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Cleavage in American Attitudes toward Social Welfare

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Opinion polls probing both the narrow and broad senses of social welfare among Americans indicate hardly any substantial differences over crucial social sentiments among a variety of groups with at least theoretically divergent interests: rich and poor, men and women, blacks and whites, a variety of ethnic groups, union and nonunion households. The items mainly concern the provision of welfare to the poor through AFDC, now TANF, and Food Stamps but also cover OASDHI. Consistently over more than sixty five years of systematic opinion polling, there is an astonishing consensus, so large in fact that it may undermine any effort to move the American citizenry into a more congregational series of provisions for each other. In fact, the consensus is antagonistic to the public welfare. Americans by their very actions, opinions, and codified intentions have canceled the notions of class and caste in subverting a generous welfare state.

Key words: attitudes toward social welfare; cleavage; polarization; culture wars

The Englishman William Robson put his finger on the heart of the problem: "Unless people generally reflect the policies and assumptions of the welfare state in their attitudes and actions, it is impossible to fulfill the objectives of the welfare state" (Robson 1976). He might have gone on to point out that it is impossible to sustain any public policy in a democracy with deep divisions—cleavages—among the population.

The issue of cleavages in American attitudes toward social welfare has received surprisingly little attention except as expressed by aggregated data. An antagonism toward welfare and

welfare programs has been widely supported (Dimaggio, Evans and Bryon 1996; Mouw and Sobel 2001; Page and Shapiro 1992; Baggette, Shapiro and Jacobs 1995; Page, Shapiro, and Young [1986]; Shiltz 1970; Erskine 1975; Public Agenda 1995). The few studies suggesting popular support to expand the welfare state (Cook and Barrett 1992; Demos 2002) or documenting a shift in attitudes over the past decades (Teles 1998) have been seriously flawed.

Income class would seem to be one of the most compelling variables in any analysis of decision-making and social attitudes. However, sixty five years of polled attitudes toward social welfare have rarely been disaggregated by income group; Page and Shapiro (1996) is a rare exception but even their treatment is cursory. Attitudes toward welfare are customarily reported by ethnicity, gender, region, and others but undifferentiated by income.

Contemporary disputes over social issues generally—the “culture wars”—and over the source of social sanction for public policy decisions (elites versus masses; class dominance versus pluralism) are sensitive to cleavages in the American polity (Domhoff 1996, 1990, 1967; Domhoff and Dye 1987; Mills 1956; Hunter 1953; Hunter 1991, 1994; Wolfe 1996; Gordon 1994; Downey 2000; Gitlin 1995). Small actual cleavages in American opinions among important political groups—a great consensus over public policy—would reduce these disputes to media events and public entertainments. Large political cleavages would begin to point to the consistent influence of particular groups in determining social policy. So far, the evidence for a general consensus rather than deep cleavages is considerable although again there is hardly any analysis by income class although somewhat more by race and gender (Dimaggio, Evans and Bryon 1996; Mouw and Sobel 2001; Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002; Brooks and Cheng 2001; Miller and Hoffmann 1999; Hoffman and Miller 1998; Evans 1997; Williams 1997). Presumably the most intense debate—abortion—is distinguished by a split between the pro-choice left and the center but not with the anti-abortion right which appears to very unpopular (Dimaggio, Evans and Bryon 1996). With great support for contemporary social policy or without general support for change or even deep cleavages in attitudes toward current policy, there is little prospect for new policies in a democracy.

Method

The separate polls of the General Social Surveys (1972–1998) (GSS), the National Elections Studies (1948–1998) (NES), the CBS/ New York Times Polls (since 1976) (CBS/NYT) and others were analyzed to describe the cleavage—that is, welfare polarization—in American attitudes to the narrow and broader sense of social welfare and to attempt to place any consensus that may exist within the context of American policy. The narrow sense of welfare is defined as public attitudes toward AFDC, now TANF, and the Food Stamp Program, to a number of specific issues and policies closely allied with those program, mainly the federal role in underwriting the programs and to a associated attitudes especially including those toward blacks. The broader sense of welfare focuses on OASDHI (Old Age, Survivors, Disability, and Health Insurance), what is commonly referred to as Social Security and Medicare, as well as associated attitudes.

Cleavage is explored as the differences between rich and poor whites and blacks, men and women, and to a smaller degree, among ethnic groups and union and nonunion households. The analytic problem is not to find statistically significant differences, since only the tiniest difference will fail to be highly statistically significant with such large samples. Rather, the central task of the research is to interpret whether the differences among the study groups are substantial for purposes of social policy and social welfare. There is no quantitative test of substantiality but rather a number of far more amorphous considerations discussed in the Conclusions. The backup Appendix data tables are available online at www.univ.edu/faculty3/epstein/polls.

