

IS WELFARE A DIRTY WORD? CANADIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICIES

Allison Harell, Stuart Soroka and Adam Mahon



How do Canadians feel about social assistance policy? Drawing on data from the Canadian Opinion Research Archive, the authors explore the structure of public opinion on welfare and other social assistance programs over the past two decades. They suggest that differences in program support are linked to “issue framing” and the degree to which programs are based on cash transfers versus services. They also find there is a strong link between recent trends in public opinion and developments in Canadian social assistance policy.

Que pensent les Canadiens des politiques d'aide sociale ? À partir des données des Canadian Opinion Research Archive, cet article analyse la structure de l'opinion publique sur l'aide sociale et d'autres programmes sociaux au cours des deux dernières décennies. On observe ainsi que l'appui des Canadiens à ces politiques dépend à la fois du « cadrage de la question » et de la façon d'offrir les programmes, soit sous forme de services ou de transferts en argent. Il existe également un lien étroit entre les tendances récentes dans l'opinion publique et les changements apportés aux politiques canadiennes d'aide sociale.

Generally speaking, the Canadian social safety net enjoys widespread support. This is certainly true of the health care system, which occupies the most prominent (and expensive) place in this system. It is similarly true of many (though, as we shall see, not all) of the programs targeting those in need.

Despite this support, only moderate progress has been made in Canadian governments' social assistance policy outcomes. Along with unemployment and income inequality, the poverty rate has declined slightly from early-1990 levels. Nonetheless, according to the National Council on Welfare, roughly 5 percent of the Canadian population (about 1.7 million people) currently relies on public social assistance programs, and welfare incomes have been eroding since the mid-1990s. As of 2005 more than 15 percent of Canadian families lived below the Statistics Canada low income cut-off.

Given the prominence of foreign affairs, environment and energy issues, poverty and social assistance are unlikely to leap to the top of the policy agenda in the very near future. Most recent polling suggests that the economy is of increasing concern to Canadians, however, and topics relating to poverty clearly deserve further attention. We accordingly take the opportunity here to explore the structure of Canadian public opinion about social assistance policies. In this article, we rely

on the Canadian Opinion Research Archive (CORA) at Queen's University to explore public attitudes in Canada toward social assistance since the 1980s. In particular, we examine how public attitudes toward the redistribution of wealth are shaped by issue framing and perceptions of need, and also the degree to which policy focuses on services versus cash transfers. Like our neighbours to the south, we Canadians appear to have quite varied views about social assistance programs: while both countries generally support social assistance spending, welfare itself appears to be a dirty word.

We begin by looking at some relatively simple data that nonetheless tell much of the story of Canadians' support for redistributive policies. Figure 1 shows Canadians' net preferences for spending on welfare and services for the poor from 1984 to 2006, using data from Environics Focus Canada surveys. For each policy area, the survey question is “Do you think the federal government should spend more, less, or the same on...” This figure shows *net support* — the percentage of those who think we should spend more minus those who think we should spend less — for (1) welfare and (2) social services for the poor.

That the two series move in parallel suggests that the two questions are tapping a similar underlying preference

for social assistance policy. Changes over time are driven by a combination of government policies and macroeconomic conditions. Regarding the former, note that the question asks if the federal government should spend “more” or “less.” Responses to the questions are therefore conditioned by the perceptions of current levels of

both the arguments forwarded and the language used — can have a profound influence on how that problem is viewed. For instance, the issue of social assistance can be framed either in terms of equality — the need to ensure a minimum standard of living for everyone — or in terms of need — a duty to help out those who are less well

When it comes to social assistance, the frame is salient. In the example of equality versus need, the former implies a universality among citizens, whereas the latter may well evoke negative stereotypes about who is needy. In the United States, for instance, a similar gap between preferences on “welfare” versus “the poor” has been

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government spending. For instance, the downward movement in preferences for more spending in the early 1990s may reflect the fact that welfare spending was increasing through the late 1980s. Put simply, spending preferences in the aggregate partly reflect the current policy environment, and so they change as policy changes.

Macroeconomics also matters. Taking into account levels of government spending, Canadians tend to support redistribution more during periods of economic strain. Note that this runs counter to the hypothesis that to protect their own resources the average self-interested citizen’s support for redistribution will decrease during hard times. Pure short-sighted self-interest has of course never been a particularly powerful explanation for welfare state support, but it is reassuring to know that Canadians’ support for welfare spending increases during times of need.

