

Ideology and Action:

The Effect of Volunteering on Attitudes Toward Social Welfare Spending

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Abstract

Despite extensive research having been done on explaining why some individuals are more likely to support spending on social welfare than others, to this date, no one has examined the effect that a person's level of volunteerism has on support for spending. However, the level of community involvement is worthy of consideration as an explanation for support for social welfare spending because, as has been reported by previous research, volunteers often find that structural problems exist that can only be remedied by government intervention. Using data from the 1996 General Social Survey, this research tests the hypothesis that the more areas in which a person volunteers, the more likely he or she is to support increases in social welfare spending. Additionally, the control variable of political ideology was tested. Although the original hypothesis was rejected, the results examining the effect of both volunteerism and political ideology on support for welfare spending revealed that conservatives who volunteered the most were more likely to support increases than their liberal counterparts.

Introduction

Unfortunately, living in poverty is a painful reality for many Americans. Although people earning meager wages and living in less-than-desirable conditions have always been present in this country, the government was not an active force in bettering the situation of the poor until the Great Depression of the 1930's. With the advent of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, however, the role of government was expanded in an attempt to help those in need, especially the unemployed and the elderly, through social welfare programs such as Social Security. As the twentieth century progressed, more and more programs, like Medicaid, Head Start, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, were instituted in order to assist a greater number of impoverished people (Welfare Reform). Furthermore, a large portion of the federal government's budget is reserved for spending that seeks to improve the general welfare of citizens, such as money spent on fighting drug addiction and solving urban problems.

Despite the assistance that welfare provides, many people are opposed to its expansion. In 1996, the welfare system underwent significant changes that reduced benefits and reformed the nature of several programs (Welfare Reform). Debate on this topic continues to the present day. Claiming that the country needs to remedy the ever-growing gap between rich and poor, some activists (as well as the poor themselves) clamor for financial support from the government in order to level the playing field.

Another way to increase the quality of life for the poor, however, is through volunteering, a method often supported by those who disagree with an expansive government or do not trust the sometimes ineffective federal bureaucracy. Although seemingly contradictory, it is completely plausible that volunteering would cause an individual to support an *increase* in social

welfare spending because he or she may come to realize through volunteering that some problems are too vast to be cured by the work of a few individuals.

By examining the relationship between an individual's level of volunteerism and his or her support of social welfare spending, this research will provide insight into why some people support increases in social welfare spending, while others do not.

Literature Review

Although the connection between volunteering and support for social welfare spending has not been widely considered by political scientists, much research has been done regarding the public's attitude toward spending on social programs designed to assist the poor. For example, the idea that government is obligated to provide assistance to the less fortunate has widespread public approval. Robert Wuthnow (1991) reports that 77% of people think that a basic responsibility of government is to assist people who are unable to care for themselves, while 76% agree that the government should guarantee that every citizen has sufficient food and adequate housing (264).

When addressing the issue of spending on specific welfare programs, however, overall support decreases. Nevertheless, public opinion of welfare programs remains favorable. For example, Fay Lomax Cook and Edith J. Barrett (1992), indicate that very few Americans desire a decrease in spending for any of the seven major welfare programs in place at the time of the research. In fact, a majority of people support increases in Medicare, Supplemental Security Income, and Social Security and agree with maintaining the current spending levels of Unemployment Insurance, AFDC, and Food Stamps (p. 62). The only welfare program that did not receive majority support for increasing or maintaining the level of spending was Medicaid;

however, 47.1% of those surveyed supported more spending on Medicaid, while only 6.6% approved of a decrease in that program's budget (Cook & Barrett, 1992, p. 62).

Although these statistics are helpful in gauging the attitude of the American public, they do not provide any explanation as to *why* Americans are supportive of some welfare programs, but not others. As a result, many researchers have undertaken the task of determining the reasons that lead to such behavior. Cook and Barrett (1992) concluded that a person's support of welfare is based on the characteristics of each program, such as whether or not the programs are effective and whom the programs are designed to help. Stanley Feldman and Marco Steenbergen (2001) support the notion that the nature of the program determines how much support it will receive. They concluded that Americans usually reject programs whose main focus is the redistribution of wealth; rather, more popular aspects of the welfare system are those that are "associated with the goal of a more equal society (e.g. support for homeless shelters)" (Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001, p. 659).