The narrow sense of welfare is explored with three types of questions that probe: first, attitudes toward welfare (AFDC, now TANF) and Food Stamps—e.g., whether to increase or decrease spending on them—and their effects, such as whether they decrease work incentives; second, attitudes toward the federal government's role in sustaining these program and toward closely related questions of public responsibility for the poor and needy; and third, attitudes toward blacks and government responsibility to secure their welfare.

The broader sense of welfare focuses first on OASDHI but also explores a variety of adjunctive attitudes that seem to underpin

the citizens' sense of general welfare: finances, family, children, education, being cultured, life satisfaction and happiness, the role of government beyond its responsibility for the poor, the trade off between social spending and taxes and so forth.

The Findings section presents highly summarized data. However, it is impossible to array all of the comparisons reported in the paper; and therefore, following current practice, the reader is invited to request specific additional information from the author.

In almost every comparison, cleavage among income groups is virtually absent for the top four quintiles or so. The data are therefore only presented at the ends of the income distributions, purposely searching for the greatest instances of cleavage.

The statistical properties and characteristics of the polls—sampling, question wording and order, representativeness and so forth—can be traced back from their separate code books (Davis and Smith 1996; Miller and Traugott 1989). Both the GSS and the NES conduct face to face interviews, the latter biannually and the former more frequently. The other polls are phone interviews.

Findings

The narrow sense of welfare

The attitude differences toward welfare, that is, cleavage, between rich and poor men, women, blacks and whites, between poor and wealthy union and nonunion households, and among ethnicities are typically small, theoretically insubstantial, or both. The cleavage between poor blacks and wealthy whites is occasionally substantial but this difference has been declining since the 1980s. It is notable that there is rarely any cleavage of note among the top four income quintiles; for all intents and purposes they are indistinguishable. Whatever cleavage exists is most pronounced between the poorest and wealthiest. There were no substantial cleavages among these groups in their attitudes toward welfare increases, personal responsibility, or a range of other associated attitudes. Except occasionally, all groups consistently preferred personal responsibility, limiting welfare payments, the stringent reform measures of 1996, and attitudes hostile toward welfare recipients.

Table 1

Percent responding "we're spending too much"* on welfare and average differences between poorest and wealthiest groups by race. GSS 1973-1998

Income group	All	White	Black	Difference white/black
Quintile				
Bottom	35.1	41.1	16.8	24.3
Top	58.3	59.1	37.2	21.9
Difference	23.2	18.0	20.4	-2.4
Decile				
Bottom	29.5	35.9	16.6	22.3
Top	59.0	60.2	36.7	23.5
Difference	29.5	24.3	20.1	4.2

*Responses=too much, about right, too little

In the 21 polled years between 1973 and 1998, differences between the poorest and wealthiest quintiles were only 23.2 percentage points in reporting to the GSS that "we're spending too much money on welfare" (Table 1). In any polled year differences infrequently exceeded thirty percentage points (Table 2). Yet the income differential between the lowest quintile and the upper quintile is enormous; the upper income threshold of the lower quintile of respondents is barely above the poverty line for a family of three (Appendix Tables 1-6). The differences between the lower decile of respondents, the best off of whom are often well below the poverty line, only adds a few percentage points totaling an average cleavage of 29.5 between them and the wealthiest decile of respondents (Table 1). Differences rarely exceeded 35 percentage points (Tables 2-3, Appendix Tables 4-6). Differentials between whites and blacks were also under thirty percentage points. The only differentials that were larger than fifty percentage points occurred between the poorest blacks and the wealthiest whites and only occasionally (Appendix Tables 4-6). There was no cleavage among ethnic groups (Western Europe, Mid or Central Europe, New World Hispanic, American Indian) and only about 30 percentage points separated blacks from Europeans (GSS tabulations).

Table 2

Percent of all respondents reporting "we're spending too much money on welfare." Approximate lower quintile vs. approximate upper quintile family income, poverty line, income thresholds of quintile vs. approximate upper quintile family income, poverty line, income thresholds of quintiles, cumulative percent. 1972–1998 General Social Survey.*

Year	<i>Those with lower 20% income brackets</i>		<i>Those with upper 20% income brackets</i>		<i>Percentage difference</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	
1973	96	33.2	236	65.2	32.0
1974	75	28.3	219	52.1	23.8
1975	105	31.4	231	55.4	24.0
1976	167	50.0	188	68.6	18.6
1977	147	48.4	214	76.4	28.0
1978	139	41.2	220	73.3	32.1
1980	130	42.6	217	67.2	24.6
1982	80	23.3	260	56.8	33.5
1983	118	37.0	181	62.4	25.4
1984	28	29.2	46	46.5	17.3
1985	53	34.4	92	55.1	20.7
1986	44	29.3	80	50.0	20.7
1987	31	25.4	65	53.7	28.3
1988	32	25.2	75	50.0	24.8
1989	49	32.9	70	53.0	20.1
1990	46	38.3	47	39.5	1.2
1991	39	25.5	90	48.6	23.1
1993	56	39.2	115	64.2	25.0
1994	140	47.1	232	71.4	24.3
1996	120	46.3	158	64.8	18.5
1998	81	29.9	138	50.5	20.6

*Responses=too much, too little, about right.