Perhaps most notable in figure 1 is the gap between the two series. There is a consistent difference of almost 50 percentage points between spending preferences on social services compared to welfare for the poor. Taken at face value these data suggest that Canadians (1) overwhelmingly support spending social services for the poor, but (2) favour reduced spending on welfare.

Why is this the case? The literatures on “issue definition” and “issue framing” may have much to tell us here. This work suggests that the way in which a problem is described —

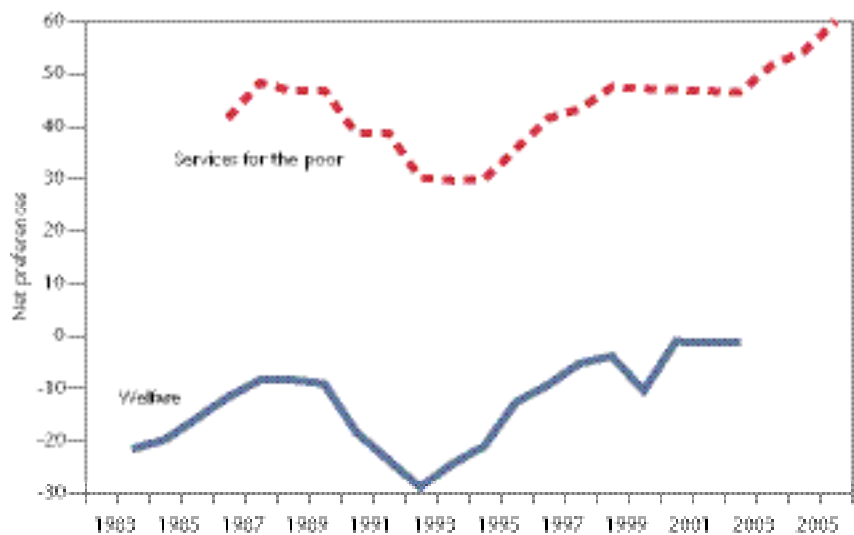
off. The symbolic importance of each frame lies in the way in which it activates an image of the typical recipient of a program.

(Recent work also suggests that once established the structure of social assistance policy itself can have a kind of framing effect on how recipients are viewed. Welfare states with primarily selective benefits, as in Canada and the US, leave open questions about which recipients are most needy; systems focused on mainly universal benefits, as in Scandinavian countries, may close entirely the discussion of which recipients are most deserving.)

attributed at least in part to issue framing; in particular, the racialization of the welfare frame. The image of the single, black mother on social assistance plays an important role in this discourse. In the US “welfare” combines negative stereotypes about poverty being the result of an individual’s lack of motivation or ambition with deeply embedded racial stereotypes about African Americans.

There is little evidence that welfare in Canada has the same racialized connotations as it does in the United States. That said, support for welfare policy is conditioned by Canadians’ impressions about who receives benefits. The 2002 Equality Security Community Survey reveals a weak connection between support for redis-

FIGURE 1. CANADIANS’ NET PREFERENCES FOR SPENDING ON WELFARE AND SERVICES FOR THE POOR, 1984-2006 (PERCENT)



Question: Keeping in mind that increasing services could increase taxes, do you think the federal government should spend more, less or the same on each of the following?
 Source: Environics Focus Canada surveys; Canadian Opinion Research Archive.

tributive policy and beliefs about how many immigrants or Aboriginal people are on welfare, for instance. And while support for social assistance appears to be increasing even as the Canadian population has become more diverse, there are concerns that ethnic diversity leads to decreasing support for redistributive policies. These worries are driven in large part by “welfare chau-

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vinistic” reactions to immigration in Western Europe, although recent research suggests that this effect is rather slight in Canada. Nonetheless, while it is clear that Canadian welfare support is not as highly conditioned by racial issues as it is in the US, we certainly cannot ignore the possibility that racial and ethnic stereotypes play a role in Canadian attitudes about redistribution.

Even independent of the link to race or ethnicity, attitudes about recipients do quite clearly have an effect on support for social assistance. Recent work in the European context explores criteria for the “deservingness” of recipients, including control, need, (common) identity and reciprocity. In the Canadian context, the impression that welfare destroys an individual’s work ethic and creates a culture of entitlement and easy living certainly decreases support. Figure 2 draws on the merged 1993-2006 Canadian Election Studies (CES), and shows the relationship between responses supporting (1) welfare spending and (2) the impression that welfare makes people less willing to work. Clearly, there is a very strong relationship between people’s views about welfare making people less likely to work and their support for welfare spending. Among those who strongly agree that welfare erodes a work ethic, only about 17 percent support increased funding for wel-

fare. Among those who do not see welfare as impeding workforce integration, almost 60 percent support increased funding.

