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The Association Between Family Income and Adults' Attitudes on Whether the Government
Should Help the Poor

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Honors Project

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Abstract

This research examines whether people in different social classes have varying views on whether the government should help the poor and whether that depends on political affiliation. Income inequality has become a greater problem in the U.S. in recent decades. This means that the poor could require more assistance and it is important to know if the public thinks the government should help the poor. Knowing what influences public opinion on this issue could help policy makers make informed decisions about whether the government should help the poor. Data from the 2008 (N=2,023) and 2018 (N=2,348) General Social Survey (GSS) were analyzed using cross tabulation and chi-square test using SPSS. The study found that respondents with higher incomes were the least likely to report the government should help the poor among moderates and conservatives. Liberals across all income levels were found to be more likely than moderates and conservatives to report that the government should help the poor. Policy makers interested in creating or changing legislature for the government to help the poor should prioritize persuading moderates and conservatives in the upper class.

Introduction

In this study, I analyzed if annual family income influenced American adults' attitudes of whether the government should help the poor. Political affiliation was controlled to see if it played a role in the formation of attitudes on whether the government should help the poor. The issue of poverty has salience in the United States. In 2018, 11.8% of Americans were living in poverty according to the US Census Bureau (Semega, 2019). Income inequality has widened since the 1990s, so poverty is getting worse in the U.S. while the top 1% has become wealthier (Semega, 2019). Income inequality is a social issue because it can have widespread effects on physical and mental health. Income inequality could also have a negative impact on the American economy because there are fewer people contributing to the economy. Decreasing the American income gap by assisting the poor could boost the economy and improve the overall well-being of millions of Americans with low SES. Examining public opinion on government assistance is important because previous studies have found that public opinion could heavily influence the decisions of policy makers (Brooks & Manza, 2006, p. 490). Therefore, finding specific income or political groups that do not support the government helping the poor could give social activists target audiences to focus on when changing public opinion. If more groups support the government helping the poor, then policy makers could change policies to help the poor.

Background

It was difficult to find any research that did not support my hypotheses that people with lower SES and more democratic political views would be more likely to support the government helping the poor. Prior research provided new reasons for why people support the government

helping the poor. One of the most prominent reasons I found in past research was that people were driven to support government spending because of self-interest. Research also suggested that people have varying levels of support for the government helping the poor depending on what kind of programs the government funds.

The politics of welfare policy in Sweden: structural determinants and attitudinal cleavages, by Svallfors (1991), notably found that income was the most significant determinant of attitudes on political policies. This is one reason why family income is my independent variable. Svallfors conducted the study analyzing a 1986 survey on attitudes toward welfare policies in Sweden. SES was found to be a stronger determinant than variables such as gender when people formed their attitudes about the government helping the poor. Specifically, Svallfors found that people with higher SES were less likely to support the government to help the poor compared to people with lower and middle SES. This finding suggests research like mine on the public's attitudes towards political issues can be used by policy makers to make decisions representative of public opinion.

Jason Weeden and Robert Kurzban's (2017) research article *Self-Interest Is Often a Major Determinant of Issue Attitudes* found that the main driving force shaping people's political attitudes is self-interest. This supports the findings of research by other scholars (Campbell, 2016; Burgoon & Dekker, 2010). This idea, again, suggests that people with higher SES are less likely to benefit from these programs directly, so they are less likely to support them. To study self-interest, the researchers examined current attitudes on self-interest as they relate to people's attitudes on political issues. The research was meant to give policy makers and scholars a more contemporary look at these issues because past research has been limited since the 1950s.

The next study I examined was very similar to the study I conducted and was the most influential on my hypotheses and research. Like my research, Campbell (2016) looked at how past economic hardship and experiences influenced attitudes on whether the government should help the poor in *The Formative Years, Economic Hardship, and Beliefs about the Government's Role in Lessening Poverty*. The study focused on two main hypotheses and used GSS data. Firstly, the economic vulnerability hypothesis stated that, “economic position influences whether someone will support government spending on poverty programs,” (Campbell, 2016, p. 245). Campbell hypothesizing that individual’s economic standing influences people’s attitudes on the government helping the poor heavily influenced my research question. Secondly, the self-interest hypothesis reads “individuals take their own goals and whether they will be affected into consideration when they consider if they will support the government helping,” (Campbell, 2016, p. 245). People’s self-interest could influence their opinions on the government helping the poor. If someone was in the lower SES, they would be more likely to believe the government should help the poor because they thought they could benefit (Campbell, 2016, p. 245). As expected, the study found that people with a lower socioeconomic status were more likely to report the government should help the poor (Campbell, 2016, p. 254). This study’s limitations were that the earliest data was from 1948, so conducting similar research with newer data like in my research is relevant. Also, income inequality has increased since the 1990s which makes recent research on this topic useful for the current economic situation in the U.S. (Semega et al., 2019).