Besides determining why some welfare programs are viewed more favorably than others, studies have also been done to explain why people support federal spending on welfare in the first place. Personal characteristics, such as an individual's sex and race, have an effect on a person's support, with females and nonwhites typically having a more favorable view toward welfare than males and whites (AuClaire, 1984, p. 141). In addition to personal traits, monetary concerns, such as income and the tax burden, provide explanations for attitudes toward welfare. Philip AuClaire (1984) examined the results of the General Social Surveys conducted between 1976 and 1982 and discovered that a high income is "significantly related to opposition to social welfare spending" (143). For example, in 1982, 60% of those in the highest income bracket opposed social welfare spending, compared to 29% in the lowest category (AuClaire, 1984, 141).

AuClaire attributes this large gap to the fact that, although higher-income households contribute the most tax money, they receive the least amount of benefits of the welfare system, creating “resentment” towards the program and an “increasing reluctance to support expansion of social welfare efforts” (184). AuClaire’s findings support Cook and Barrett’s (1992) hypothesis that individuals consider the question “What’s in it for me?” before forming a judgment regarding welfare (p. 35-36).

In addition to these explanations, an individual’s political ideology, which will serve as the control variable in this study, also should be considered in determining support for social welfare spending. Because conservatives have traditionally opposed government expansion, they are usually more reluctant than liberals to support spending on social welfare. In a study conducted by Fred Groskind (1994), the results showed that those who do not believe the government’s role is to provide for the poor in society support less benefits than those who think the opposite (p.83). Furthermore, individuals who identify themselves as liberals believe, on average, poor families should receive \$12,700 in benefits each year, while moderates and conservatives supported an average benefit of \$9,900 (Groskind, p.85). Groskind’s observations led him to conclude that support for welfare is based more on “political positions that stretch across income and class lines” than any other characteristic (p. 89).

Despite all of these explanations of support for social welfare spending, few researchers have spent time examining the effect that an individual’s involvement in volunteering has on the issue. In one of the first relevant studies concerning this matter, Ralph E. Pumphrey (1959) observed that compassion, a characteristic that may drive one to volunteer, is a precursor of social welfare policy: “Those social welfare institutions which have proved enduringly useful to society as a whole have embodied...compassion, that is, a desire to do something for the benefit

of unfortunate people in the present” (p. 13). However, Pumphrey does not explicitly relate volunteerism to support for welfare, leaving that work up to later researchers, such as Wuthnow (1991) who, in his book *Acts of Compassion*, conducted interviews with various volunteers on several topics, one of which was opinions on welfare. He found that one characteristic of volunteers is that “at first, their efforts have been directed more to specific individuals in need. But as they become involved with volunteer work, their vision expands...they realize that individual suffering is rooted in larger social arrangements” (Wuthnow, 253). Volunteers who desire widespread change must look to a powerful, established institution, such as the government, to initiate such structural modifications that could improve the lives of all of the less fortunate, rather than simply the lives of a few individuals.

Although Wuthnow’s work is thorough and helpful, his conclusions cannot be applied to the entire population because his research consists solely of interviews with a select group of people, rather than a larger, random sample of the population. For a greater external validity in determining the relationship between volunteerism and support for social welfare spending, one can look to the study conducted by Feldman and Steenbergen (2001) that used a random sample of 294 people from the New York metropolitan area to gauge the relationship between an individual’s humanitarianism and his or her attitude toward welfare spending. By asking for responses to statements such as “One should always find ways to help others less fortunate than oneself” and “The dignity and welfare of people should be the most important concern in any society,” the researchers were able to gauge levels of humanitarianism, which is defined as the belief that it is a person’s duty to assist the needy. Using this method, they found that individuals with higher levels of humanitarianism were more likely to support higher social spending levels (Feldman & Steenbergen, p. 673). Because volunteer work is, in effect, a manifestation of one’s

humanitarian attitudes, this study is very relevant to the current research being undertaken. However, because the elements of the sample came only from urban areas, the results cannot be generalized to the entire population.

Contribution of This Research

This research will seek to provide another explanation as to why people support social welfare spending. No previous research has directly examined the relationship between volunteerism and support for social welfare spending using a national, random sample. Considering the various studies that have been conducted throughout the years, especially Wuthnow's claims that "serving as volunteers [puts] these people in a position to see injustices to which they otherwise might not have been exposed in the course of their ordinary middle-class lives" (p. 253), making them more sympathetic to the plight of the poor, one can certainly conclude that a basis for a relationship between volunteerism and support for social welfare spending exists.

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis will be tested:

H1: The more an individual volunteers, the more likely he or she is to support an increase in social welfare spending.