It is nevertheless true that a majority of Canadians support some kind of basic social safety net. From 1993 to 2006, in response to the CES question “The government should:

(a) see to it that everyone has a decent standard of living, or (b) leave people to get ahead on their own,” roughly 65 percent of Canadians agreed with the former. And preferences for spending reveal widespread support across a number of social assistance policy domains. Figure 3 shows the percentage of Canadians supporting more spending, from the 2003 and 2006 Focus Canada surveys. (Note that 2003 is the last year in which the welfare question was

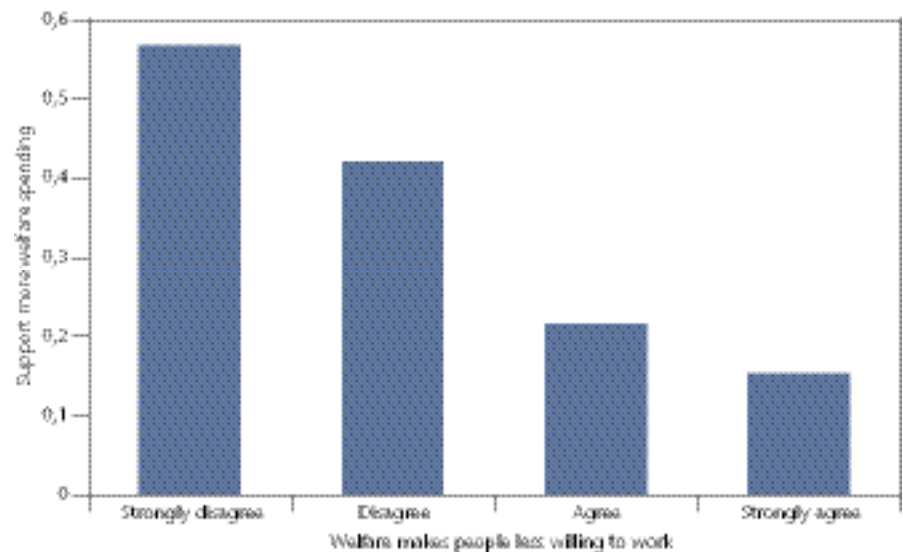
asked, but we also include more recent data for the other domains.)

Welfare clearly garners the lowest level of support for spending increases, though employment insurance (EI) receives only marginally more support. In all other domains, the clear majority believe the federal government should spend more — on job creation, services for the poor, homelessness and child poverty. Note that the differences in support found here mirror views of deservingness across the developed world, beginning with children and the elderly and ending

with those on social assistance, and where perceptions of recipients’ “control” over their situations seems to be a central criterion.

A parallel and critical difference, apparent in figures 3 and 1, is between cash transfers (welfare and EI) and services (all other domains). Relatively little work been done on the structure of public support for transfers versus services. Cash transfers do imply a degree of moral hazard that is less likely to be the case

FIGURE 2. CANADIANS’ OPINIONS ON FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON WELFARE AND WHETHER WELFARE MAKES PEOPLE LESS WILLING TO WORK (PERCENT)



