Americans Support Limits on College Athlete Pay, but Concerns About Coaches' Salaries Weaken Support

Eric Olson, Head of Economic Liberty · Survey experiment, IGC–Ipsos Q4 2026 National Survey[1]

46%
of adults support a total athlete salary cap when given only the facts; just 10% oppose it

–11 pts
drop in support after hearing how coaches face no pay limit

54%
of adults don't follow college sports at all; 49% have heard nothing about the pay debate

THE EXPERIMENT

Under the 2025 *House v. NCAA* settlement, participating Division I universities can pay student-athletes on top of scholarships; however, each school's yearly total is capped (about $20.5 million in 2025–26). Each university's **total salary cap** is like a pro team's payroll cap. The salary cap limits the combined pay of all student-athletes at a university, not what any one student-athlete can earn.

We asked a nationally representative sample of 1,036 adults whether they support the total salary cap for student-athletes. We randomly assigned each respondent to read one of three versions of the question. Since the groups are alike, any difference in their answers reflects the wording itself.

Question 1a: Baseline

As you may or may not know, under the current system, athletes at participating Division I schools can receive direct payments and benefits from their schools in addition to scholarships. Each participating school is subject to a limit on the total amount of payments and benefits it can provide to its athletes each year.

Based on what you have read, to what extent do you support or oppose setting a limit on the total amount of direct payments and benefits each school can provide to its athletes each year?

Question 1b: Coaches Salary

As you may or may not know, under the current system, athletes at participating Division I schools can receive direct payments and benefits from their schools in addition to scholarships. Each participating school is subject to a limit on the total amount of payments and benefits it can provide to its athletes each year.

Opponents of limits on athlete compensation say college athletes should be allowed to receive whatever compensation schools are willing to pay them. They note that there is no comparable limit on how much schools may pay their coaches and argue that athletes should not face compensation restrictions that coaches do not.

Based on what you have read, to what extent do you support or oppose setting a limit on the total amount of direct payments and benefits each school can provide to its athletes each year?

Question 1c

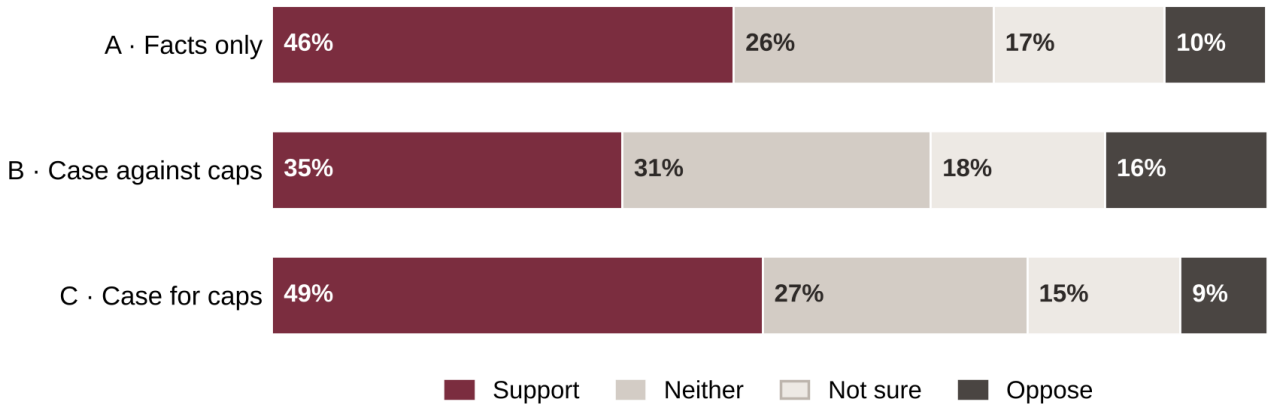
As you may or may not know, under the current system, athletes at participating Division I schools can receive direct payments and benefits from their schools in addition to scholarships. Each participating school is subject to a limit on the total amount of payments and benefits it can provide to its athletes each year.

Supporters of limits on athlete compensation say they help prevent the wealthiest schools from outspending other schools for the best athletes and help preserve funding for women's sports and other college sports that generate less revenue.

Based on what you have read, to what extent do you support or oppose setting a limit on the total amount of direct payments and benefits each school can provide to its athletes each year?

[1]Claude (Anthropic's AI assistant) helped analyze the survey data and summarize the findings in this brief. The author computed all estimates from the respondent-level Ipsos data file and reviewed them.

SUPPORT FOR A TOTAL ATHLETE SALARY CAP, BY VERSION READ



Weighted shares of all adults who saw each version.

