Public Opinion on Welfare:
An Analysis of Survey Data

Filip Lazarevic

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Andrew Ziegler
Department of Government Studies

I. Introduction

Welfare has a controversial past in the United States, enjoying the limelight of public debate most intensely since the Great Depression. The problem of welfare legislation is created by the opposing vantage points on the issue. The main arguments for the increase of welfare programs usually focus on the idea of equality in the sense that all people are thought entitled to have a certain level of care provided to them if they are poor, disabled, or otherwise unable to care for themselves. Some authors point out that, in the U.S., public opinion on the welfare system is that it is not efficient enough to accomplish this goal, citing the millions who found themselves in dire straits after the Great Recession of 2007 (Anderson 1979; Hacker 2002). On the other end of the spectrum, arguments exist that an under-regulated or overly generous welfare system is prone to abuse, causing people to stay dependent on the welfare rather than encouraging them to work (Anderson 1979; Gilens 1999). This theory of welfare dependence claims that too much welfare is bad for the economy of the state in two ways: Directly impacting the economy, welfare costs public money insofar as the beneficiaries of such programs are directly dependent on public money. Less directly, the beneficiaries are seen as potentially inactive parts of society, therefore as using public money but not contributing to the wellbeing of the state; in this view, welfare programs encourage such inactivity by eliminating the need for useful work.

These arguments can be understood as having two aspects, one focusing on the socio-economic dimensions, often connected to the social standing, gender, and racial issues in the debate, and the other addressing the political angle, which looks at partisanship and ideology and how they shape public opinions on the issue. All aspects of the issue, however, have a cultural component centered on a belief in individualism as one of the main components in U.S. culture (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001).

In regards to individualism as an overarching component in the debate, public opinion on welfare is globally divided between the egalitarian and the humanitarian

viewpoints. The first argues that the governmental obligation is to provide a minimum of equality for all its citizens, while the second stresses the importance of the individual's inherent equality of opportunity in an economically liberal and limited government environment, and therefore bases welfare more on individual donations and similar help to the endangered groups of society.

In this paper, an examination of these ideas as well as public opinion surveys on welfare and related issues will attempt to identify the factors that account for the difference in people's level of support for government programs to help low income people economically.

Socio-Economic Influences

The idea that public opinion is critical of welfare—as being too generous to those who do not deserve these benefits—is represented by a large portion of the academics writing on the issue (Anderson 1979; Iversen 2005; Gilens 1999). Martin Gilens maintains that the biggest reasons given for this public opinion are certain misconceptions about welfare recipients' ability to work and their race, and media misrepresentation. The United States public, according to Gilens's book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, is fully supportive of welfare but is disillusioned by its application. For example, he argues that there is a strong racial bias shaping welfare opinion, African-Americans being stereotyped as less interested in work and more interested in living on the benefits of the welfare state. This notion is exaggerated by the media, with its excessive representation of crime, poverty, and welfare abuse in the African-American population at rates higher than found in reality, which presents a more equal distribution of these issues among the races. Therefore, he argues, many scholars represent the white population's public opinion as seemingly negative on expansion of the welfare programs that are believed to benefit financially the black population. However, he goes on to argue that this is not an accurate depiction of public opinion, and that the U.S. public is still overwhelmingly supportive of welfare programs that enable income generation rather than give direct help to recipients, even if these are closely associated with the black population, as in the case of Head Start and job training (Gilens 1999, 67-72).

The racial discrimination in public opinion on welfare and the notion that welfare recipients are undeserving are echoed and augmented by Reingold and Smith (2012). These authors claim that race, but also gender, stereotypes have created a "controlling image" of the welfare recipient as one "who promiscuously gives birth to multiple children in order to receive more benefits and avoid working[, an image] that has come to symbolize the typical recipient and all that is wrong with American welfare policy"(Reingold and Smith 2012, 135). These researchers echo the sentiments of other scholars who agree that ignorance and ill-informed stereotypes are important parts of the discussion of public opinion about welfare (Reingold and Smith 2012).