Burgoon and Dekker (2010) conducted a study titled, *Flexible employment, economic insecurity and social policy preferences in Europe*. Their goal was to determine if part-time employment and temporary employment influenced people’s attitudes on the government creating policies to help the unemployed. In other words, if someone without a stable job not

having job security influenced his or her opinions on whether the government should help the poor. Their self-interest could have played a role in Burgoon and Dekker's finding that they were more likely to support the government helping the unemployed compared to those with full-time jobs. This finding helped lead me to make my hypothesis that people with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to support the government helping the poor. Like the studies by Campbell (2016) and Weeden and Kurzban (2017), Burgoon and Dekker also suggested that they found self-interest to be a big factor in people forming their attitudes on the issue.

Nadja Wehl (2019) wrote *The (ir)relevance of unemployment for labour market policy attitudes and welfare state attitudes*. Wehl's study attempted to challenge research on self-interest significantly influencing people's policy attitudes. Wehl examined if factors influencing people's self-interest like risk of unemployment, egalitarian beliefs, or labor market policy attitudes influenced people's policy attitudes. Wehl researched this by studying data from the European Social Survey of 31 European countries. Wehl found that both the employed and unemployed have similar attitudes on labor market policies and egalitarian beliefs. Because people who are employed and unemployed would most likely be in different socioeconomic classes, this suggests that socioeconomic status may not be an important factor in determining people's attitudes on whether the government should help the poor. This suggests that self-interest tied to income level is not a significant factor in whether someone supports the government helping the poor. This contradicts other studies by Campbell (2016), Weeden and Kurzban (2017), and Burgoon and Dekker (2010). However, Wehl stated that the study had a lot of limitations because outside factors could have influenced the attitudes found.

Martin Gilens and Adam Thal (2018) offered an alternative explanation to why people in the upper classes support the government helping the poor even though they would not directly

benefit in *Doing Well and Doing Good? How Concern for Others Shapes Policy Preferences and Partisanship among Affluent Americans*. They studied whether altruistic motivations influenced people's decisions to support the government helping the poor. They found that people with lower socioeconomic status were not likely to be influenced by altruistic beliefs, but people with higher incomes were likely to be influenced by altruism. Additionally, people with higher socioeconomic status who were more liberal were significantly more likely to support the government helping the poor because they had altruistic beliefs. This could be significant because Gilens and Thal found that people in the upper classes were more likely to influence government policy making compared to people in the lower class. Finding that political affiliation tied to altruistic beliefs significantly influenced my hypothesis that people who are more liberal will be more likely to support the government helping the poor compared to moderates and conservatives.

Alberto Alesina, an economics professor at Harvard, and Eliana La Ferrara, an economics professor at Bocconi University, (2005) examined factors that influence people's attitudes towards redistribution of money in *Preferences for redistribution in the land of opportunities*. The researchers analyzed data from the 1978-1991 General Social Survey. Like most of the studies I have looked at, Alesina and Ferrara found that current income influences people's attitudes on whether the government should redistribute money to the poor. This led me to hypothesize that people with higher socioeconomic status being less likely to support the government helping the poor. They also found that other factors including being younger, female, African American, and having less education all made people significantly more likely to support redistribution. This could mean that age, gender, race, and education level could influence people's opinions on whether the government is responsible for helping the poor. This

suggests that there are other factors besides political affiliation that may be influential to people's attitudes besides income and political affiliation.

The next article I examined was by Brooks and Manza (2006) titled *Social Policy Responsiveness in Developed Democracies*. The researchers found that people's social policy preferences had a sizable influence over welfare state spending efforts in OECD democracies (Brooks & Manza, 2006). Public opinion influencing governmental policy is significant to my research because it emphasizes how my research can be used by social activists or policy makers. Brooks and Manza used cross-sectional time-series data to analyze how public opinion influenced governmental policy over time. A relevant theory used was the power resources theory, which examined how people with higher economic positions had more power and how it affected policy (Brooks & Manza, 2006, p. 477). Looking at economic position as it relates to someone's power to affect policy making is linked to my research because I analyzed attitudes related to the government helping the poor which could influence policies. This study supports the relevance and need for my research because Brooks and Manza did not specifically look at attitudes about helping the poor, so I filled a gap where their research was lacking.