This hypothesis will then be subjected to the control variable of political ideology, resulting in a second hypothesis:

H2: Regardless of an individual's level of volunteerism, conservatives, because of their belief in a limited government, will be less likely to support social welfare spending than liberals.

Data and Methods

In order to test the above hypotheses, data from the 1996 General Social Survey was

used. The General Social Survey is conducted bi-annually by the National Opinion Research Center through face-to-face interviews with a random sample of the English-speaking population age eighteen and older. In 1996, the sample consisted of 2,904 individuals (NORC). Although recent data is usually preferred in empirical research, the 1996 GSS marked the last time that the full complement of questions regarding the independent variable of volunteerism were asked.

The independent variable of the level of volunteerism was operationalized through a series of questions on the 1996 GSS to which the elements of the sample answered “yes” or “no.” The questions asked whether or not a person had ever volunteered in any of fifteen specific areas (see Appendix A). I combined the separate variables into a simple additive scale by giving each “no” response a value of one and each “yes” response a value of two, producing a scale that ran from fifteen to thirty. The scores were recoded so that a score of fifteen represented an individual who had not volunteered in any area, a sixteen meant that the respondent had volunteered in one area, and a score of seventeen or more represented the highest level of volunteerism, with the individual lending his or her assistance in two or more areas. As a result of the combination of variables, measurement of the independent variable in this study is at the ordinal level.

In addition to the independent variable of volunteerism, a control variable of political ideology was added. Because one’s ideology often forms his or her opinion regarding the role of government in providing welfare programs, this variable was included as another possible explanation of one’s support for welfare spending. Measured at a nominal level, the three values of this variable were obtained by asking the survey respondents whether they were liberal, moderate, or conservative in their political views.

The operational definition of the dependent variable of support for social welfare

spending was a combination of seven questions regarding a person's attitude toward spending on various welfare programs. As a result, the content validity of this measurement is stronger than it would have been had the dependent variable consisted of only one area of social welfare expenditures. (A complete list of the elements that make up the dependent variable is available in Appendix A.) An additive scale was formed using the responses to each of the seven questions, with the lowest possible score being seven, indicating opposition to increasing expenditures in all of the measured areas, and the highest score being twenty-one, signifying support for increases in every measured program. Based on this scale, the scores were combined into three roughly equal categories. The first category, demonstrating those who desire a decrease in social welfare expenditures, consists of the scores seven through fifteen; the scores representing favoring maintaining spending run from sixteen to eighteen; and the category of support for decreasing spending includes the scores nineteen through twenty-one. The measurement of the dependent variable is at the ordinal level.

Data Analysis

Because the level of the measurement of each of the variables being tested was at either nominal or ordinal level, a crosstabulation was run with the 1996 General Social Survey data, using the recoded variable for level of volunteerism, as well as the recoded variable for support of welfare spending. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 1. In Table 2, the outcome of a crosstabulation examining political ideology and its effect on support for social welfare spending is reported. In order to control for political ideology, a third crosstabulation was run. These results are reported in Table 3. Condensed from its original form, the table reports only the percentage of people who support increasing or maintaining in spending with regard to their level of volunteerism and their political ideology.

Results and Conclusions

When the level of volunteerism was examined as a possible explanation for an individual's support of social welfare spending, the original hypothesis—as volunteerism increases, support for social welfare spending will increase—was rejected. In fact, individuals who did not volunteer were more likely to support an increase in spending than those who volunteered in two or more areas. Furthermore, the percentage of people who desired a decrease in spending on welfare programs actually increased as the level of volunteerism increased.

Despite the rejection of the original hypothesis, the second hypothesis including the control variable of political ideology reveals interesting results. For moderates and conservatives, the relationship between volunteerism and support for welfare spending is a positive one, with support increasing as the level of volunteerism increased. This phenomenon can be explained by looking at the foundations of the ideology. As reported by researcher Fred Groskind and confirmed by the results in Table 2, when the effect of ideology alone on attitudes toward welfare spending is considered, liberals are more than twice as likely than conservatives to support increases by a margin of 32.8% to 15.3%. This outcome is expected because a conservative is traditionally one who dislikes a large federal government. When both political ideology and level of volunteerism are examined as factors (see Table 3), the results among non-volunteering conservatives are similar to those found when not taking volunteerism into account, with only 17.4% of non-volunteering conservatives in support of increases, compared to 52.3% of non-volunteering liberals. However, and most importantly, as conservatives become more involved in their communities through volunteering, they have direct experience with the less fortunate and observe firsthand that structural problems exist which only the government has the ability to correct. Therefore, their support for social welfare spending increases, just as the

original hypothesis predicted.