Political Influences

The political shaping of public opinion is another controversial issue. For example, the Bush Administration openly promoted a policy of creating a selective welfare system that would encourage or "discipline" (Fitzgerald 2004) the welfare

recipient to keep the traditional family structure. The Bush Administration declared the following:

> Although our policy must and does continue to support single-parent families, national policy must do a better job of promoting healthy marriages. Rather, it is simply wise and prudent to reorient our policies to encourage marriage, especially when children are involved. For this reason, the Administration plans to commit up to $300 million per year for states to design and implement programs that reduce nonmarital births and increase the percentage of children in married-couple families. (White House press release 2002)

This policy is seen by some scholars as discriminatory, as it may mean less support for single parents and preferential treatment for marriage, which some believe is not "a sure way out of poverty" (Fitzgerald 2004).

Martin Anderson, conservative economist and fellow at the Hoover Institution, claimed in his 1979 book *Welfare* that public opinion in the United States was positive for programs that help those who cannot help themselves but also overwhelmingly opposed to welfare programs in general, as many recipients were seen as "cheating" (Anderson 1979, 59). He went on to assert that "[t]here is, in effect, a 'poverty wall' that destroys the financial incentive to work for millions of Americans. Free from basic wants, but heavily dependent on the State, with little hope of breaking free, they are a new caste, the 'Dependent Americans'" (Anderson 1979, 43). Anderson concluded that the public was concerned with the issue of welfare being misused by recipients, and that this view was consistent with the idea of American individualism. Following these lines, Shapiro and Young argued that the public was most favorable to welfare in those areas which were most closely related to individual success, or in their words, "equality of opportunity, as opposed to equality of outcomes for individuals" (Shapiro and Young 1989).

The preference of many administrations to create a welfare regime based on the principle of equality of opportunity has led to a hybrid system that supplements a limited system of public welfare with an extensive system of regulations to encourage the private sector to contribute. This hybrid machine has followed a pattern of development in almost all aspects of welfare. Yet the problem dogging this development has been that the government regulation is followed by "attempts at evasion and then tighter regulations and then litigation and then more regulations" (Hacker 2002, 281).

These patterns are seen as the major shortcoming of the humanitarian system, which is troubled by, on one hand, the evasiveness of the private sector in utilizing the subsidies as originally intended and, on the other hand, the inability of the public sector to respond appropriately in preventing misuse of funds (Hacker 2002).

II. Methodology

The purpose of this section is to operationally define variables that will explore the causal effects between independent variables and the dependent variables, and to provide hypotheses that will direct this process. In doing so, the paper will answer the research question. Two main dependent variables will be observed, in order to be able to compare and contrast them in the analytical sections of the paper. These variables will be further explored below. All the data in this study were collected in 2008 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and are represented in the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a survey used to collect sociology data on demographics and attitudes of United States residents. The GSS contains 3559 individual cases (respondents).

Concepts and Variables

In order to operationally define the dependent variables, the paper will use the variables 68) WELFARE $ for welfare spending and 86) EQUALIZE $ for equalizing income. The variable 68) WELFARE $ is an ordinal variable that is made up of three sets of responses to the question whether the government spends "too much," "right amount," or "too little" money on welfare. This variable was chosen as it directly expresses the respondent's opinion on government spending (and therefore tax money spending) on welfare programs. Variable 86) EQUALIZE $ is also an ordinal variable. The GSS asked participants to choose the answer that best fits their opinion, where the possible answers were the following: government should concern itself with income inequality; moderate; and government should not be concerned with income inequality. This variable shows public opinion on government involvement in helping people economically by lowering the rich-poor divide.

The independent variables that could possibly indicate influences on public opinion on welfare are ideology, party affiliation, and income per family. These variables will be divided into two categories, political and economic. Here is an overview of the variables with conceptual definitions and descriptions of each.

Political Variables:
1. 57) POL VIEW — asks if the respondent is a (1) liberal, (2) moderate, or (3) conservative, effectively asking for the ideology of the respondent. This is an ordinal variable.
2. 56) PARTY — asks respondents if they generally think of themselves as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or something else. The results are presented in three categories: (1) Democrat, (2) Independent, and (3) Republican. This variable is ordinal.

Economic Variable:
50) INCOME — asks respondents for their family's income, described as (1) Low, (2) Middle, or (3) High. It is an ordinal variable. This variable will show the correlation between self-perceived family income (economic status) and the opinion on welfare.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses on the welfare spending dependent variable.

        Hypothesis 1: Liberals tend to have greater support for more spending on welfare programs than conservatives.

