CULTURE & DEMOGRAPHY
Typical white American diet contributes more to climate change than black, Latinx diets

ECONOMY
No consensus yet exists on the effectiveness of top marginal tax rates

EDUCATION
Study: Liberal arts education can lead to ‘meaningful economic mobility’

EMPLOYMENT
How states’ legislation continues to support employment of the disabled

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT
Forest survey estimates 18 million trees died in CA in 2018

GENERAL GOVERNMENT
Most effective gun control laws target buyers, not guns

TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE
$150 billion of CA’s coastal real estate at risk from rising sea levels

CULTURE & DEMOGRAPHY


“Caucasian populations are disproportionately contributing to climate change through their eating habits, which uses up more food—and emits more greenhouse gases—than the typical diets of black and Latinx communities.… Researchers tracked information from multiple databases to identify foods considered ‘environmentally intense’ by requiring more precious resources such as water, land and energy to produce…. Potatoes, beef, apples and milk are some of the worst offenders.… Data showed that whites produced an average of 680 kilograms of the CO2 each year, attributable to food and drink, whereas Latinx individuals produced 640 kilograms, and blacks 600. They also found the diets of white people required 328,000 liters of water on average per year. Latinx used just 307,000 liters, and blacks 311,800.” (New York Post, Mar. 28, 2019).
“[Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is] not saying that everyone who pays the current top rate should see their taxes raised to 60 or 70%. Rather, a small number of ultra-rich people should pay at that rate. This is obviously a controversial proposition that will strike some as unfair and others as counterproductive to the economy. But it’s pretty much in line with the cutting-edge work of progressive-minded tax economists. MIT’s Peter Diamond and Berkeley’s Emmanuel Saez relaunched this debate with a landmark 2012 paper that argued for a 73% top income tax rate in the United States. This conclusion relies on two subsidiary points. One is the notion that for the very rich, the subjective value of an extra dollar is essentially $0. In other words, while a poor person’s life may get a lot better if he gets a little bit of extra money, someone like Mark Zuckerberg isn’t going to care at all.” (Vox, Jan. 7, 2019).

Seemingly lost in this discussion is that this estimate is based on total taxes, not just the federal income tax. As Stanford economist John Cochrane writes: “Even in Diamond, Saez, et al, 7[3]% is the total tax, not the federal income tax…. In California, where I live, the top rate is at least 42% federal + 13.2% state [income tax + effective sales tax + property taxes, etc.].” Beyond this clarification, a wide range of estimates exist. As Cochrane describes: “Diamond and Saez [estimate of] the optimal top marginal tax rate at 7[3]% … made a big splash precisely because their estimates were so novel and so much higher than the prevailing consensus. For example, Greg Mankiw … writes, ‘A well-known early result of the Mirrlees (1971) model is the optimality of a zero top marginal tax rate.’… [or that] ‘A Flat Tax, with a Universal Lump-Sum Transfer, Could Be Close to Optimal’…. The optimal top tax rate is in fact a highly contentious number, depending on many assumptions, all very hard to measure or even to define.” (The Grumpy Economist, Jan. 6, 2019).

In addition, the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank assessed the Diamond and Saez estimate and found limitations based on the static, short term nature of its assumptions. “This article assesses the consequences of increasing the marginal tax rate on top earners using a human capital model. We highlight three main findings. First, the top of the model Laffer curve occurs at a top tax rate of roughly 53% for either of the two reforms that we analyze. This is well below the 73% top tax rate highlighted by Diamond and Saez (2011). Second, we determine the role that human capital accumulation plays in governing the shape of the model Laffer curve. The model Laffer curve is flatter with a lower top rate compared to the Laffer curve that would hold in a similar model that ignores the possibility of skill change in response to a tax reform. Third, we argue that a simple, elegant formula for the revenue maximizing top tax rate does not hold in our human capital model. Diamond and Saez (2011) use this formula to provide quantitative guidance for setting the top tax rate.”
EDUCATION


“The study makes no claims that liberal arts grads outearn those in, say, engineering. But the report says the claims that a liberal arts degree isn’t worth its cost or will hurt a graduate’s career prospects prove untrue. Specifically, the report says attending a liberal arts college for most students leads to meaningful economic mobility….Throughout the study, the authors draw attention to misconceptions about liberal arts education. They note that, to the extent some liberal arts graduates end up in relatively low-paying careers, this reflects their career interests and market forces, and would likely be the same even if they attended another kind of institution.” (*Inside Higher Ed*, Feb. 15, 2019).

EMPLOYMENT


“For years, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities has remained higher than the rate for those without disabilities…. Despite an overall drop in enacted legislation from 2017, lawmakers across the country continued to affirm their support for employing people with disabilities. Nine states passed legislation addressing getting to work and accessing opportunities in 2018. Transportation remained a key legislative priority for lawmakers, with seven states passing legislation to increase access to transit—a barrier people with disabilities cite as one of the most significant to attaining employment. Connecticut’s HB 5245 established a task force to study the state’s transportation system and identify more efficient options for people with disabilities, along with veterans and senior citizens. Missouri’s HB 2004 appropriated money to improve the state’s public transportation system beyond the ADA’s federal requirements.”

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/catreemortality/toolkit/?cid=FSEPRD609121

“An estimated 18 million trees have died in California wildlands and private property in the past year, many of them victim of recent droughts and bark beetle infestations…. In total, an estimate 147 million trees, many Sierra conifers, have died in California since the start of the state’s drought years in 2010. The death toll comes as the state struggles with an elevated fire risk, some of it fueled by unhealthy forests…. The latest tree death numbers are lower than in previous years, offering a dose of encouragement to state and federal forest officials…. The health effects of drought have hit hardest on the west slope of the southern Sierra Nevada … but the effects also are being felt throughout the range, including at high elevations.” (*Sacramento Bee*, Feb. 11, 2019).

“States that had enacted two types of measures that can limit certain people’s access to firearms during … 1991 to 2016 … had lower gun homicide rates, while policies banning guns themselves appear to have done little to curb the death rates…. Across U.S. states, laws banning gun possession for people who had been convicted of a violent misdemeanor were associated with an 18.1% reduction in gun homicide rates … while universal background checks were linked to a 14.9% decline…. Meanwhile, states with ‘shall issue’ laws … were associated with a 9 percent increase in gun homicide rates. Seven types of gun control laws, including bans on the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, were not significantly linked to either an increase or decrease in gun homicide rates.” (U.S. News & World Report, Mar. 28, 2019).
TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE

Dynamic Flooding Modeling Essential to Assess the Coastal Impacts of Climate Change.
https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-40742-z

“According to new research by the U.S. Geological Survey, about $150B in coastal real estate in California alone is at risk of flooding caused by rising sea levels, in combination with storms, by the end of the 21st century…. In recent months, winter storms eroded Capistrano Beach in Dana Point, California, enough to make a boardwalk collapse, and in Imperial Beach, large waves and high tides sent water flowing past seawalls, flooding roads and garages, the Los Angeles Times reports. The upshot of the USGS report is to expect more of this kind of damage as sea levels rise and storms hit—either the kind of storms that regularly hit California, or stronger storms formed in a warmer ocean.” (Bisnow, Mar. 15, 2019).

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