is performed by individuals, it is not illegitimate to try to reduce inequalities between employees and not only between the employees’ households.

The proposed boost to the RSA is ambiguous, as the term “RSA” designates both the minimum social benefits for the unemployed and the inactive population (the “base” RSA, formerly the RMI and API benefits) and the income supplement for the working poor (RSA *activité*). If the proposal for a boost applies only to the RSA *activité*, it would then be inconsistent with the objective of targeting the most disadvantaged households. If, on the contrary, it concerns the RSA as a whole, which would

be legitimate, then it is necessary to be more explicit and to assume that it will benefit mainly the unemployed and the inactive [1]. In March 2012, there were 1.59 million people receiving just the base RSA, and 689,000 the RSA *activité* (all France), *i.e.* only one-third of RSA recipients received the *activité* component.

The implementation of the RSA *activité* has up to now failed in two ways ("[The failings of the RSA income support scheme](#)"): according to the [final report of the National Evaluation Committee](#), it has had no discernible impact on employment, and poverty reduction has been severely limited because of a major lack of take-up of the *RSA activité* component. We can move quickly over the first point, as there is little emphasis these days on the incentive aspect of the RSA. The main problem of a boost to the *RSA activité* is indeed the lack of take-up: in the report, take-up for the *RSA activité* component alone is estimated at 68% in December 2010 [2]. And this is not a matter of the programme coming on line: between December 2010 and March 2012, the number of *RSA activité* beneficiaries increased only marginally in mainland France, from 446 000 to 447 000. Linking eligibility for the *RSA activité* to both earned income and family expenses and mixing into a single instrument beneficiaries of a social minimum and the working poor, who are sometimes very well integrated into the labour market, poses problems both in terms of improper assessment of eligibility for the provision and stigmatization. This highlights two causes of the lack-of take-up of the *RSA activité*: insufficient awareness of the scheme, on the one hand, and voluntary lack of take-up, on the other: 42% of non-applications who do not exclude themselves from eligibility declare that they did not file a claim because they "get by financially otherwise", and 30% did not file a claim because they did "not want to depend on welfare, to owe something to the state" (p.61). Better information would not be sufficient to solve the problem of lack of take-up. Increasing the minimum wage, on the contrary, has the great advantage of

automatically benefitting those affected without fear of stigmatization, since it involves labour income.

Unlike the RSA, increasing the gross SMIC increases labour costs. However, there are several strategies to raise the minimum wage that would not have a net effect on labour costs: the increase could be offset by a reduction in employers' social contributions. One could also ease employee social security contributions on low wages. But this proposal would probably be censured by the Constitutional Council, which in 2000 knocked down the exemption of the CSG tax on low wages on the grounds that the progressivity of the CSG would then no longer depend on the household's ability to pay [\[3\]](#). Finally, a more extensive reform aimed at merging the CSG tax and the income tax would make it possible to reduce taxes on low wages and thus increase the net minimum wage. The integration of the PPE in-work negative income tax would also make it possible to show the amounts involved directly on the payslip.

The fight against inequality clearly should not stop with inequalities in wages between full-time workers. It is also necessary to attack involuntary part-time work, by enabling the workers concerned to move into full-time work and/or by making part-time work more costly by lowering the rate of general tax relief on employer social contributions.

Basically, there is no reason to want to vary the level of the base RSA relative to the minimum wage. However, since the base RSA is indexed to prices, its level has fallen sharply relative to the minimum wage since the early 1990s (see [Périvier, 2007](#)). It would therefore be legitimate to significantly raise the base RSA (even if this means reducing the rate of accumulation of the RSA *activité* component) and to index it to the minimum wage level. This would definitively solve the question of whether to boost the minimum wage or the RSA.

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[1] Here it can be seen that the “simplification”, which consists of combining two instruments into one, is not facilitating public debate.