        Ideology is an important element in public opinion on welfare spending, as it directly relates to public opinion on equity and social programs in general. The underlying hypothesis is based on the premise that respondents with a more liberal viewpoint have greater support for social programs and therefore have more support for welfare, which is a subset of social programs. As both variables are ordinal, the Measure of Association (MoA) that will be used is Gamma.

        Hypothesis 2: Democrats tend to have greater support for increased spending on welfare than Republicans.

        Party affiliation has traditionally been correlated to welfare support, with Democrats having a tendency to favor welfare support more than Republicans. These two parties have used welfare as an election issue throughout their history, with fairly consistent positions of Democratic support and Republican opposition. Testing this hypothesis will show how relevant and how strong these relationships are. Both variables are ordinal, and Gamma will be used as the MoA.

        Hypothesis 3: Low income respondents will tend to have the opinion that the government does too little spending on welfare programs, unlike middle income and high income respondents.

        The traditional recipients of welfare are those in the low income categories and, to a lesser degree, those in the middle income category. This means that respondents with low income will tend to support higher spending as that will directly benefit them. Both variables are ordinal, and Gamma will be used as the MoA.

Hypotheses on the income inequality dependent variable.

        Hypothesis 4: Liberals tend to have greater support for a more equal income distribution than conservatives.

        This hypothesis is based on the premise that liberals tend to have a more egalitarian view, supporting government intervention in lowering the difference in income. The MoA is Gamma.

        Hypothesis 5: Democrats tend to have greater support for a more equal income distribution than Republicans.

        Similar to hypothesis 2, hypothesis 5 is based on the premise that Democrats support income equality more than Republicans do. The MoA is Gamma.

        Hypothesis 6: Low income respondents will tend to support a more equal income distribution, unlike middle income and high income respondents.

        The low income respondents are more likely to support a more equalized income distribution because they would directly benefit from it and because they are more likely to see the problem of limited upward mobility due to the inherent limitations of those without sufficient income to get educated. The MoA will be Gamma.

Research Method

As mentioned above, this research will be using the General Social Survey data file from the software included with the book *Research Methods in Political Science*, 8th edition (Le Roy 2013). This file contains 424 variables (with 3559 cases/respondents) from which the secondary analysis will be performed, in a quantitative manner. This research will be an aggregate data analysis.

Cross-tabulation will be used to plot the data, with the columns representing the independent variables and the rows representing the dependent variables. The main two views that will be utilized in representing the cross-tabulation data are the column percentage view and the statistical view.

A test for statistical significance will be performed. This test will show whether the sample that was observed is actually representative of the entire population and therefore whether the results are statistically significant enough to be used to analyze the pattern. The software uses the abbreviation 'prob' for the test for statistical significance, and we will use a cut-off value of 0.05, which means that there is a 5% chance that the pattern is random. This means that we will consider all correlation with a statistical significance between 0.00 and 0.05 to be statistically significant and all correlation outside these parameters as not statistically significant.

After the determination that a correlation is statistically significant, a measure of association will be performed to determine the strength of this correlation. As both dependent variables are ordinal, the independent variable determines the measure of association used. Gamma will be used in every case because all the independent variables are ordinal. The Gamma measure has a range from 0 to 1 (with three decimal places in the value). The strength of the relationship between the variables for the Gamma measure of association will be determined by the guideline provided by the Le Roy (2013, 196) textbook:

Value of measure of association	Strength of relationship
Under .1	Very weak
.10 to .19	Weak
.20 to .29	Moderate
.30 or above	Strong

The methodology section provides a general framework on how the research will be conducted, an overview of hypotheses, and a description of the main statistical tool that will be utilized. The next section, Findings and Analysis, will utilize the methods described above to present the results of the research.

III. Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this section is to present the findings and analyze these findings based on the hypotheses from the previous section. The findings will be presented in Tables 1-6. The tables are divided in two sections according to the dependent variable they represent, with section A dedicated to welfare spending and section B reserved for income equalization. These tables will show whether the hypotheses were supported or not. This section will give an analysis of the findings after each individual finding and explore some implications of these findings, and hence help answer the research question: "What accounts for the difference in people's level of support for government programs to help people economically?"

