

Abstract

Government spending on social programs is perhaps the most widely debated platform topic in American politics. The American two party system has produced two distinctive camps, defined most obviously by liberal Democrats and Democratic Socialists on one side, and conservative Republicans on the other. The former argues that government should play a stronger role in securing wealth for the lower class than it currently does via social safety nets provided by taxes on richer individuals. The latter claims that the current American welfare state is either doing enough or too much in its legal role to redistribute funds to lower class individuals/households. While these assertions may be accurate, they are extremely broad and do not properly explain the status of our welfare state or how it has attained its current form. In this analysis, I will look at data and historical trends regarding the US budget, public opinion on its own welfare/ social spending, specific programs, and any legislation, movements, or events that are relevant to the current status of our welfare state. I predict that public opinion regarding the social spending programs of the US government have had an effect on actual legislation and budgets passed by congress.

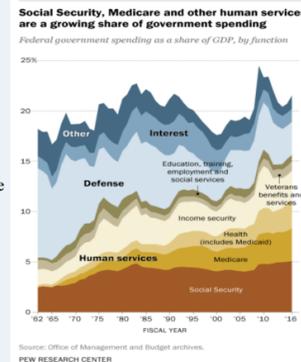
Overview Of Project

The purpose of this project is to learn and uncover trends regarding social program spending policy and public opinion as it pertains to the American Political system. To do this, I will use existing literature posted in Political Science journals, as well as online resources to gather data and answer key questions that help shed light on the topic. The main questions that will be asked, and hopefully answered by this analysis are something along the lines of:

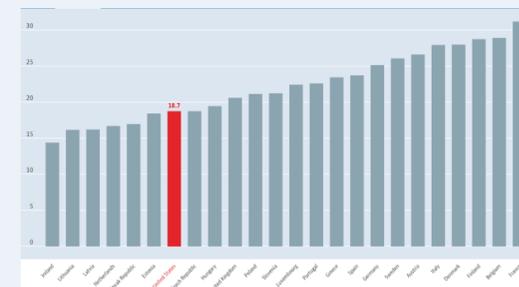
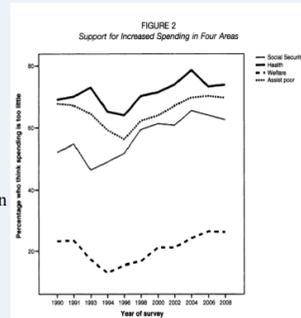
- What is the current status of social welfare spending within the United States that contribute to it being a form of welfare state?
- Data on modern US budgets, GDP, poverty rate, as well as comparisons to similar countries can be helpful in answering this question. There are a multitude of sources and studies on this topic.
- How does the American public feel about its spending on social programs?
- Public opinion studies are frequently done asking questions that center around this topic.
- How have these figures changed over time?
- How has the public opinion regarding social welfare changed over time? Are there any events that may have contributed to historical shifts in opinions on policy?
- Has US spending policy on social programs reflected public opinion on the topic?

Findings in Relevant Literature

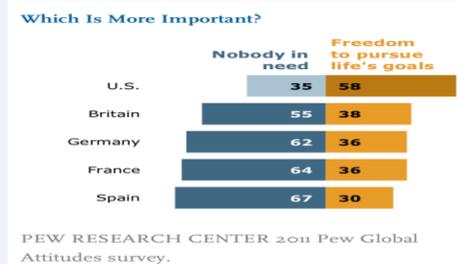
This chart taken from Pew Research¹ shows the US budget as a percentage of GDP over time. One can notice how social programs have increased to around two thirds of the budget.



This chart, taken from Greg Shaw's *Changes in Public Opinion And the American Welfare State*² shows that while Americans may not like the word "welfare", nearly 70% believe that the main forms of social services are underfunded.



These two charts, taken from OECD³ and Pew Research⁴ respectively show the difference between the United States and our allies in Europe when it comes to spending and philosophy on social programs.



Conclusion

The data put forward by economists and other experts on the topic clearly shows that spending on social and "welfare" type services has increased over the last fifty years. To answer whether or not the public opinion agrees with this increase in spending is slightly complicated depending on how you frame the question, but ultimately can be answered with "yes". Americans seem to have a disdain for the term "welfare"⁴, but largely believe that most specific social programs need more funding. What is interesting is that based on this data, the increase in spending on government sponsored social programs has been met with an appetite for even more spending.

One explanation for this could be a dilution of those that still hold the McCarthyism anti-socialist and anti-communist sentiments of the 1950's. To further investigate this proposition, data reaching back from the 1930's through the 1960's would be helpful.

Another explanation may be that with the increase of globalization and trade, Americans are noticing that our partners in Europe have a different norm of government spending on social programs than we do. Americans seem to obviously have some negative connotation with government assistance.

Future Directions

As this project moves forward, it will be important to fill in some of the gaps of data in order to grasp a more complete picture of public opinion. The modern American welfare state was born under the New Deal, so data from the mid twentieth century would be extremely interesting.

A look at major legislation passed that deals with social spending will be helpful to take a deeper dive into historical public opinion and party stance on the topic.

References

Bibliography

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2. Shaw, Greg. 2010. "Changes in Public Opinion and the American Welfare State." *Political Science Quarterly* 627-653.
3. OECD Data. 2018. "Social Spending as % of GDP." OECD data. Accessed 2020. <https://data.oecd.org/social-exp/social-spending.htm>.
4. Stokes, Bruce. 2013. *Public Attitudes Toward the Next Social Contract*. Washington D.C.: New America Foundation.