[2] This lack of take-up is partially due to the fact that, for some of those who are eligible (about a third), the potential gains are very low or even non-existent due to the deduction of the sums paid under the RSA *activité* from the PPE in-work negative income tax. But the lack of take-up is nevertheless high even when looking at the potential gainers (and not simply all those eligible).

[3] [Decision No. 2000-437 DC dated 19 December 2000](#): “Whereas, while the legislature has the right to change the base of the general social contribution to alleviate the burden on the poorest taxpayers, this is subject to the condition that it does not undermine the existence of conditions of equality between taxpayers; that the provision in question does not take account of the taxpayer’s income other than from an activity or of income of other household members or of dependents within it; that the choice made by the legislature to not take into consideration all the contributory capacities does not create, between the taxpayers concerned, a manifest inequality that violates Article 13 of the Declaration of 1789.”

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## **The middle class: baseless fears or genuine hardship?**

By Louis Chauvel



The term “middle class” is one of those social science concepts that provoke controversy due to its complex definition and dynamics and the political debate it generates. The fact that it is surrounded by sharp controversy should not therefore come as a big surprise. [In a note by the OFCE](#) – where a multifaceted definition of the middle class is proposed [1] – we review several dimensions of the social malaise afflicting this social group, which is often considered to be relatively privileged, in an effort to understand the actual situation.

Two theses are considered here:

– on the one hand, the thesis of the middle class maintaining its former status, the strengthening of the protection its members enjoy and confirmation of their economic ascent [2] – a thesis that makes the “fear of decline” that haunts them a paradox;

– on the other hand, the thesis of an objective increase in social problems that were previously limited to people in lower strata (employees and workers, two social groups whose hourly wages are similar), with the upwards diffusion of the problems through capillary action now less blocked [3].

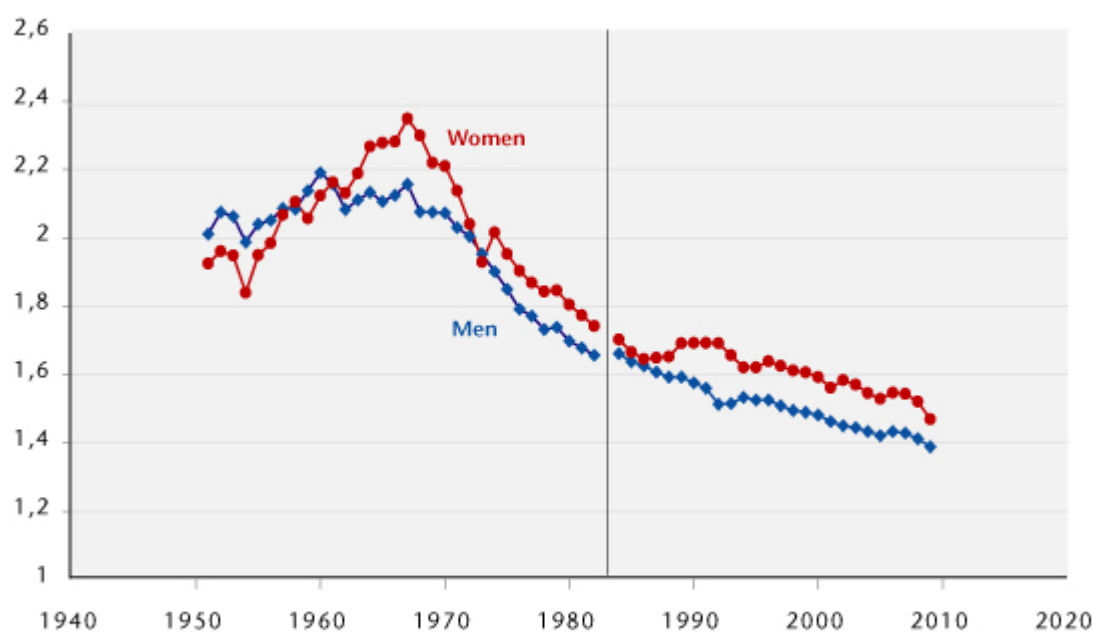
Proponents of the optimistic thesis, that of maintenance, argue that “contrary to popular belief”, the fall in status of the middle class is a “fiction”, as this social group “simultaneously embodies a ‘France holding its own’ and a ‘France that’s rising’” (Goux and Maurin). In this view, fear of decline is a psychological reaction of the middle class with no real cause.