William Franko (2016) examined if there was a positive correlation between income inequality and the public's attitude on the government redistributing wealth in *Political Context, Government Redistribution, and the Public's Response to Growing Economic Inequality*. Franko's study used time-series cross-sectional data covering over three decades and all 50 states, meaning he analyzed each state separately (2016, p. 957). Because of this, Franko was more focused on geographic location whereas I was interested in political affiliation. Franko found that public attitudes in favor of the government's redistribution of wealth went up when economic inequality increased. My research expanded on Franko's by investigating how other

differences in economic standing such as family income relate to attitudes on the government helping the poor.

Hasenfeld and Rafferty's (1989) findings supported my hypothesis that people with lower SES and more liberal political views are more likely to report the government should help the poor in *The Determinants of Public Attitudes Toward the Welfare State*. This study focused on data from the 1983 Detroit Area Study. Hasenfeld and Rafferty's study is fairly dated, but the results were supported again in Abner's (2011) study called *Determinants of Welfare Policy Attitudes: A Contextual Level Analysis*. Abner's study looked at how factors related to residential context were connected to attitudes towards welfare policy. The study focused on neighborhoods around Chicago and was different from my research because it had more control variables like race, religion, age, employment, etc. Abner found that "Lower income respondents residing in neighborhoods with higher household public assistance use are more likely to endorse positive attitudes toward welfare than their higher income neighbors," (Abner, 2011, p. 466). This finding leads me to predict that people with low SES are most likely to think the government should help the poor with things like welfare.

Both the Hasenfeld and Rafferty and Abner's studies were that the more democratic a respondent was, the more likely it was that he or she would support welfare (Abner, 2011; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). This led me to make my second hypothesis that the more liberal someone is, the more likely they will support the government helping the poor. Abner found that there was an association between people having more democratic political affiliations and being more supportive of the government helping the poor with welfare. This means that a person having more liberal views could cause them to support welfare despite them not getting anything out of it if they were in the middle or upper SES. It's possible that democrats were found to be

more supportive of the government helping the poor because they have more collectivist views of society compared to republicans who tend to have more individualistic views of society. Seeing society as collectivist could make them think the government should help people instead of thinking the poor should help themselves. Comparatively, the study by Svallfors found that income was the clearest determinant of people's political attitudes on issues such as if the government should help the poor. This could suggest that political affiliation does not influence people's attitudes on whether the government should help the poor.

Reaching out or pulling back: macroeconomic conditions and public [US] support for social welfare spending by Kam and Nam (2008) pointed out some factors that could have influenced my research. The study found that the more inflation there was in the U.S., the more support social welfare spending got. Finding that the economic climate could affect attitudes on whether the government should help the poor could be important for future research. Moreover, this study supports the idea that when people think there is more economic hardship, they are more likely to support the government helping the poor. This could also support my hypothesis that people with more economic hardship, or people in the low SES, will be more supportive of the government helping the poor. Other studies done by Campbell, Weeden and Kurzban, and Burgoon and Dekker also supported the argument that self-interest motivates people's opinions on the government helping the poor (Campbell, 2016; Weeden & Kurzban, 2017; Burgoon & Dekker, 2010).

James Kluegel's (1987) study *Macro-economic Problems, Beliefs about the Poor and Attitudes Toward Welfare Spending* did not support the findings from Kam and Nam's (2008) study. Kluegel found that the more inflation there was, the less respondents liked the poor. Because public attitudes about the poor influence people's attitudes towards whether the

government should help the poor, this is significant. Further research could examine this. An explanation for why Kluegel's study contradicted Kam and Nam's could be explained by the large gap in time between when the studies were conducted. This is significant because it shows how vastly different people's opinions on the government helping the poor can be depending on when they are asked about it. As a result, my research on recent data from both 2008 and 2018 is important to examine how the public feels in recent years about the issue. This will allow policy makers to make informed decisions about current public attitudes.