A1: Political Views by Opinion on Welfare Spending

The first hypothesis states that "[l]iberals tend to have greater support for more spending on welfare programs than conservatives." Table 1 shows the results for cross-tabulation of political views by opinion on welfare spending. Across the top, designated POLITICAL VIEW, is the category of political views held by the respondents, classified in three subcategories: liberal (LIB), moderate (MOD), and conservative (CONS). As in the next two tables, the row category is that of opinion on welfare spending, with self-explanatory subcategories of responses that the government spends too little, the right amount, and too much on welfare.

Table 1: Political Views by Opinion on Welfare Spending

		POLITICAL VIEW				
		LIB	MOD	CONS		TOTAL
WELFARE $	TOO LITTLE	34% (165)	21% (131)	18% (98)		24% (394)
	RIGHT	43% (207)	40% (257)	33% (178)		38% (624)
	TOO MUCH	23% (113)	39% (252)	49% (259)		38% (624)
	TOTAL	100% (485)	100% (640)	100% 535		1659
P = 0.00 Gamma = 0.28						

Looking at the lowest row, we can see that P=0.00, meaning that there is 0% chance that the data in the table is random. We can thus regard the data in the table as being reliable—statistically significant—and we can move on to analyze it.

The second piece of data in this row is the measure of association, Gamma = 0.28. Referring to the book *Research Methods in Political Science* (Le Roy 2013), we can see that the measure of association is moderately strong in this case. (See Le Roy 2013, page 10, for a table on how to interpret the data.) Therefore, we can go on to look at the table itself and see if the hypothesis is supported.

In the case of this dependent variable, the subcategory TOO LITTLE is the one that represents support for more welfare spending, as it means that the respondent believes that the government is spending too little money on welfare programs. If we look across the TOO LITTLE row, we see that 34% of liberals, 21% of moderates, and 18% of conservatives support increased welfare spending. We can conclude that those who would self-report as being liberals would also support welfare programs.

It has to be noted that the respondents who report themselves to be liberals are more willing to respond that the spending is at the right amount than do conservatives. We see that most liberals (43%) claim that the spending is right. On the other hand, we see that conservatives adhere to a pattern with most (49%) standing against more spending on welfare. The differences in the "strength" of support or opposition show that the conservative respondents adhere closer to their pattern than liberal respondents adhere to the liberal pattern. This can mean that the issue of cutting welfare spending is more important to persons who are in favor of it than increasing welfare is to persons that support increased welfare spending—in other words, liberals tend to have a lukewarm support for welfare, while conservatives have strong outright opposition, a finding that has to be further compared to other data.

A2: Party Affiliation by Opinion on Welfare Spending

The second hypothesis states that "Democrats tend to have greater support for increased spending on welfare than Republicans." Table 2 shows the results of cross-tabulation of party affiliation by welfare spending. The rows show opinion on welfare spending while the columns represent party affiliation: Democrats (DEM), independents (IND), and Republicans (REP).

With a P value of 0.00, the statistical significance of this test can be affirmed. The measure of association, the Gamma value, is 0.315, meaning that there is a strong relationship between the variables. As the statistical data points to a relevant data set, we can proceed to analyze the data.

Table 2: Party Affiliation by Opinion on Welfare Spending

		PARTY				
		DEM	IND	REP		TOTAL
WELFARE $	TOO LITTLE	31% (258)	23% (60)	14% (82)		24% (400)
	RIGHT	40% (338)	40% (103)	36% (207)		39% (647)
	TOO MUCH	29% (240)	37% (94)	50% (290)		37% (624)
	TOTAL	100% (836)	100% (256)	100% (579)		100% 1672
P = 0.00 Gamma = 0.315						

With 31% of respondents who identify themselves as Democrats supporting an increase in welfare spending and only 14% of Republicans supporting the same, the hypothesis is supported. Therefore, we can conclude that those who self-identify as Democrats support welfare more than those who self-identify as Republicans. It is possible to stipulate that this pattern is consistent with not just the historic patterns of people according to their party affiliation, but also the historic patterns of action by the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, with the former traditionally supporting increases in welfare spending and the latter opposing.