WHAT WE FOUND

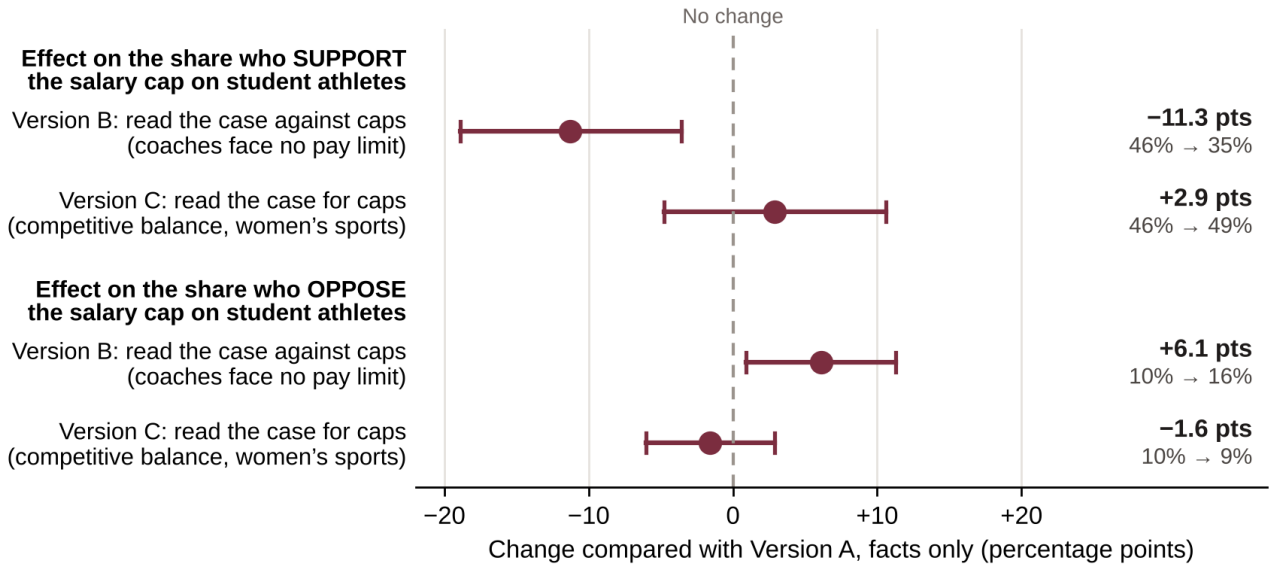
1. Support is broad. With only the facts, 46% of all adults support the total salary cap, and just 10% oppose it.

2. Support for the cap is soft. In every group, more than four in ten are neutral or unsure, and about half of Americans don't follow college sports. Much of the support likely reflects acceptance of the current system.

3. The coach comparison works. Hearing how coaches face no pay limit lowers support for the student salary cap by 11 points (p = .004). Most who change their opinion become undecided, not opposed to the salary cap itself.

HOW MUCH EACH ARGUMENT MOVED OPINION

Each dot shows how much a version changed the share who support or oppose the salary cap on student-athletes, compared with Version A (facts only). Lines show 95% confidence intervals; a line crossing zero is not statistically significant.



WHAT IT MEANS

Public backing for a total student-athlete salary cap is real but fragile. Defenders of the salary cap, whether the NCAA, conferences, or Congress, start with a favorable majority. Opponents have a simple fairness argument capable of shifting public opinion. In a debate few Americans follow closely, support is easier to lose than to build.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Ipsos KnowledgePanel, a probability-based online panel of U.S. adults; national sample n = 1,036, weighted to Census benchmarks. Respondents were randomly assigned to version A (n = 348), B (n = 332), or C (n = 350). Effects are differences in weighted shares with robust standard errors.

All versions: "As you may or may not know, under the current system, athletes at participating Division I schools can receive direct payments and benefits from their schools in addition to scholarships. Each participating school is subject to a limit on the total amount of these payments and benefits it can provide to its athletes each year."

B adds: "Opponents of limits on athlete compensation say college athletes should be allowed to receive whatever compensation schools are willing to pay them. They note that there is no comparable limit on how much schools may pay their coaches and argue that athletes should not face compensation restrictions that coaches do not."

C adds: "Supporters of limits on athlete compensation say they help prevent the wealthiest schools from outspending other schools for the best athletes and help preserve funding for women's sports and other college sports that generate less revenue."

Question: "Based on what you have read, to what extent do you support or oppose setting a limit on the total amount of direct payments and benefits each school can provide to its athletes each year?"