Lowery and Sigelman (1982) researched *Party Identification and Public Spending Priorities in the American Electorate* which explored if political affiliation played a role in determining people's attitudes towards government spending. The researchers analyzed data from the 1973 and 1980 General Social Survey. The findings were significant because they contradict all of the other research I have found exploring political affiliation as it relates to people's attitudes on the government helping the poor. Lowery and Sigelman found that political affiliation was unrelated to people's preferences about governmental policy. This could mean that my hypothesis about people with more liberal political affiliation being more likely to support the government helping the poor will be disproven. The reason Lowery and Sigelman found these results in their study could have been because it was a dated study.

Paul Goren (2000) researched a study titled *Political expertise and principled political thought [in the US]*. Goren examined National Election Study surveys from 1990 and 1992. Goren aimed to test a hypothesis supported by other researchers; people gaining more political knowledge strengthens the relationship between their core values and their attitudes towards policies. If supported, this would mean that political affiliation was not as significant as core beliefs in affecting people's attitudes towards the government helping the poor. Goren's research did not

support the hypothesis held by other researchers. Goren argued that this meant political affiliation was not a strong implication of whether someone would support the government helping the poor. This finding goes against my hypothesis related to liberals being more likely to support the government helping the poor. Goren only studied two years of data, so that may have been a limitation of his study.

Hypotheses

My first hypothesis is that respondents with higher incomes are less likely to report the government should help the poor compared to those with middle or low incomes. People with a higher family income could feel less sympathy for the poor and assume that they should work harder to get out of poverty. Additionally, supporting the government helping the poor may not be in the self-interest of people in the middle and upper SES. My second hypothesis is that the association between family incomes and attitudes about the government helping the poor will be less pronounced among respondents who identify themselves as politically liberal. As found in past research, people who have more liberal political beliefs could be more likely to support the government helping the poor because of their values associated with their political beliefs.

Method

Sample

The cross-sectional data collected from the General Social Survey (GSS) was analyzed (Smith et al., 2019). The GSS surveyed a nationally representative sample of adults 18 and older living in non-institutionalized households in the conterminous United States and was given in English or Spanish (Smith et al., 2019). Specifically, a combined dataset from the 2008 GSS ($N=2,023$) and 2018 GSS ($N=2,348$) were analyzed (Smith et al., 2019). These two datasets

from 2008 and 2018 were combined to increase the number of cases in the sample examined because the questions on the GSS I looked at was only asked to a subsample of the GSS. The subsample was too small to get meaningful results after analysis. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago conducted the 2008 and 2018 GSS. The independent variable was family income and the dependent variable was attitudes on how to help the poor. The control variable was political affiliation.

Measures

The dependent variable I focused on was whether Americans thought the U.S. government should help the poor. The survey question was from both the 2008 and 2018 GSS ($N=2,852$). I recoded this variable to make more meaningful response categories for analysis. The specific survey question asked was “I’d like to talk with you about issues some people tell us are important. Please look at CARD BC. Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans; they are at Point 1 on this card. Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself; they are at Point 5. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you made up your mind on this?” These original response categories were used to gauge people’s attitudes on government assistance (1=Government, 2=between Government and Agree with Both, 3=Agree with Both, 4=between Agree with Both and People Help Selves, 5=People Help Selves). The recoded response categories were the government should be responsible (1=Government or between Government and Agree with Both), both (2=Agree with Both), and individuals should help themselves (3= between Agree with Both and People Help Selves or People Help Selves).

My independent variable was family annual income. I recoded the original total family income variable into three categories including upper, middle, and lower SES. The original variable was from the 2008 and 2018 GSS to show total family income ($N=3,926$). Because of differences in cost of living between 2008 and 2018, there were a couple small differences in the two datasets (2008 and 2018) which were adjusted for. For example, the family income variable's question was slightly different in response categories, but I recoded the family income variable accordingly to make the variables effectively work together. The original response categories for the 2018 GSS included smaller intervals for response categories (1=under \$1,000, 2=\$1,000 to \$2,999, 3=\$3,000 to \$3,999, 4=\$4,000 to \$4,999, 5=\$5,000 to \$5,999, 6=\$6,000 to \$6,999, 7=\$7,000 to \$7,999, 8=\$8,000 to \$9,999, 9=\$10,000 to \$12,499, 10=\$12,500 to \$14,999, 11=\$15,000 to \$17,499, 12=\$17,500 to \$19,999, 13=\$20,000 to \$22,499, 14=\$22,500 to \$24,999, 15=\$25,000 to \$29,999, 16=\$30,000 to \$34,999, 17=\$35,000 to \$39,999, 18=\$40,000 to \$49,999, 19=\$50,000 to \$59,999, 20=\$60,000 to \$74,999, 21=\$75,000 to \$89,999, 22=\$90,000 to \$109,999, 23=\$110,000 to \$129,999, 24=\$130,000 to \$149,999, 25=\$150,000 to \$169,999, 26=\$170,000 and over, 27=refused to answer, 98=don't know, and 0=not applicable). The small difference between the 2008 and 2018 GSS was that the highest income available to choose was smaller in 2008 (25=\$150,000 or more). Because of the differences in cost of living between 2008 and 2018, I adjusted the values for lower, middle, and upper classes between 2008 and 2018. For the 2008 dataset, I made the lower socioeconomic status (1=0 to \$34,999), the middle socioeconomic status (2=\$35,000 to \$109,999), and the upper class (3=\$110,000 or more). For the 2018 data, I recoded the total family income to represent lower socioeconomic status (1=0 to \$39,999), middle socioeconomic status (2=\$40,000 to \$129,999), upper socioeconomic status (3=\$130,000 to \$170,000+). I chose the socioeconomic grouping values (lower, middle, and