In the Note, which upholds a different view, we review several aspects of this analysis to understand the objective basis for the malaise of the middle class. We show that the increasing difficulties faced by lower strata – for example, the risk of unemployment – are seeping into the intermediate middle classes, who can no longer be said to be protected. This is an



element of the “theory of the lump of sugar at the bottom of the cup of coffee”: while the upper and middle parts of society still seem intact, erosion is continuing through the capillary-like action of the immersed part and, if nothing is done, it threatens inevitable deterioration.

Ratio between the net annual full-time salary of the intermediate professions and that of manual workers (men and women, separately)



Note: An in-depth examination shows that over the last 50 years workers and employees have experienced similar changes in wages.

Source: DADS data, private and semi-public sector.

The relative standard of living of the intermediate middle class peaked in what the French call the “Trente glorieuses”, the three decades of post-war prosperity: since the end of this golden age, stagnant wages and incomes, the reduction of wage differentials with the lower classes holding jobs (see chart), the unprecedented risk of unemployment, the numerical expansion of diplomas to numbers that go well beyond the space available in the intermediary professions, and the consequent devaluation of education, etc., were a number of the problematic issues analyzed in this paper that highlight the existence of a very real malaise. It is thus possible to show that, in terms of diplomas, the intermediate middle class population increasingly consists of a share of potential managers (based on their level of education) who have not actually managed to enter the upper middle class, due to a

lack of sufficient places, and on the other hand survivors of the intensified competition, a reflection of the growing number of people with the same level of education who have fallen into the lower classes.

In this note, we therefore consider the cause of the destabilization of the project of “middle class civilization” (Alexandre Koyré) that had emerged in the context of the growth and modernity that marked the 1960s to 1980. The corresponding social dynamics were not based simply on the numerical expansion of the intermediate middle class, but also on a coherent social and political project that has now become unstable. What are the ways to reconnect with this dynamic? How would it be possible to escape the vicious circle whereby the middle classes disintegrate and we develop policies targeted at those most in need without seeing that they feed the fall of groups that were previously better situated but that haven't been supported? The answer lies in productive investment in sectors with long-term promise. Without coming to terms with the real causes of the malaise of the intermediate middle class and dealing with the root problems, we may be preparing ourselves for a difficult decade.

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[1] The middle class is defined in their plurality as falling into the upper middle classes, comparable to the “executives and intellectual professions” who make up about 10% of households, and the intermediate middle classes, which corresponds to the 20% located immediately below, and thus close to the intermediary professions as defined by the INSEE.

[2] D. Goux and E. Maurin, 2012, *Les nouvelles classes moyennes*, Seuil, Paris. Most of these ideas were already presented in S. Bosc, 2008, *Sociologie des classes moyennes*, La Découverte.

[3] L. Chauvel, 2006, *Les classes moyennes à la dérive*, Seuil, Paris.

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# Towards a major tax reform?

By [Guillaume Allègre](#) and [Mathieu Plane](#) (eds.)

Taxation is more at the heart of the current election campaign and public debate than ever before. The economic and financial crisis, coupled with the goal of rapidly reducing the deficit, is inevitably shaking up the electoral discourse and forcing us to confront the complexity of our tax system. How do taxes interact with each other? What are the effects? How are they measured? What kind of consensual basis and constraints does taxation require? How should the tax burden be distributed among the economic actors? How should social welfare be financed? Should we advocate a “tax revolution” or incremental reform? The contributions to [a special “Tax Reform” issue of the Revue de l’OFCE – Débats et Politiques](#) aim to clarify and enrich this discussion.