Interestingly, a similar pattern can be seen as before in regard to the distribution of the support versus opposition. Most of the respondents affiliating with the Democrats fall in the middle category on the welfare support category (RIGHT). This category accounts for some 40% of Democratic respondents while 31% of Democrats answered TOO LITTLE and 29% responded TOO MUCH. With only 2% more supporting increased welfare spending than opposing to such spending, the strength of the hypothesis, despite the statistical values, is questionable. However, the opposition of those identifying as Republicans is far more evident, with 50% of the respondents falling into the category of TOO MUCH and only 14% falling in the supportive TOO LITTLE category. Again, the same pattern emerges as in the results of A1, with Democrats exhibiting high variability and therefore only lukewarm support, while Republicans show low variability, and therefore strong opposition.

There were 836 respondents who identified themselves as Democrats and 579 who identified as Republicans. Yet, despite the Democratic strength in numbers, because of this difference in variability only a total of 340 respondents (if we disregard the category INDEPENDENT) supported increased welfare spending while 530 respondents opposed current welfare spending.

The previous two independent variables can be seen as related, therefore it is necessary to look at some others, and see if the pattern thus far identified will be seen again.

A3: Income Category by Opinion on Welfare Spending

The third hypothesis is that "[l]ow income respondents will tend to have the opinion that the government does too little spending on welfare programs, unlike middle income and high income respondents." Table 3 shows the results of the cross-tabulation of income categories by opinion on welfare. Here, the column category represents self-reports of respondents on their income, where they had to choose between low, medium, and high.

As in previous examples, the statistical significance value is 0.00, meaning that the data is statistically significant. The measure of association is 0.173, which is considered a weak correlation. An analysis of the table will have to be made, to establish the viability of the hypothesis.

Looking at the table, we can see a general trend across the rows, with 34% of low income respondents supporting welfare spending and only 21% of high income respondents supporting more spending on welfare. Only 28% of low income and 42% high income respondents ask for less welfare. This is an interesting trend, as it weakly supports the hypothesis, but it also shows a familiar trend of a spike in the RIGHT

category, 39% by the overall most supportive group, in this case the low income group. Taking all the data into consideration, this hypothesis is weakly supported by the evidence.

Table 3: Income Category by Opinion on Welfare Spending

		INCOME				
		LOW	MIDDLE	HIGH		TOTAL
WELFARE $	TOO LITTLE	34% (118)	23% (106)	21% (177)		24% (400)
	RIGHT	39% (135)	39% (176)	37% (312)		38% (623)
	TOO MUCH	28% (97)	39% (176)	42% (357)		38% (630)
	TOTAL	100% (350)	100% (458)	100% (846)		1654
P = 0.00 Gamma = 0.173						

These results might be explained by the fact that almost all recipients of welfare are found in the lower income categories. This would mean that those who see themselves as low income are also those who are on some sort of welfare program. The reason for the weak relationship in this hypothesis could be the relatively low support by the middle income category. By implication, many of the respondents from this category may not be recipients of welfare, hence skewing the results. Another explanation could be that party affiliation and ideology go across income levels, making the results based on income levels somewhat ambiguous.

B1: Political Views by Income Redistribution

The fourth hypothesis states that "[l]iberals tend to have greater support for a more equal income distribution than conservatives." Table 4 shows results for cross-tabulation of the independent and dependent variables. The independent variable is political views, as defined in the categories of Liberal (LIB), Moderate (MOD), and Conservative (CONS). The dependent variable is the opinion on government involvement in income redistribution: the respondents are asked how much they believe the government should intervene in income inequality. The answers are set into three subcategories, coded as SHOULD (i.e., should intervene in income redistribution), MODERATE, and SHOULD NOT.

The test for statistical significance (P) value is 0.00, meaning that there is a 0% chance of the data being random. The measure of association value is represented by Gamma, and it is 0.355, meaning that the relationship is strong.

Looking at the data in the table, it is evident that there is a strongly contrasting relationship across the rows, with liberals supporting income redistribution at 64% while conservatives support it at only 36%. Amongst the liberals, only 19% stated that they do

not support income redistribution, while 48% of conservatives do not support income redistribution.

Table 4: Political Views by Income Redistribution

		POLITICAL VIEW				
		LIB	MOD	CONS		TOTAL
EQUALIZE $	SHOULD	64% (395)	51% (447)	36% (274)		50% (1117)
	MODERATE	17% (104)	23% (201)	17% (127)		19% (432)
	SHOULD NOT	19% (115)	26% (229)	48% (365)		31% (709)
	TOTAL	100% (615)	100% (877)	100% (766)		2258
P = 0.00 Gamma = 0.355						

It is interesting to see that, overall, most participants (50%) support government involvement in income redistribution while 31% do not. This overall support for income redistribution is fairly different than attitudes seen in the first hypothesis, concerning welfare spending.