upper) by using the data provided in an article defining the middle class (Real Median Household Income in the United States, 2019). The article said that the middle class includes anyone with a family income that is 2/3 the median income of the country through anyone who has a family income doubling the median family income in an area (Real Median Household Income in the United States, 2019). I based the categories I chose to recode the family income variable on this definition because the median income in 2008 was \$58,000 and was \$63,000 in 2018- which is another reason the recoded categories are slightly different. The family income variable was examined to see if it had a significant influence on Americans attitudes related to the government's role in helping the poor.

My control variable was self-identified political affiliation. The survey question was "I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal--point 1--to extremely conservative--point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?" Originally, there were 7 response categories (1=Extremely Liberal, 2=Liberal, 3=Slightly Liberal, 4=Moderate, 5=Slightly Conservative, 6=Conservative, 7=Extremely Conservative). I recoded the variable to make three categories including liberal (1=Extremely Liberal, Liberal, and Slightly Liberal), moderate (2=Moderate), and Conservative (3=Slightly Conservative, Conservative, and Extremely Conservative).

Analytical Plans

To test my hypothesis, I used crosstabulation analyses and chi-square tests. **Results**

Figure 1 demonstrates the frequency distribution of the dependent variable examining American attitudes on whether the government should help the poor or if the poor should help themselves. In the frequency distribution, about a third (32.1%) of respondents said the

government was responsible, almost half (44.2%) chose both, and almost a quarter (23.7%) responded that poor individuals should help themselves.

Figure 2 displays the independent variable which is annual family income. A large percentage of respondents (39%) were in the lower class, almost half (46.5%) made up the middle class, and a small amount (14.5%) were in the upper class.

The frequency distribution for the political affiliation control variable is in Figure 3. Looking at the frequency distribution of the political affiliation, the smallest percentage (28.4%) were liberal, the largest group (38.2%) identified as moderate, and about a third (33.5%) were conservative).

I first examined the association between family income and views on whether the government should help the poor for the total sample, without separating it by political views (data not shown). The total sample ($N=2,506$) had a significant association at $p < .001$ ($\chi^2 = 72.134$, $df = 4$). This suggests that income levels and views on the government's role of helping the poor is associated.

Then, annual family income was examined as it related to views about if the government should help the poor and how it could be linked to political views. Figure 4 shows the results. For those respondents who identified as having moderate political views ($n=938$), 32.8% of the lower class, 25.4% of the middle class, and 17.6% of the upper class reported that the government should be responsible for helping the poor. In the same moderate sample, 13.6% of respondents with low incomes, 20.0% with middle class incomes, and 30.4% of respondents with high incomes said it should be the poor's responsibility to help themselves. The differences were significant based on chi-square tests with $p < .001$ ($\chi^2 = 21.466$, $df = 4$). Overall, the majority of

moderates (53.9%) reported thinking that both the government should help the poor and the poor should help themselves compared to the other response categories.

As for conservatives (n=839), 56.6% of the upper class, 47.4% of the middle class, and 26.1% of the lower class reported that they believe the poor should help themselves rather than the government helping the poor. Only 9.1% of the upper class compared to 13.7% of the middle class and 27.9% of the lower class reported that the government should be responsible for helping the poor. Chi-square tests suggest these differences in family income are significant because $p < .001$ ($\chi^2 = 57.075$, $df = 4$) (Figure 4). That is, the upper class who have conservative political views appear to be the least likely to support the government being responsible for helping the poor.