The first section of the special issue deals with the requirements and principles of a tax system. In an introductory article, [Jacques Le Cacheux](#) considers the main principles that should underpin any necessary tax reform from the viewpoint of economic theory. In a historical analysis, [Nicolas Delalande](#) emphasizes the role of political resources, institutional constraints and social compromises in drawing up tax policy. [Mathieu Plane](#) considers past trends in taxation from a budgetary framework and analyzes the constraints on public finances today. In response to the problem of imported carbon emissions, [Eloi Laurent and Jacques Le Cacheux](#) propose the implementation of a carbon-added tax.

The second section deals with the issue of how the tax burden

is distributed among households. [Camille Landais, Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez](#) respond to the important article by [Henri Sterdyniak](#) in which he recommends a “tax revolution”. [Clément Schaff and Mahdi Ben Jelloul](#) propose a complete overhaul of family policy. [Guillaume Allègre](#) attempts to shed light on the debate over France’s “family quotient” policy. Finally, [Guillaume Allègre, Mathieu Plane and Xavier Timbeau](#) propose a reform of taxation on wealth.

The third section concerns the financing of social protection. In a sweeping review of the literature, [Mireille Elbaum](#) examines changes in the financing of social protection since the early 1980s, and considers the alternatives that have been proposed and their limits. [Eric Heyer, Mathieu Plane and Xavier Timbeau](#) analyze the impact of the implementation of the “quasi-social VAT” approved by the French Parliament. [Frédéric Gannon and Vincent Touzé](#) present an estimate of the marginal tax rate implicit in the country’s pension system.

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## On the taxation of household income and capital

By [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The idea is very widespread that in France unearned income benefits from an especially low level of taxation and that the French system could be made fairer by simply raising this level. In an [OFCE Note](#), we compare the taxation on capital income with that on labour income, and show that most of it is taxed just as highly. The reforms adopted in 2012 further increase the taxation of capital income. So there is little room for manoeuvre. However, there

are tax loopholes and a few exceptions, the most notable being the current non-taxation of imputed rent (which benefits households that own their own residence).

The table below compares the marginal tax rates for different types of income. The effective economic tax rates (including the “IS” corporate income tax, non-contributory social charges, the CSG wealth tax, social security taxes) are well above the posted rates. The interest, rental income, dividends and capital gains that are taxed are taxed at approximately the same level as the highest salaries. It is therefore wrong to claim that capital income is taxed at reduced rates. When it is actually taxed, this is at high levels.

Economic tax rate

	Economic tax rate 2011	Economic tax rate 2012
Wages	54.4/57.1*	54.4/57.1*
Interests	62.6	79
Property income	56.1	59.0
Implicit rent	10.0	10.0
Dividends	55.0**/57.1***	58.4**/59.2***
Taxed capital gains	62.8	67.5
Untaxed capital gains	34.43	34.43

\* Beyond 4 times the Social Security ceiling. \*\* Withholding tax. \*\*\* Income rate taxation after 40% allowance.

The official tax rate on capital income increased from 29% in 2008 to 31.3% in 2011 due to a 1.1 percentage point increase in payroll taxes to finance the RSA benefit, a 1 point increase in withholding tax and a 0.2 point increase to fund pensions. The government has financed the expansion of social policy by taxing capital income. This rate will increase to 39.5% (for interest) and to 36.5% for dividends on 2012 income.

Should we advocate a radical reform: submission of all capital income to the tax schedule on personal income? This might be justified for the public image (to show clearly that all income is taxed similarly), but not on purely economic grounds.

With respect to interest income, this would mean ignoring the

inflation rate. The 41% bracket would correspond to a levy of 108% on the real income of an investment remunerated at 4% with an inflation rate of 2%. For dividends, one must not forget that the income in question has already paid the "IS" tax; the 41% bracket (by eliminating the 40% allowance) would correspond to a total tax of 70%. We must make a policy choice between two principles: a single economic tax rate for all income (which paradoxically would lead to preserving a special tax on capital income) or higher taxation on capital income, since this goes mostly to the better-off and is not the fruit of effort (which paradoxically would lead to subjecting it to the same tax schedule as labour income, while forgetting the IS tax and inflation).