We can conclude that liberals do in fact support income redistribution more than conservatives, affirming the hypothesis.

B2: Party Affiliation by Income Redistribution

The fifth hypothesis states that "Democrats tend to have greater support for a more equal income distribution than Republicans." Table 5 shows the results of cross-tabulation of party affiliation and income redistribution.

The P value is 0.00, meaning the data is statistically significant, with 0% chance of data being random. The value of Gamma is 0.477, indicating a strong relationship between the variables.

With 64% of Democrats supporting income redistribution and 30% Republicans supporting income redistribution, and the reverse pattern in the SHOULD NOT row, we can see that the hypothesis is supported. Interestingly, again we can see that the overall population supporting income redistribution is at 50%, while the opposing population is 31%. This is in contrast to the results of the cross-tabulation for the second hypothesis.

Unlike in the first two hypotheses' results, in hypotheses 4 and 5 we see that the variation in the data is reversed. In the case of hypothesis 5, the supporting population scores higher in its support, with 64% positive responses, than the opposing population in its opposition, scoring 52% negative responses. This can only mean that the respondents who identify as Democrats are more cohesive in support of income

Table 5: Party Affiliation by Income Redistribution

		PARTY				
		DEM	IND	REP		TOTAL
EQUALIZE $	SHOULD	64% (722)	50% (180)	30% (234)		50% (1136)
	MODERATE	19% (211)	24% (87)	19% (149)		20% (447)
	SHOULD NOT	18% (203)	25% (90)	52% (412)		31% (704)
	TOTAL	100% (1136)	100% (356)	100% (795)		2287
P = 0.00 Gamma = 0.477						

redistribution than those who consider themselves Republicans are in opposing redistribution.

B3: Income Categories by Income Redistribution

The sixth hypothesis states that "[l]ow income respondents will tend to support a more equal income distribution, unlike middle income and high income respondents." Table 6 shows the results of cross-tabulation of income categories by income redistribution.

Table 6: Income Categories by Income Redistribution

		INCOME				
		LOW	MIDDLE	HIGH		TOTAL
EQUALIZE $	SHOULD	58% (281)	52% (336)	45% (485)		50% (1103)
	MODERATE	22% (107)	21% (134)	17% (189)		19% (429)
	SHOULD NOT	20% (100)	28% (182)	38% (415)		31% (697)
	TOTAL	100% (488)	100% (652)	100% (1090)		2230
P = 0.00 Gamma = 0.197						

The value of P is 0.00, meaning that there is a strong statistical significance. The measure of association is Gamma, and it has the value of 0.197. This is identified as a

weak/moderate association due to the proximity between the values set for the interpretation of the values, as set forth previously in the text.

We can see that the low income category supports income redistribution by 58%, while the high income category supports it by only 45%. There is an inverse pattern for those who do not support income redistribution, with 38% of high income respondents and only 20% of low income respondents siding against redistribution. The middle income respondents were moderate in their choices as well, with 52% being in support and 28% opposing government intervention to promote income redistribution. This data is in line with the hypothesis as it does support the claim that low income respondents support income redistribution more than do high income respondents.

Interestingly, the response MODERATE for the income redistribution variable scored the least with only 19% of the population choosing this answer. It would seem that the public is very divided on this issue, with most respondents either being for or against government intervention for income redistribution. It also has to be noted that the overall results show a largely supportive public opinion on income redistribution.

Discussion

Overall, the strongest indicator of welfare support is party affiliation. It is followed by a moderate indicator, political views, and then by a weak indicator, income. Across the independent variables, welfare spending garners relatively low support by all of the respondents, with the highest support coming from liberals, at 34% support. Republicans and conservatives seem most opposed to welfare spending, at approximately 50% disapproval. An interesting pattern suggests that, when it comes to welfare, the opposition categories have usually smaller deviations, while the supporting groups often have a greater variability, as demonstrated in the case of party affiliation, where 31% of all Democrats support increased welfare spending while 29% want to see current spending levels reduced.

The highest support for an increase in welfare spending is found among liberals and Democrats, with only moderate support in the low income category.