In contrast, with five possible responses between independence and government responsibility for the poor, average cleavage was even less between the poor and the wealthy (17.2 percentage points) and blacks and whites (14.5 percentage points) (Tables 4–6, Appendix Tables 7–12). The cleavage increased only

Table 3

Percent of all respondents reporting "we're spending too much money on welfare." Approximate lower decile vs. approximate upper decile family income, poverty line, income thresholds of deciles, cumulative percent. 1972–1998 General Social Survey*

Year	<i>Those with lower 10% income brackets</i>		<i>Those with upper 10% income brackets</i>		<i>Percentage difference</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	
1973	66	31.0	123	65.1	34.1
1974	26	19.5	111	52.1	32.6
1975	54	27.6	132	57.1	29.5
1976	91	47.6	105	71.9	24.3
1977	54	40.0	165	81.7	41.7
1978	52	31.9	159	74.6	42.7
1980	57	35.6	217	67.2	31.6
1982	48	21.1	139	57.9	36.8
1983	59	34.5	87	61.3	26.8
1984	14	28.0	21	46.7	22.7
1985	17	25.4	45	55.6	30.2
1986	17	25.3	55	48.7	23.3
1987	8	14.8	39	53.4	38.6
1988	11	16.4	49	59.0	42.6
1989	19	24.7	45	57.0	22.3
1990	23	34.3	35	41.7	7.4
1991	12	16.9	33	43.4	26.5
1993	29	39.7	44	60.3	19.6
1994	52	38.2	100	72.5	34.3
1996	56	43.8	104	65.4	21.6
1998	33	24.8	55	46.6	21.8

*Responses=too much, too little, about right.

slightly in comparing deciles, 21.8 and 18.7 respectively. Whites in particular had substantial preferences for personal responsibility as opposed to government responsibility, one of the areas of consistent but not large disagreement between whites and blacks over the years but also an area of recent convergence (also see Public Agenda 1995).

Table 4

Percent strongly agreeing "that people should take care of themselves" rather than the "government should improve the living standards of all poor Americans" and average differences between poorest and wealthiest groups by race. GSS 1975-1998*

<i>Income group</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Difference white/black</i>
<i>Quintile</i>				
Bottom	15.9	21.0	9.7	10.4
Top	33.1	35.2	9.4	25.8
Difference	17.2	14.2	-0.3	14.5
<i>Decile</i>				
Bottom	14.9	16.6	10.1	5.5
Top	36.7	36.8	11.6	25.2
Difference	21.8	20.2	1.5	18.7

*Responses=five responses from strongly agree with the former to strongly agree with the latter

The consensus preference for personal responsibility and consistently against increasing welfare, is even stronger in light of the fact that much larger percentages of respondents simply agreed rather than strongly agreed that people should care for themselves while about one third of respondents each year stated that welfare payments were adequate as they were. There were only small preferences for government responsibility and increases in welfare even among poor people. Indeed, on average thirty-five percent of the poorest white Americans wanted to cut welfare benefits. Again, the top four quintiles provide very similar responses to queries about both the welfare budget and government responsibility, emphasizing the centrality of the natural economic preferences of higher income groups. Continuing the suggestions of Schiltz's (1970) earlier tabulations, the data document America's consistent hostility since the beginning of systematic polling in the 1930s across income classes toward public assistance.

Welfare is perceived increasingly as a local administrative responsibility with enormous majorities of wealthy men, women, and whites preferring state standards and responsibility over

Table 5

Percent of all respondents stating strong agreement that “people should take care of themselves” rather than the “government should improve the living standards of all poor Americans.” Approximate lower quintile vs. approximate upper quintile family income, poverty line, income thresholds of quintiles, cumulative percent. 1972–1998. General Social Survey.