The problem lies above all in schemes that allow tax avoidance. For many years, the banks and insurance companies managed to convince the public authorities that it was necessary to make income from household financial capital tax exempt. Two arguments were advanced: to prevent the wealthy from moving their capital abroad; and to promote long-term savings and high-risk savings. Exemptions were thus made for PEA funds, PEP funds, and UCITS mutual funds. Governments are gradually pulling back from these exemptions. Two principles should be reaffirmed: first, all capital income should be subject to taxation, and tax evasion should be combated by European agreements on harmonizing tax systems; and second, it is the responsibility of issuers to convince investors of the value of the investments they offer – the State should not fiscally favour any particular type of investment.

There remains the possibility that wealthy families will succeed in avoiding taxes on capital gains through donations to children (alive or upon their death) or by moving abroad before taxation takes place. Thus, a wealthy shareholder can hold his securities in an ad hoc company that receives his dividends and use the company

securities as collateral for loans from the bank, which then provides him the money needed to live. The shareholder thus does not declare this income and then passes on the company securities to his children, meaning that the dividends and capital gains he has received are never subjected to income tax.

The other black hole in the tax system lies in the non-taxation of imputed rent. It is not fair that two families with the same income pay the same tax if one has inherited an apartment while the other must pay rent: their ability to pay is very different.

Two measures thus appear desirable. One is to eliminate all schemes that help people avoid the taxation of capital gains, and in particular to ensure the payment of tax on any unrealized capital gains in the case of transmission by inheritance or donation or when moving abroad. The second would be gradually to introduce a tax on imputed rent, for example by charging CSG / CRDS tax and social security contributions to homeowners.

Having done this, a policy choice would be needed:

– Either to eliminate the ISF wealth tax, as all income from financial and property capital would clearly be taxed at 60%.

– Or to consider that it is normal for large estates to contribute as such to the running costs of society, regardless of the income the estates provide. With this in mind, the ISF tax would be retained, without comparing the amount of the ISF to the income from the estate, since the purpose of the ISF would be precisely to demand a contribution from the assets themselves.

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# Women's Day

On the occasion of 8 March, we would like to remind our readers that, together with Sciences-Po, the OFCE has developed the specialist Research Programme for Teaching and Knowledge on Gender Issues ([PRESAGE](#)).

A number of posts on this blog have taken up the subject of [occupational equality between men and women](#).

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# Competitiveness at the expense of equality?

By [Hélène Périvier](#)

Working time has made its appearance in the presidential campaign, and the idea that people work less in France than elsewhere is gaining ground. This is the subject of a report by [COE-Rexecode](#), which unfortunately does not take into account the sexual division of labour.

The employment policies being implemented by European governments are not, however, gender neutral, and ignoring this gives a distorted view of the reality of how work is divided up in our economies: an integrated approach to equality (or “gender mainstreaming”), which requires thinking about the differential effects of public policies on women and men, is far from automatic.



The counteranalysis to the Coe-Rexecode report proposed by [Eric Heyer and Mathieu Plane](#) emphasises the importance of not just looking at full-time workers when trying to compare working hours and their impact on the labour market dynamics of the major European countries. Indeed, part-time workers represent 26% of all employees in Germany, against 18% in France, so it is misleading to exclude them from the analysis.

It is well known that the distribution of full-time and part-time jobs is gender-biased: throughout Europe, women work part-time more than men do. While in France about 30% of women employees work part-time, the rate is 45% in Germany, and in both countries the part-time rate for men is below 10%. The gendered nature of part-time work is a factor in inequality: recall for example that in France working time explains about half of the wage gap between men and women (see in particular [Ponthieux, Meurs](#)). The issue of working time is central to the promotion of occupational equality.