By supporting increases in welfare spending, conservatives who volunteer are breaking away from the traditional ideological stance regarding the issue. This difference in opinion has many implications in the political realm, especially considering the presence of a Republican in the White House and a Republican-controlled Congress. Believing that their party has a mandate to implement policies in accordance with the party platform and traditional ideological beliefs, Republicans may attempt to reduce spending on welfare. For example, President George W. Bush's 2006 budget includes cuts for social welfare programs, including Medicare (Baker). Furthermore, under the proposed budget, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, home of many social welfare programs, would suffer the largest drop in funding—11.5%—out of all the Cabinet departments (Baker). However, this research has shown that expecting the backing of all conservatives in this area would be a mistake, as their beliefs change according to their volunteer involvement.

Although the original hypothesis was confirmed among conservatives and moderates, it does not apply to liberals. Within this political ideology, support for social welfare spending decreased drastically (from 52.3% to 22.5%) as the level of volunteerism increased.

Because hypotheses are tentative and always changing, further research certainly can be done on this topic. In future studies, more control variables such as income and race should be added in order to establish a causal relationship by eliminating other explanations for the results. Additionally, research can be done to determine whether ideology has an effect on a person's decision to volunteer. A project such as that could explain whether liberals are less likely to volunteer because of their belief that it is the government's responsibility to attend to assist the less fortunate.

Although the original hypothesis was rejected, the addition of the control variable produced interesting results that empirically explain one of the reasons people support social welfare spending. In addition to this new explanation, this research also provides a starting point for future research regarding volunteerism, support for social welfare spending, and ideology. There is no doubt that the debate over social welfare spending will continue long into the future, and, hopefully, this research can contribute something significant to those attempting to determine what characteristics affect a person's attitudes toward social welfare spending.

Table 1. Relationship Between Level of Volunteerism and Attitudes Toward Social Welfare Spending

		Level of Volunteerism		
		Do not volunteer	Volunteer in one area	Volunteer in two or more areas
Attitudes Toward Social Welfare Spending	Decrease spending	60 28.6%	50 42.4%	56 39.4%
	Maintain spending	88 41.9%	46 39.0%	50 35.2%
	Increase spending	62 29.5%	22 18.6%	36 25.4%
Total		210 100.0%	118 100.0%	142 100.0%

Source: General Social Survey 1996

Chi Square= 9.5; p < .05

Table 2. Relationship Between Political Ideology and Attitudes Toward Social Welfare Spending

		Political Ideology		
		Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Attitudes Toward Social Welfare Spending	Decrease spending	46 18.2%	126 32.4%	180 46.8%
	Maintain spending	124 49.0%	169 43.4%	146 37.9%
	Increase spending	83 32.8%	94 24.2%	59 15.3%
Total		253 100.0%	389 100.0%	385 100.0%

Source: General Social Survey 1996

Chi Square: 62.1, $p < .001$

Table 3. Percentage of People Who Support Increasing the Level of Social Welfare Spending by Level of Volunteerism and Political Ideology *

<i>Ideology</i>	Level of Volunteerism			
	Do not volunteer	Volunteer in one area	Volunteer in two or more areas	
Liberal	23 52.3%	4 16.7%	9 22.5%	<i>Chi Square</i> = 14.3, p<.01
Moderate	23 26.7%	10 21.3%	15 31.3%	<i>Chi Square</i> = 1.7, NS
Conservative	12 17.4%	5 11.4%	12 23.1%	<i>Chi Square</i> = 10.3, p<.05

* *Note:* Because the table was condensed to report only one value of the dependent variable (support for increasing welfare spending), percentages may not add up to 100%

Source: General Social Survey 1996

Appendix A

Components of the recoded independent variable “volscale,” which asks “Which of the following fields have you volunteered in?”

- Health field
- Education
- Religious organizations
- Human services
- Environment
- Public/society benefit
- Adult recreation
- Arts, culture, and humanities
- Work-related organizations
- Political organizations or campaigns
- Youth development
- Private and community foundations
- International/foreign
- Informal/Alone
- Other

Source: General Social Survey 1996

Components of the recoded dependent variable “overall\$,” which asks the respondent to determine whether government spending is too much, too little, or just right in the following areas:

- Improving and protecting the nation’s health
- Solving the problems of the big cities
- Dealing with drug addiction
- Improving the nation’s education system
- Improving the conditions of blacks
- Welfare
- Social Security

Source: General Social Survey 1996

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