Year	<i>Those with lower 20% income reporting people should take care of themselves</i>		<i>Those with upper 20% income reporting people should take care of themselves</i>		<i>Percentage point difference between top and bottom quintiles</i>
	N	%	N	%	
1975	61	17.6	133	30.9	13.2
1983	53	16.3	114	39.7	23.4
1984	41	14.4	103	36.8	22.4
1986	46	15.8	107	31.8	16.0
1987	58	15.5	99	27.5	12.0
1988	27	14.4	70	33.0	18.6
1989	25	12.6	84	32.6	20.0
1990	24	13.4	55	24.8	11.4
1991	24	11.8	71	27.0	15.2
1993	44	19.6	81	32.5	12.9
1994	78	20.4	161	35.2	14.8
1996	60	17.3	129	38.2	10.9
1998	58	17.6	149	39.7	12.1

federal responsibility for welfare programs (CBS/NY Times April 1995). In fact, these attitudes strongly endorsed the reforms of 1996 (witness the large consensus reported by Public Agenda 1995) and continue to sustain their reauthorization in 2004. Near majorities of poor men women and whites felt the same way. Blacks demurred, but surprisingly poor blacks less than wealthy blacks. In the same poll, wealthy men, women, and whites overwhelmingly wished to limit “the amount of money available for welfare benefits even if this means there might not be enough money to cover all families who qualify.” Approximately forty

Table 6

Percent of all respondents stating strong agreement that "people should take care of themselves" rather than the "government should improve the living standards of all poor Americans." Approximate lower decile vs. approximate upper decile. 1975–1998. General Social Survey.*

Year	Approximate bottom decile		Approximate top decile		Percentage point difference
	N	%	N	%	
1975	33	16.1	82	34.9	18.8
1983	29	16.5	59	41.8	25.3
1984	19	11.2	103	36.8	25.6
1986	21	15.8	57	37.0	21.2
1987	35	17.7	65	29.3	21.6
1988	11	11.7	46	35.1	23.4
1989	14	14.0	30	30.6	16.6
1990	7	8.0	28	27.2	19.2
1991	10	10.6	41	35.7	25.1
1993	21	22.3	42	40.4	18.1
1994	31	17.1	71	39.7	22.6
1996	31	16.6	85	41.7	25.1
1998	27	16.5	72	42.6	26.1

*Responses=strongly agree that government should improve living standards, agree, agree with both, agree that people should take care of themselves, strongly agree.

percent of poor men, women and whites agreed. However, cleavages between wealthy and poor were never even twenty percentage points. The same pattern repeats to support the Republicans in Congress as they "completely rebuild the welfare system" along these lines (CBS/NY Times April 1995).

There is a lineage to these types of responses. Only a majority of blacks, and only in 1984, agreed that "families are not getting enough welfare" is a more serious problem than families "getting more welfare benefits than they need" (CBS/NY Times September 1984, January 1988). Only very small percentages of men, women, and whites agreed. One decade later, all groups

including blacks were much *less* sympathetic (CBS/NY Times January 1994). Indeed, while over seventy percent of poor and wealthy males, females, blacks, and whites endorsed government "financial assistance for children raised in low income homes where one parent is missing" (CBS/NY Times July 1977), almost twenty years later, all of these groups except poor blacks cut their support in half for a more leading question: "spending on programs for poor children" (CBS/NY Times December 1994).

The hostility seems aimed toward recipients as much as toward the programs themselves, a difficult distinction to make since the recent social disapproval of racist expression may suppress certain responses. Welfare recipients are obviously considered to be able-bodied and therefore should be independent since Americans consistently agree that "it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves" (e.g., CBS/NY Times January and April 1995). However, very large percentages of rich and poor men, women, blacks, and whites, and often more than fifty percent, agree that "most people who receive money from welfare could get along without it" rather than "most of them really need this help" or "half and half" (CBS/NY Times July 1977, March 1982, January 1994, December 1994). Cleavages were usually less than ten percentage points with even blacks infrequently demurring by much. Moreover, there was hardly any cleavage at all by ethnic descent with only small and intermittent differences, again usually less than ten percentage points, between poor and wealthy Americans who identified themselves as Italian, Slavic, German, Black, Irish, Scandinavian, Latin, British, or "other, American" with (CBS/NY Times September 1976); there was also very little cleavage among the ethnicities themselves (CBS/NY Times September 1976—three questions by ethnicity).

The tenets of unworthiness—tested by the perceived unwillingness to work—cut across almost all groups, rich and poor. Only a majority of blacks and only in December 1994 believed that "most recipients really want to work" (CBS/NY Times January 1994, December 1994, February 1995). Curiously, wealthier respondents customarily endorsed this finding slightly more than the poor perhaps tacitly confessing an ignorance of the unpleasantness of lower paid jobs—but again, hardly any cleavage. Large

majorities of poor and wealthy men, women, and whites and a near majority of poor blacks in January 1994 consistently report that "there are jobs available for most welfare recipients who really want to work" (although note that the New York Times may have *really* wanted this response to endorse their preference for work training or a work program) (CBS/NY Times January 1994, December 1994). But majorities of *all* these groups, reaching eighty percent for wealthy females report that the jobs do not "pay enough to support a family." Independence from welfare is characteristically preferred over the reduction of poverty—the presumed nobility of work no matter what its consequences.

