Poverty Attributions and Attitudes toward Government Spending

Laurel George
georgelaureld@gmail.com

Leila N. Kempf

Kristie Phillips

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Introduction

U.S. has the greatest inequality of any wealthy nation
• Third in per capita income; yet it has the highest poverty rate
• Over 20% have incomes at or below ½ the median income
• 1% of the population owns almost 70% of the wealth (Drier 2007)
• Among rich nations, the U.S. has
  • greatest income disparity
  • largest income inequality growth over past 20-30 yrs
• Public policy & institutional effects are more important than demographics in explaining these trends (Smeeding 2005).

Perceptions of the causes of poverty may underlie public policy.

We investigate whether there is a link between poverty attributions & opinions about spending on programs that benefit the poor.

Results

Comparing those who attribute poverty to structural factors, people who attribute poverty to laziness have a decrease in odds of favoring increased spending for the following programs:

- Food Stamps: 82%
- Welfare: 49%
- Childcare: 54%

*Controlling for age, income, race, and political views.

Methods

• Data: 1992 American National Election Study (ANES)
• Analysis: Binary Logistic Regression
• Participants given poverty belief question (N=674)

Beliefs About Why People Are Poor
• Structural reasons
• Laziness or both

Demographic Characteristics: Race, Sex, Age, Income level

Beliefs about the causes of poverty are associated with opinions toward government spending

Table: Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Odds Ratios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Welfare Program</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>-1.708***</td>
<td>.478</td>
<td>.181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>-.005**</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>-.465***</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.006**</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leg. Constant: 1.372
N: 573

Food Stamps: Welfare: Childcare

Favoring Spending Increase among those who Attribute Poverty to Laziness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Welfare Program</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>1.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>.510**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>.458***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results: We found that beliefs about the causes of poverty do impact one’s opinions toward government spending on food stamps, welfare, and child care. If people believe the poor are lazy, they are less likely to support increased government spending for them. By recognizing this, it is possible to educate the public about the realities of poverty and the circumstances of those in it, leading to more informed opinions about policy issues. The persistent and growing mismatch between poverty rates and increases in the GNP per capita (Hoyes 2006) may begin to decrease. We are hopeful that with a greater knowledge of these issues, support for programs targeted at the poor will increase and the inequality so prevalent in our society may begin to decrease.

References

Dreier, Peter. 2007. “Just the Numbers: The United States in Comparative Perspective.” Contexts 6(3):38–47.