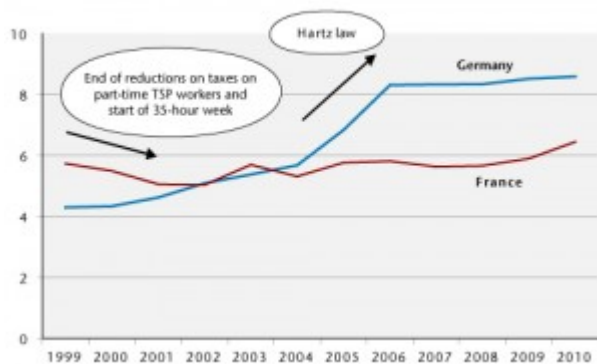
According to the methodological note to the Coe-Rexecode report, “The annual data provided by Eurostat and published by Coe-Rexecode in the paper, “La durée effective du travail en France et en Europe” [“Average effective working time in France and in Europe”] are the only data on average annual hours of work that is comparable between European countries.” It is unfortunate that in its order to Eurostat, Rexecode did not see fit to ask for a gender breakdown of its data. This would have provided a cost-effective way of determining trends in working hours by gender in both countries. Despite this omission, is there anything that can be said about changes in working hours from a gender perspective in the two countries during the last decade, based on the data available to us? How were the adjustments in the labour market divided between women and men?

The changes over the period studied are instructive in terms of the employment policy approaches adopted in the two countries. In the early 2000s, the introduction of the 35-hour

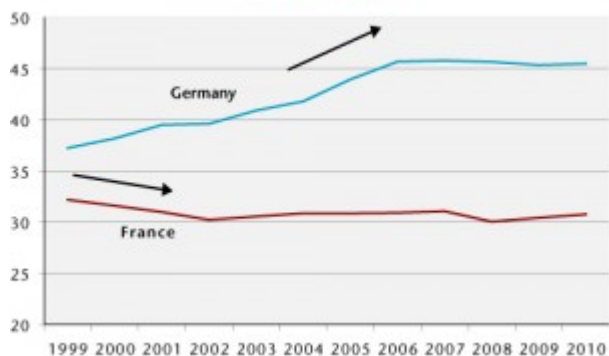
work week in France put an end to the reductions in charges that had made hiring part-time workers attractive and which had been driving the ramp-up of part-time employment in France, without significantly affecting the employment conditions of men. Since then, the rate of part-time employment has been stable for women as well as for men (see figure). In Germany, the implementation of the Hartz law (effective as of April 2003) introduced “mini-jobs” [\[1\]](#), which basically meant the creation of part-time precarious employment. This affected both men and women, but while the part-time rate of German men rose by 4.3 points, the rate of German women rose by 8.2 points (Figure). German women were thus significantly more affected by part-time employment than were German men, or French women. Furthermore, the average working time for part-time jobs was slightly over 4 hours less in Germany than in France (according to the Eurostat data).

French women were of course more affected by the increase in part-time work than were French men, but this increase has been limited, since new part-time jobs accounted for only 21% of the total jobs created between 1999 and 2010. In contrast, in Germany, part-time work has been the driving force in employment during the period, with German women being the main ones concerned by the individual reduction of working time: they represent 70% of the battalion of part-time workers added during this period. Thus, not only did France create more jobs than Germany between 1999 and 2010, but the choice of a collective rather than an individual approach to reducing working time led to a more balanced distribution of employment between men and women.

Change in the rate of part-time work among men aged 15-64 (in %)



Change in the rate of part-time work among women aged 15-64 (in %)



Source : Eurostat [[lfsa\\_eppga](#)]

Share of part-time jobs in the growth of employment between 1999 and 2010 in France and Germany, by sex

	Change in employment	Share of part-time jobs in the growth of employment	Share of female part-time jobs in the growth of employment
Germany	6,1	130	93 (or 70 % of 130 %)
France	12,2	21	15 (or 76 % of 21 %)

Source : Eurostat [lfsa\_eppga].