Enormous majorities believe that "people are so dependent on welfare that they will never get off" (CBS/NY Times January 1994, April 1995) and that unmarried mothers who are under eighteen and "have no way of supporting their children" as well as other welfare recipients should enter work programs and "should stop receiving [welfare] benefits" after a period of time (CBS/NY Times February 1995). Moreover, about twenty percent of all these types of respondents believe that "giving welfare to poor people" increases crime rather than decreases it or has no effect (the dominant response) (CBS/NY Times July 1977); a slightly smaller percentage of all groups believe that "most people are on relief for dishonest reasons" (CBS/NY Times 1995).

Indeed, reported attitudes toward the programs may be proxy for attitudes toward some of the recipients. That is, respondents may make use of the opportunity offered by questions about welfare and welfare recipients to voice their attitudes toward blacks and other minorities or perhaps the poor generally, conflating a sense of moral deficiency with the relief programs themselves.

The NES, sometimes back to the 1960s, and CBS polled for the federal government's responsibility to assist and compensate blacks, for fairness in employment, and for associated attitudes. First it is obvious that little cleavage exists among the various groups and that even the black/white differentials, while consistent, are customarily small (the seemingly large differentials between wealthy blacks and other groups may be artifacts since the group often contained very few respondents and sometimes none at all). Second, recalling that five responses from strong agreement to strong disagreement were offered to the NES questions and

that agreement and disagreement customarily contained a larger proportion of responses than the extremes, antagonism to compensation, a federal role, fair treatment for blacks in employment, and others was considerable, perhaps denoting hostility toward blacks themselves and perhaps carrying over to the narrow sense of welfare.

Except for blacks, the nation appears opposed to job preference for blacks even "where there has been job discrimination . . . in the past" (CBS/NY Times July 1977, April 1995), believing that "blacks should not have special favors" (NES) (Appendix Tables 13, 13a). Again, except for blacks, few strongly agree that "over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve" while many feel that "blacks must try harder" (recalling the confusion created by "must" which may mean that whites believe they *should* try harder while blacks believe they are *forced* by racism to carry an extra load) (NES) (Appendix Tables 14, 14a). These antagonisms are even that much greater in light of the socially approved attitude of nondiscrimination and fairness. If indeed the pressures of social conformity suppressed even a modest amount of hostility, then the actual amount of racism and perhaps also hostility to the poor generally—the contemporary notion of an underclass of incorrigibles, deviants, and malingerers—grows as a daunting impediment to the welfare state.

The broader sense of social welfare

Very large proportions of all study groups between 1984 and 1996 endorsed increases in spending on Social Security; still, there is virtually no cleavage at all (Appendix Tables 15, 15a). As Page and Shapiro (1992) point out, this has become such a standard of America's reported attitudes that it is only infrequently queried. While support for a national health insurance plan seems to have eroded over the past thirty years there is again very little cleavage, on the order of twenty percentage points between wealthy and poor groups (and curiously high nonresponse rates in 1972 and 1984). Cleavage is slightly more but again under thirty percentage points in preferences to "completely rebuild" the American health care system (CBS/NY Times January 1994). At the same time, there are only insubstantial differences, remarkably small considering the income differentials, between poor and wealthy groups

in choosing between taxes and spending on "social programs" (GSS 1993). The wording is far more benign than "welfare" but it still did not elicit strong support even among very poor people.

Hardly any group places great trust in the "government in Washington to do the right thing "just about always," even at the height of the Reagan presidency (CBS/NY Times January 1986), which is carried over as a preference for state and local government (CBS/NY Times January 1986). A majority or near majority of all groups responded yes when asked if "there are *any* groups in America today that are not given a fair chance to succeed economically" (CBS/NY Times 1984); it was surprising that many more did not agree with this near truism. About forty percent of all groups except blacks whose percentages were much higher reported that "government programs created in the 1960s . . . made things better" (CBS/NY Times January 7 1986) and majorities, sometimes very large for all groups except wealthy males, agreed that "the federal government should spend money now on a similar effort to try to improve the condition of poor people in this country"—note again the use of "poor" rather than "people on welfare" (CBS/NY Times January 7 1986). There was a strong positive response in all groups except wealthy blacks to the proposition "that it is as possible now as when [they] finished school to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich" (CBS/NY Times August 1988).

As elsewhere, there is hardly any cleavage at all between the poor and the wealthy relative to a variety of social attitudes: financial security, being cultured, having faith in God, having children, being married, having nice things, being self-sufficient, and having a fulfilling job (GSS 1993). The poor and the rich equally reject nihilism ("life serves no purpose") (GSS 1998). The paradox of satisfaction is even more astonishing; consistently between 1972 and 1998, a cleavage of only about twenty five percentage points separated people well under the poverty line and the wealthy in reporting that they are "very happy . . . with the way things are these days" (GSS 1972–1998).