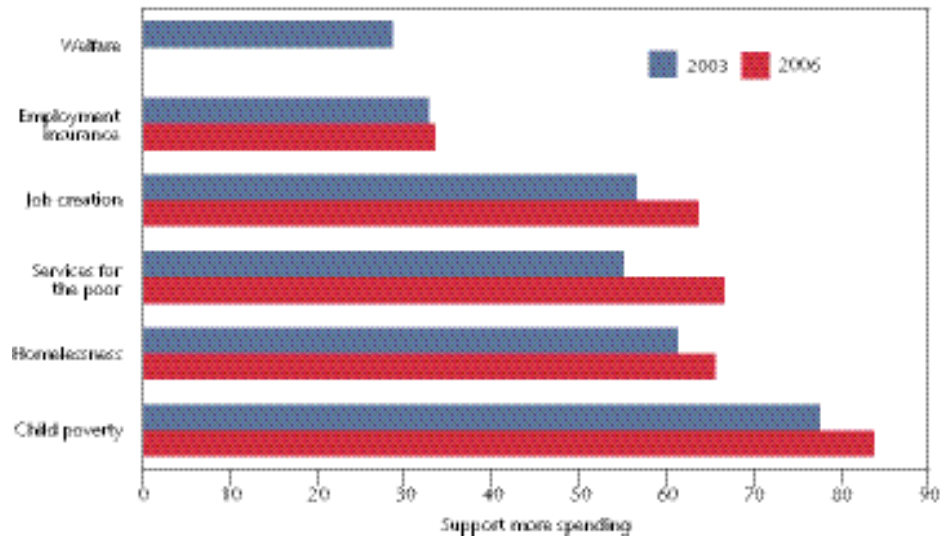
Questions: (1) The welfare state makes people less willing to look after themselves. (2) Should the federal government spend more, less or about the same as now on the following areas?
Source: Canadian Election Study for 1993-2006 (merged); Canadian Opinion Research Archive.

for services. Indeed, existing research implies that cash transfers are often seen as handouts that provide a negative incentive to reintegrate into the workforce. Regardless of any positive outcome from cash payments that may emerge, they tend to evoke in citizens a frame about poverty that sees those on welfare or EI as benefiting financially from the program. More importantly, this benefit is viewed as undeserved. The typical recipient evoked in many people's minds is someone able to work but taking the easy way out and collecting free handouts from the government.

On the other hand, services — whether they are directed at the poor or at specific segments of the population — involve programming. Such programming is viewed as a positive incentive to reintegrate that may include need-based support; critically, the frame is one of integration. Furthermore, such services are also viewed as benefiting those who “deserve” to be helped — that is, those who are actively trying to reintegrate by seeking out services (as with job creation), or whose poverty is clearly not their fault (such as children).

Views on (1) the relative benefits of cash transfers versus services and (2) the perceived deservingness of recipients are thus intertwined. Those who are seen as most deserving are also those for whom programs focus largely on services. We do not know whether moving to a more service-focused approach to welfare is either desirable or viable. Nor is it clear whether moving away from cash transfers would make much difference to public support for a new version of welfare — the recipients would be the same, and deservingness may remain an issue. Shifts in public support may principally rely on attitudes about recipients, shaped by a bevy of individual attitudes and experiences, and the information and frames provided by policy-makers and journalists.

FIGURE 3. CANADIANS' OPINIONS ON FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON SPECIFIC SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS, 2003 AND 2006 (PERCENT)



Question: Keeping in mind that increasing services could increase taxes, do you think the federal government should spend more, less or the same on each of the following?
 Source: Environics Focus Canada surveys; Canadian Opinion Research Archive.

Opinion clearly matters, however. The structure of public preferences revealed above fits remarkably well with, and may even partly account for, the current trajectory in Canadian social assistance programs. Consider the following: through the 1990s there was major retrenchment in welfare and EI, but major investments in services to the poor and child poverty, which is perfectly in line with our data in figure 3. The National Child Benefit strategy, certainly one of the most prominent recent social policy innovations, had the federal government increasing the child tax benefit to respond to child poverty, while provinces were to cut the welfare payments they gave to families with children on welfare by exactly the same amount (and invest their welfare savings in services for poor families). This federal increase and provincial decrease meant that the welfare poor were left in the same net position, but working-poor families benefited. To be clear: the increased benefits were to go to the poor, but not to those on welfare.

Of course, our data cannot speak directly to the degree to which public policy is driven by public opinion.

The connection between public attitudes and policy change is nonetheless rather striking. At a minimum, we suggest that preferences and social assistance policy are intimately connected. And where public opinion on social assistance is concerned, we believe that Canadian attitudes are structured by an overlapping combination of issue framing, views about deservingness and attitudes toward services as opposed to cash transfers. These are likely the lenses through which current and future social assistance policies will be judged by the Canadian public.

Allison Harell is a postdoctoral fellow at the Canadian Opinion Research Archive (CORA), School of Policy Studies, Queen's University. Stuart Soroka is associate professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University and director of CORA at Queen's University. Adam Mahon is an MA candidate in the Department of Political Science at McGill University and the MA fellow at CORA. The authors are grateful to Keith Banting for his comments on a penultimate draft of this paper. All data used here are freely available online at <http://www.queensu.ca/cora>