For liberals (n = 729), differences in opinions across family income levels were much smaller. For liberals, 55.1% in the lower SES, 52.3% in the middle SES, and 46.3% in the upper SES reported supporting the government helping the poor. Only 8.5% in the lower SES, 10.8% in the middle SES, and 12.2% in the upper SES believed that the poor should be responsible for helping themselves. Lastly, a moderate 36.4% in the lower SES, 36.8% in the middle SES, and 41.5% of people in the upper SES thought that both the government and the poor should help the poor. Chi-square test suggests that differences in attitudes across three income groups are not significant for liberals ($\chi^2 = 3.34$, $df = 4$, $p = .502$).

In sum, looking at just people that identified as moderate, the respondents in the lower class were most likely to think the government should help the poor compared to the middle and upper class. The lower-class moderates were also the most likely out of the middle and upper class to report thinking the government should help the poor. Looking at the conservatives, there was a similar trend because the lower class was the most likely to report thinking the government

should help the poor compared to the middle and upper classes. The conservative lower class was also more likely than the middle and upper class to think the government should help the poor and the poor should help themselves. In contrast, family income was not related to people's views that the government should help the poor among people who identified as having liberal political beliefs. All in all, there appeared to be a significant association between family income and views on the government's role in helping the poor for respondents who identified as having moderate or conservative political views, but not for those who identified as liberal. Income level did not matter for people's beliefs about if the government should help the poor for liberal respondents. Liberal respondents at all income levels were more likely to report the government should help the poor across all income levels. Liberal respondents were also more likely than moderate and conservative respondents to report that the government should help the poor across all income levels.

Discussion

Overall, the largest share (44%) of Americans were found to believe that both the government and the poor are responsible for helping the poor. Adults in different social classes were found to have varying views on whether the government should help the poor. People with upper SES were the most likely to think that the poor should be responsible for helping themselves. Further analyses showed, however, that the association between family annual income and attitudes on the government helping the poor differed by political affiliation. Respondents with higher incomes were the least likely to report thinking the government should help the poor among moderates and conservatives. Liberals across all income levels were found to be more likely than moderates and conservatives to report thinking the government should

help the poor. Upper-class conservatives were found to be least likely to report that it is the government's responsibility (9.1%).

My hypothesis that people with upper SES would be less likely to support the government helping the poor compared to lower and middle SES was supported for the total sample. This finding supports the overwhelming number of studies that found people with lower SES were more likely to support the government helping the poor (Abner, 2011; Campbell, 1996; Franko, 2016; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). Those past studies were conducted over a large time span and lacked recent data. My research filled this gap to give social activists and policy makers more recent information on public opinion related to supporting the government helping the poor. Having data representative of recent public opinion is important because past research done by Kam and Nam (2008), along with Kluegel (1987), found that people's opinions can change over time depending on various economic factors. Having recent information available can help policy makers make informed decisions.

My hypothesis that people with more liberal political affiliations would be more likely to support the government helping the poor was also supported. There was more support for the government helping the poor from liberals across all income levels. This is significant because annual family income did not change the support that liberals had for the government helping the poor. Even upper SES liberals who would not directly benefit from the government helping the poor supported the government helping the poor. Past research on self-interest by Campbell (2016) along with Weeden and Kurzban (2017) supported the idea that people were motivated by self-interest when making decisions about which political policies to support. Their research suggested that people in the upper SES who would not benefit from policies like the government helping the poor would be less likely to support those policies. My research suggests that their

finding may have an exception- people who have more liberal political views are more likely to support policies like the government helping the poor. Additionally, it is important to know that the majority of liberal upper SES respondents supported the government helping the poor because Brooks and Manza (2006) found that people with higher annual incomes have more power to affect policy making which is supported by the power resources theory (p. 477). This means that liberals with higher SES could be essential in using their power to influence policy makers to support their belief that the government should help the poor.

Martin Gilens and Adam Thal (2018) offered an alternative explanation of why people in the upper classes support the government helping the poor by examining altruistic motivations. They found that people with lower socioeconomic status were not likely to be influenced by altruistic beliefs, but people with higher socioeconomic status were likely to be influenced by altruism. This could be significant because Gilens and Thal found that people in the upper classes were more likely to influence government policy making compared to people in the lower class.