The Case of Organized Labor

Workers presumably form unions in response to the constraints of the labor market, the need to counter the natural

Table 7

Percent response to "In general, how good are labor unions for the country as a whole?" by union and nonunion households. General Social Surveys 1988–91.

	Union household			Nonunion household
	Respondent in union	Spouse in union	Both in union	
100%	10.8	4.9	0.9	83.4
How good are unions?				
Excellent	13.1	0.0	0.0	1.9
Very Good	35.7	21.1	14.3	15.1
Fairly Good	39.3	68.4	71.4	47.1
Not very good	7.1	5.3	0.0	20.1
Not good at all	2.4	2.6	14.3	5.9
Can't choose	2.4	2.6	0.0	9.9
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

tendencies of society to neglect its less well off, and the power of employers relative to individual employees. Moreover, in order to organize, unions presumably develop a greater consciousness of the right for social welfare among their members than would be present among those not in labor unions. However, union households hardly ever differ in their attitudes from non-union households suggesting perhaps that there is no distinct social philosophy underpinning the organization of American labor, only a syndicalist ambition to compel higher wages and benefits. Surprisingly, there are only modest differences between union and nonunion households toward the importance of labor unions themselves, even when their central value is probed (Table 7).

The absence of a distinct social philosophy grounded in the grievances and broader social rights of working people and the general hostility of Americans toward social welfare perhaps explains the decline of organized labor over the past forty years—their absolute decline in numbers, their startling relative decline,

and their shift from industrial organization to middle class occupations and the public sector. Today, labor organization is in the process of realizing Kuttner's prophecy of shrinking to craft union size (Kuttner 1985).

Anomalies and differences: blacks vs. whites, broader vs. narrower welfare, ritual vs. operant values

Until recently blacks consistently voiced greater support than whites for public welfare and the role of the federal government, blaming those in need less, and wishing more to address those needs. At the same time the data also corroborate earlier observations by Shapiro [1986] that the cleavages between blacks and whites are narrowing as are differences among income groups, including the poor and the rich. Indeed, Public Agenda's poll in 1995 reported virtually no difference at all between blacks and whites in their attitudes toward welfare and, more surprising, very few differences between them and welfare recipients who are by definition very poor. Schiltz (1970) documents a similar hostility toward public assistance between recipients of public assistance and the general population during the Depression and shortly afterwards.

Yet such as the differences are between blacks and whites, there is no consensus among blacks that suggests the indignation and rage of Malcolm X, Leroy Jones, James Baldwin, or Richard Wright. Indeed, the absence of extreme cleavages and the more recent apparent satisfaction of blacks with social policy may help to explain the decline of black civil disturbances over the past few decades. Voltaire would have been pleased, Marat horrified.

While there is a customary lack of cleavage and a general hostility to the narrow sense of social welfare, there are reported attitudes that would seem to sustain the provision of broader social welfare and some ancillary programs to TANF in contradiction of current social welfare policy. In particular, Americans consistently endorse higher Social Security benefits; many seem to want national health insurance and enhanced job training programs; there is even an enormous agreement among different ethnic groups for the federal government "to see to it that every person who wants to work has a job."

Yet, the direction of federal retirement legislation seems to

reward the wealthy who save outside of Social Security and to neglect poorer Social Security recipients. Moreover, approximately forty million Americans are without any health coverage and it is very questionable whether Medicare benefits will improve substantially, even for prescription drug coverage. There is virtually no public sector jobs program and very little job training. The stated support for a broader sense of social welfare beyond and separate from programs for the poor themselves may be illusory. Indeed, much of the apparent support for social welfare in general may be more a shallow hope for good fortune projected upon the federal government but without any strong political will to convert aspirations into enforceable claims. The polls fail to distinguish between real preferences and ritualistic affirmations of America's ceremonial civil religion. So long as American policy making is open and uncoerced, the specific program conditions of public policy, actual policy choices rather than surveyed attitudes, may actually realize the true preferences of the public will.

Conclusions

The bifurcation of social welfare policy in the United States between modest work-related entitlements and inadequate, discretionary assistance for those outside of the labor force has been sustained by broad popular consent. Neither the bifurcation of policy nor the actual insufficiencies of America's social welfare programs appear to be impositions of an elite that is any more predatory than the general citizenship. Rather, the American social welfare state, sustained by the embedded preferences of Americans for market-related social hierarchies and minimal relief of want, institutionalizes the triumph of classical liberalism over welfare state liberalism. Hunter and Gitlin worry with little cause over the ability of America to govern itself; polarization appears restricted to abortion and perhaps a few other "body" issues that in fact have not created much turmoil and that remain peripheral to social welfare. Not coincidentally, the cleavages, such as they may be, relate more to procedural issues of legal right (to abortion or equal protection) and far less to the substantive (financial) issues of equality and poverty. Indeed, the powerful underlying consensus on social welfare both in the

narrow sense as well as more broadly defined—TANF and Food Stamps on the one hand and OASDHI on the other—may even be strengthened by displacing social conflict to largely symbolic and procedural issues that preserve more important social values. Inflamed conflicts over abortion and perhaps even the broader feminist agenda, occurring between groups at the political margins, are like the breast thumping among apes, the head butting in goats, and the tail dancing of the stickleback herring that serve vicariously to defuse tensions, select leaders without blood, and reinforce the probity of existing social institutions. There are no culture wars in America apart from the entertainments of the media.

