

# The Tipping System Is Immoral

By [David Brooks](#) Oct. 24, 2019

(You should still generally leave 30 percent.)



Damon Winter/The New York Times

For most of my life I've been glad that America is a society that relies heavily on tipping. First, tipping allows us to reward excellent service. Second, in a world of rising economic inequality, a 30 to 50 percent tip is a small but direct way to redistribute money to those who are working hard to earn a living.

Moreover, tipping nurtures humane relationships. It encourages servers to try to establish social connection through direct eye contact and a display of warmth. Finally, most of the servers I've known like the tipping system. They've believed that by doing their job well they could earn far more than they could through a flat wage. That's certainly what I thought as a bartender.

So over all, I've taken it as good news that tipping culture seems to be spreading to every cashier's counter in the land.

But if you look at the research you find that a lot of it doesn't buttress my priors. In the first place, the amount of a tip is rarely related to the quality of the service. Michael Lynn of Cornell, who is the leading scholar on the subject, finds that the quality of the service has a relatively small effect on tip size.

What matters most is the size of the check. If you want bigger tips, induce your customers to order more. The second thing that matters is the customer. A survey of 40 million Uber trips found that men tip more often than women and people in the middle of the country tip better than people on the coasts. The identity of the customer matters more than the quality of the service.

In short, the meritocratic argument for tipping falls apart. Then there are all the downsides:

Tipping inflames a sexist dynamic. Some men use their tips as leverage to harass female servers. Young blond women are tipped more than older brunettes. Male Uber riders tip female drivers 12 percent more, but only if they are young.

Tipping inflames a racist dynamic. African-American and Latino servers get much smaller tips. In a 2005 study of more than 1,000 tips to taxi drivers in New Haven, black drivers were tipped about a third less than white drivers.

Tipping widens class divisions. Servers who work in upscale restaurants can make good money. Servers who work in diners struggle. The people who work in the front of the restaurant might do well; those who work in the back do not. Many people think the very custom of tipping is a demeaning remnant from the age of aristocracy.

The conclusion from this is that in an ideal world, it would be a good idea to move to the French model: "service compris."

But we live in actual America. In actual America, efforts to eliminate tipping have generally failed. Voters in Maine and Washington, D.C., passed ballot measures to phase out tipping. Both decisions were overturned after protest and confusion. Restaurants that move away from tipping often backtrack.

That's in part because consumers have sticker shock when they see the 20 percent tip cost included in the menu prices. It's also in part because customers like the tipping experience. If restaurants take it away, diners perceive that the service is worse, and the Yelp scores will go down. Such restaurants also have trouble retaining staff members.

So when you're thinking about compensating servers, it's best to start from the assumption that tipping will be around for a while. The smart thing to

ask is, how can we make the best of a bad situation?

Which brings us to the real reason I'm writing this column. It is common these days to think that the way to do political and social change is: Think of the ideal system, then move to that. But the better way to make social change is: Think of the ideal system, then get as close as you can, given the restraints of human nature, and our own situation.

Thomas Sowell's outstanding book "[A Conflict of Visions](#)" explores the virtues of working realistically within constraints, and the evils that ensue when people ignore or try to run roughshod over them. He would say the constrained vision is wiser whether the subject is tipping, expanding health insurance or choosing between capitalism and socialism.

In the unconstrained vision, you ask: What's the solution? In a constrained vision you ask: What's the best set of trade-offs and reforms we can actually achieve?

The constrained vision is wiser. So I'll cheer on those who want to move America to a no-tip system. In the meantime, there are ways we can all make the best of a bad system:

- Tip 20 percent when the meal is over \$25 and 30 percent when it is under.
- Always, always, always leave a tip in a hotel room.
- To combat implicit bias when tipping drivers and others, commit to a percentage for all rides and stick to it.
- Understand that the advantages you enjoy are products of both your individual effort and privileges you didn't earn. Tip accordingly.

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