A limitation of my study could be that it only examined the 2008 and 2018 GSS datasets. Even though this is relatively recent data, it would not represent public opinion after the COVID-19 pandemic started. Another limitation could be that I went into the research with beliefs about how income and political affiliation are related to people's attitudes on helping the poor. Because I have learned in my sociology classes that people with higher incomes are less likely to help the poor, my research could have been skewed. I did try to balance my research to accurately represent all past research. However, my research could have been affected by my beliefs I brought into the research. Additionally, a limitation could have been that I did not control for

more variables that past research has pointed to as being significant. This means that there could be more influential variables that I did not examine besides income and political affiliation.

Future studies could take a more longitudinal study approach to get a broader idea of the topics analyzed. This could give social activists trying to get help change policies a better idea of who to persuade to support their own beliefs. Lastly, the majority of Americans in the study responded that they think both the government and the poor should be responsible for helping the poor. Future research could investigate which specific programs involving both the poor and the government are liked the best by Americans.

Policy makers could use the findings of this study to better represent the views of the American people. Social activists and policy makers can also use the information gathered to target groups who are least likely to agree with their attitudes on if the government should help the poor. For instance, policy makers and activists interested in creating or changing legislature for the government to help the poor should prioritize persuading moderates and conservatives in the upper class. Additionally, policy makers should consider holding both the government and the public accountable for helping the poor because that is what the largest percentage of Americans wanted.

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Figure 1. Recoded Percentage Distribution of American Adults (18+) Opinions on Whether the Government Should Help the Poor or if the Poor Should Help Themselves: From the 2008 and 2018 General Social Survey

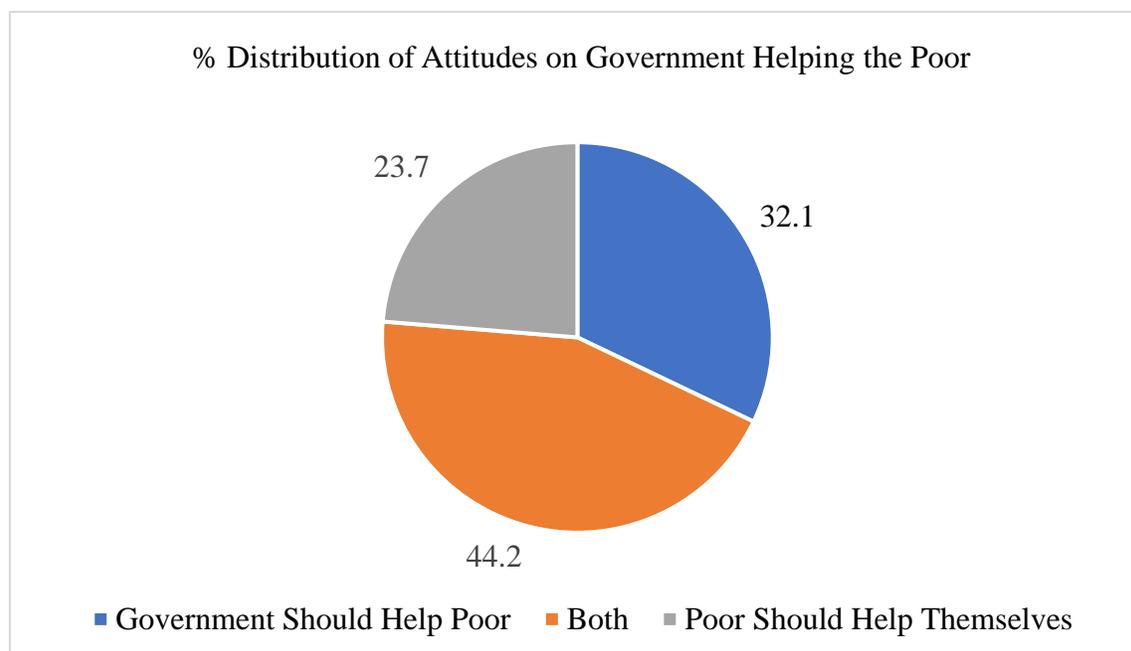


Figure 2. The Recoded Percentage Distribution of American Adults' (18+) on Their Family Income Split Up by Socioeconomic Level (Lower, Middle, Upper): From the 2008 and 2018 General Social Survey