Judged by its social welfare policies, the welfare state in the United States contains a very modest amount of Lowi's (1964) redistributive function, emphasizing regulation with even a tendency toward "distributive" policies (that is, social welfare as group patronage). The popular consent, even if misguided, curiously endorses Domhoff's assertion that "classes and class conflict, along with protest and social disruption, have to be taken seriously to understand power in America" but only in the sense that the absence of turmoil is a measure of deep satisfaction with things as they are (Domhoff 1990 282); America's ruling elite seems to enjoy pervasive permission.

Moreover the programs themselves do not seem to be triumphs of autonomous state benevolence, defying by their actual benefits the rudimentary expectations of Skocpol's demands for broad entitlements and full employment (Skocpol 1995, 2000). Still, in the absence of frankly expressed group and class differences, it is methodologically impossible to discern whether the public has been propagandized into agreement or the leadership fairly represents prior, popular references. Contrary to Domhoff, the American state at least judged by its social welfare provisions, is hardly the product of an elite, let alone a predatory one; nor could it possibly be judged a beneficence of leadership by noble, brave, maternal, and informed heroines who act largely within the permissions and constraints of an enlightened pluralism. The reigning and deep consensus profoundly rejects greater sharing, greater entitlements, greater generosity, and more opportunity secured by public interventions. Before expanding the provisions

of the social security act it may be necessary for Skocpol to first consider that the embedded displeasure with the redistributive role of government produces little support for a tutelary state of increased welfare and patrician regard.

The robustness of insubstantial cleavages even at the extremes of income and the huge common consensus across time, different surveys, a variety of groups and many different sorts of questions commands attention to a profound American social pact and one that perhaps explains the failure to achieve Robson's hopes for a generous welfare state. Americans may be very satisfied with things as they are, antagonistic toward both the narrowly focused public assistance programs and a greatly expanded government role in securing the general welfare. This uncivil complacency may well erect an insurmountable barrier to expanded entitlements or greater sharing of any sort.

Generosity and ideological diversity while perhaps goals of a vibrant public discourse in an Enlightenment society are apparently not characteristic of the American social welfare ethos, at least since the 1930s and perhaps for the past few centuries. In consideration of the technical ambiguities of the polls, it may even be the fact that America has forged a characteristic political ethos from the vast ethnic and racial ores of its peoples. Thirty percentage point differences among groups that are very differently situated, while seemingly large, are certainly not large enough to constitute *class* distinctions or even characteristic group attributes. The expectations of class theory and conflict theory would seem to demand far greater cleavages, perhaps on the order of sixty or seventy percentage points. Differences of this magnitude have separated poor blacks from wealthy whites but usually before 1985; they quite obviously carry along with them distinctions of caste made graphic in the cultural abyss that in fact often separates the two groups.

The American political consensus on social welfare has cemented a position quite a bit to the right of center, ideologically centered on voluntary civic participation and good character—"compassionate conservatism:" communitarianism rather than communalism. Not only are Americans antagonistic to welfare narrowly defined but the antagonism is consistent through almost every political division of the nation. Most notably, the poor and

the wealthy, blacks and whites, men and women, union and nonunion households, and the variety of ethnic groups share in the same hostile attitudes. The cleavages between the very wealthiest and the very poorest groups of Americans are insufficient to germinate a sizable constituency for more redistributive and generous social welfare policies. Americans cherish their unbounded markets and self-defeating heroic individualism, apparently willing to impose few restrictions for purposes of minimizing economic insecurity or relieving want.

The attempt to retrieve the public's actual but latent generosity from the meanness of standing policy is built on an imagined distinction between the notion of welfare and the welfare programs themselves as if to argue that Americans are for relief but against the poorly run programs that administer their generosity. However, this argument comes apart in light of the widely shared popularity of a work test (that is, the willingness to take a job, any job), the widespread support for mandatory work, and a stolid refusal to acknowledge frank need. Of course, it is a near newspeak tautology for people to support relief for those who deserve it. However, the actual meaning of policy is conferred by the conditions of deservingness.