In the case of income redistribution, some interesting patterns emerged. Both party affiliation and political views seem to score higher with the measure of association, showing a strong relationship between the variables. Income follows, having weak/medium strength of correlation. The most interesting pattern is that there is overall more *support* for this dependent variable, with the supporting groups being more coherent, that is, showing a smaller deviation in opinion, while the opposite can be said for the *opposition* to income redistribution.

The difference in the overall patterns for the two dependent variables could be explained by the proposition that welfare still has a negative connotation in the U.S., being associated in people's thinking with laziness, inefficiency, and socialism. The other explanation is that the question for welfare support involves the phrase "government spending," which may evoke the fears of a growing external debt and a call for reducing government spending, while the income redistribution question does not mention any government spending. These results are important to future data collection, which should try to control for words like "government spending" or even "welfare" itself, as

these might contribute to skewed results. The wording is also important to policy makers when gathering support for welfare-related policies.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this research paper is to examine different factors that influence the public's opinions on welfare spending and income redistribution. Welfare is an important part of any government, as it represents the safety net for those who need it the most, the victims of poverty. According to the support or opposition of the public, these policies change in their scope and nature to correspond more closely to those opinions. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to research these opinions in order to understand them better, and this is true not only for academic society but also for the political elites.

This research paper has looked at a wide variety of factors and found that political ideology, party affiliation, and income are important in shaping opinion on both welfare spending and income redistribution. In both cases, liberals, Democrats, and low income respondents are most likely to support the increase of such programs. It also has to be noted that in the second case, that of income redistribution, the support was higher overall.

Some explanation is needed for the fact that the results of this study, as mentioned above, show a higher overall support for income redistribution than for welfare spending. As suggested by some literature, this is most likely due to the negative overall view of the word *welfare* rather than the concept. As already suggested in the analysis section, this is probably due to the association of the word *welfare* with socialism, inefficiency, and laziness.

The strongest factors affecting opinions on welfare spending are the political factors of ideology and party affiliation. Income level has a weak relationship with welfare opinion.

Compared to qualitative data presented in the introduction section of the paper, the results indicate that public opinion is still strongly shaped by the subjective ideas of what *welfare* and *income redistribution* mean to the cultural collective mind in the U.S. An emphasis on individualism and by extension on humanitarianism, as opposed to egalitarianism, is supported by the evidence presented here and is much in line with the arguments of other authors. Yet it seems that a number of authors, among them Feldman and Steenbergen 2001, Hacker 2002, and Shapiro and Young 1989, argue that individualism and individual humanitarianism are universally valued, that is, that the U.S. culture is *a priori* more supportive of individual success and individual social responsibility to help those in need over government provided support. But this analysis of the GSS data does not support the latter position. The large difference in the weak public support for the variable of welfare spending compared to the vigorous support for income redistribution demonstrates that semantics play a stronger role than the cultural norms. One logical explanation for this phenomenon is that the long-lasting political debate over welfare has created an overall revulsion of the public to the term, while the concept itself (when presented in different terms, such as equalization of income) has a level of attractiveness.

This would mean, by extension, that there is no *a priori* preference of the public for policies regarding government support to help people economically. The operational preferences—what answers people circle in a survey—are highly dependent on the semantics of the survey rather than the content. This has implications for the methodology of public opinion research as well as for research interpretation based on culture, collective identities, and other umbrella concepts.

The methodology implications are quite clear, as they point to the possibility that the wording used in data collection may lead to biased results, as seen clearly in the Findings and Analysis section above, where the gap in support between *welfare spending* and *income redistribution* is striking. In the case of political views, liberals supported increased welfare spending with 34%, while they supported increased government involvement in income redistribution by 64%, which is beyond doubt a significant gap.

However, the issue of data interpretation is less clear and is an area of greater concern for future research. As we have seen, it is not sufficient to look at the welfare debate and claim that public opinion is shaped by the intrinsic individualism of U.S. culture. The abovementioned large difference in support for welfare spending versus income redistribution indicates that there is, in a sense, a gap between the collective perceptions of the public of the value of individualism—the responsibility of individuals to take care of themselves and others—and the collective, or public, responsibility. The results of this paper lead to the recommendation not to take individualism as a maxim in studying U.S. public opinion nor to dismiss the presence and magnitude of a sense of collective responsibility.

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