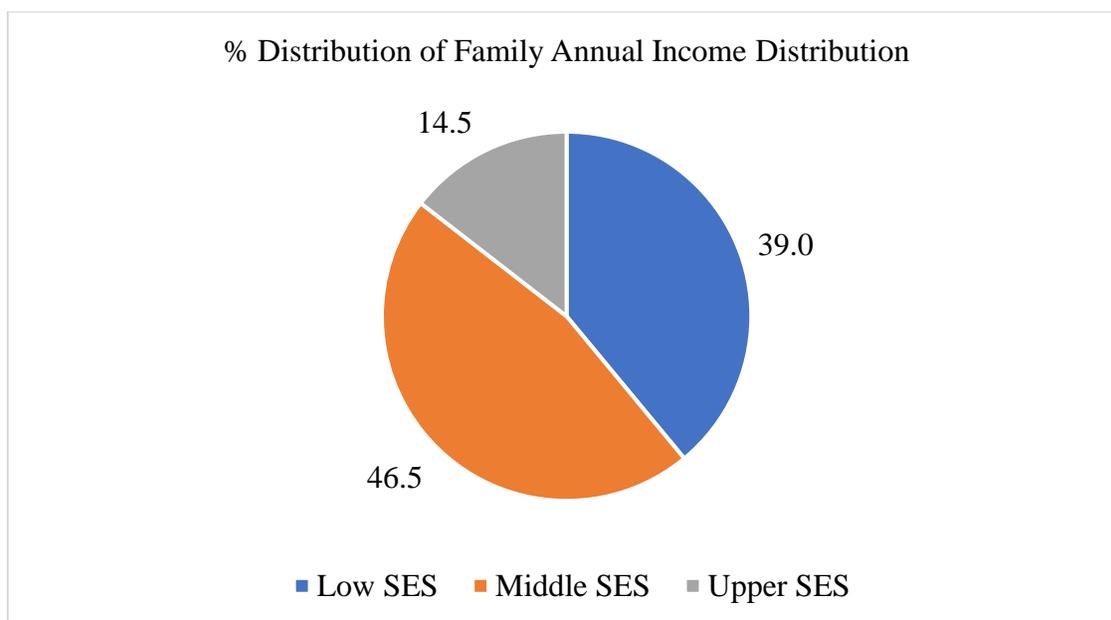


Figure 3. The Recoded Percentage Distribution of American Adults (18+) Self-Identified Political Views: From the 2008 and 2018 General Social Survey

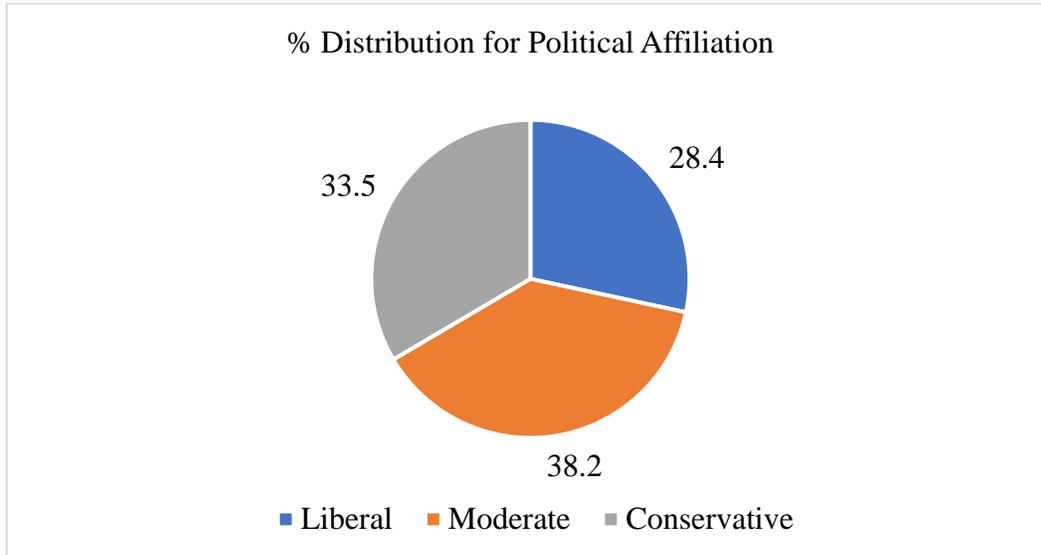


Figure 4. The Crosstabulation and Chi-squared analysis of How Family Income Influences American Adult (18+) Attitudes on the Government Helping the Poor When Controlling for Political Affiliation: From the 2008 and 2018 General Social Survey