American social welfare policy itself reflects this consensus of old liberal and new conservative, the dominance of industrial Republicanism and deep-faith traditionalists. The 1996 welfare reforms, grounded in little more than the nation's meanness of purse and spirit, continue to be extremely popular. Compassionate conservatism is laying the track of public policy. Indeed, the enormous amount of reported support for OASDHI is not a hopeful sign of greater American faith in the welfare state. Instead it may represent the nation's private attitudes authorizing the government's parsimonious public programs. Fully forty percent of OAI retirees, typically the poorest paid workers, rely for at least 80% of their income on their Social Security checks which in 1999 averaged only \$804 for all beneficiaries (Social Security Administration 1998; Ways and Means Committee 2000). On the other side, OAI maximums (about \$2,650 for a family in 1999) are paid to the relatively wealthy whose government checks represent only a fraction of their incomes. Obviously return on investment, not need, generosity, compassion, or forgiveness, is the abiding criterion of American fairness.

Americans appear to be consistently and historically opposed to social welfare policies for the indigent with little desire for even a generous series of social insurances for workers. Neither vertical nor horizontal redistributive policies are popular. The anomalous attitude that government should secure the general welfare is probably voiced as the vaporous hope that traditional American institutions of the market rather than the demeaning programs of public welfare will provide a fair distribution of American plenty.

Classical theoretical assumptions that apparently different social and material conditions greatly affect the attitudes of different economic groups, races, ethnicities, and genders may have been inoperative in the United States for the past seven decades or so and perhaps for even longer. American processes of socialization may enjoy a remarkable triumph over any material or social reality of caste, class, or gender. All would be well for the very large consensus around social welfare policy but for its cruelty to poor and marginal citizens as well as to lower paid workers in general. More than two thirds of recipients of TANF are poor children who are saddled with the miscreancy that the nation ascribes to their parents. Poor children in foster care are given a pauper's mite. The poor who are permanently disabled are treated as if they willfully perpetuated their disabilities. Hardly anything at all is provided for single adults who can not or do not work while many homeless Americans endure parked cars and uninvited pedestrians in their living rooms. And so on with inadequate health and mental health services for poor people perhaps explained by a puzzling tolerance among the working poor, near poor, and the majority of all blue collar workers for their decades of stagnant and inadequate wages and their isolation from even the frankly inadequate services afforded the very poor.

Yet if many Americans are in fact oppressed, they are unaware or blithely accepting of their oppression. Any strategy to mobilize an opposition to current social welfare policies must confront the near identical dispositions of Americans and their apparently great satisfaction if not complacency with social welfare policy both in its narrow and broader senses.

The insistence among a number of the semi-professions, notably social work, that they are liberating the oppressed—a quaint conceit in light of the obliviousness of the oppressed themselves

to their suffering—needs first to find a population that acknowledges its need before it applies a remedy. Nonetheless, the literature of the personal social services, including psychotherapy, has been engaging in a delicious irony of success for years: the liberation of the afflicted from afflictions they have do not know they are suffering. Not only is liberationism an emperor without clothes, but also a parade without an emperor, an audience, or reporters to record events—a total fabrication starting with imagination and building back to history. O'Connor's (2001) poverty knowledge and Epstein's (1997) social efficiency seem to correspond well with the popular ethos.

The reported support for increasing social security, substantial endorsements of a universal federal health insurance of one sort or another, and other preferences for an expanded welfare state documented most recently by Demos (2002) might appear to argue for the popularity of the welfare state. Yet the problems with polls may invalidate the reported preferences for expansion (Epstein forthcoming 2006). More to the point than opinions, there has been very little political activism in support of expanded social insurance. President Clinton's abortive attempt at a national health plan and the near constant inability to increase the generosity of OASDI since the 1970s suggest that the program as it exists may be far more expressive of the American consensus than the reported polls. Indeed, the social security system seems perched on retrenchment not expansion and citizen lobbies seem simply protective of the present program. Still, this line of reasoning—minimizing some reported preferences while accepting others—may seem capricious. Yet in light of the substantial methodological deficiencies of opinion polling and the drift of the nation to the right without much political dissent (indeed, with considerable acquiescence), it may be prudent to ground interpretation of reported attitudes in the facts of live political choices and traditional historical discourse. Whatever the ambiguities assigning the American consensus a point on the political continuum, the numbing consistency of reported preferences seems inescapable: there is very little cleavage in American social welfare attitudes.

Inflecting these general conclusions another note, there may be an active hostility to generosity by perhaps one third of the population that taken together with the oblivious middle has

probably undercut any serious progressive policy in the United States. Moreover, the constituency for reform—the modern American liberal and the New Democrat in the style of former president Clinton—unfortunately favors procedural equity rather than substantive equality as epitomized by support for affirmative action over compensation and job training over the provision of public jobs. There is hardly any endorsement of major budgetary initiatives to realize true structural reform. Without deep investments there is also little likelihood of addressing America's social problems.

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