

**An Unlikely Opposition:
Examining Political Threats to the American Welfare State**

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April 22, 2012

Introduction

Over the past four years, the American welfare state has come under increasing political attack. As a result, the escalating criticism over government social spending is now a defining feature of the 2012 presidential contest. The presumptive Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, frames the upcoming election as a choice between an “entitlement society” dependent upon government benefits and an “opportunity society” free from the crutch of social spending. Mr. Romney promises to curb the “massive growth of government” and its “ever-expanding payments” to individuals “hooked” on social programs.¹ Another Republican presidential hopeful, Rick Santorum, similarly decries “the narcotic of government dependency” for “systematically destroying the work ethic” of American citizens.² Public attitudes toward government social spending seem to support both candidates’ positions: 73 percent of Americans blame “wasteful government spending” on “entitlement programs that give money to people who do not deserve it” as the source of U.S. financial woes; a record-high 57 percent have little or no confidence in the ability of federal programs to solve domestic problems.³ Nearly 61 percent of likely voters favor a repeal of President Obama’s health care reform, the latest and perhaps most notorious expansion of the welfare state in the past twenty years.⁴ Since that bill’s passage in 2009, dissatisfaction over government social spending has mobilized into the Tea Party movement, a grassroots coalition of supporters hostile to any expansion of government benefits.⁵

¹ Mitt Romney, “New Hampshire Primary Victory Speech,” Southern New Hampshire University, January 10, 2012, C-SPAN, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IzNeRrD__o

² Rick Santorum, “Town Hall Meeting,” Brentwood, NH, January 4, 2012, C-SPAN, <http://c-spanvideo.org/program/SantorumTo>

³ “Americans Express Historic Negativity Towards U.S. Government,” September 26, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149678/Americans-Express-Historic-Negativity-Toward-Government.aspx>

⁴ “61% Favor Repeal of Health Care Law,” *Rasmussen Reports*, September 20, 2010, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/current_events/healthcare/september_2010/61_favor_repeal_of_heal_care_law

⁵ Tea Party Patriots, “Tea Party Patriots on the Budget.” Last Modified October 2011. <http://www.teapartypatriots.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/66571270-BUDGET.pdf>

Leading up to the 2010-midterm elections, Tea Party supporters organized raucous town hall meetings to negatively characterize President Obama's agenda as "socialist." The movement's rallying cry specifically targeted government social spending policy, which according to one supporter "left the existence of the Republic at risk."⁶ Today, almost a third of Americans consider themselves "supporters" of the Tea Party movement.⁷

But despite signs of growing hostility towards the American welfare state, this political trend cannot be understood exclusively from media reports or public opinion surveys. In order to determine the credibility of this potential threat, the emerging anti-welfare state movement warrants an inquiry beyond the limitations of polling and political speeches. While rhetoric and polling data capture a snapshot of attitudes on the American welfare state, both suffer from problems of reliability and hyperbole. Polling results, though helpful, are highly contingent on the particular phrasing of each question. For example, surveys lack a consensus definition of what constitutes the welfare state—ranging from "entitlements" to "anti-poverty programs."

Polling results also shift depending upon whether a questionnaire lists individual programs or asks a generalized question about government spending. The subjectivity and volatility inherent to survey questions makes polling an imprecise instrument for deducing public opinion. By acknowledging the pitfalls of polling, a meta-analysis of survey results indicates two important characteristics of the anti-social spending political trend: first, the public is likely more ambivalent in their opposition to the welfare state than the antagonistic rhetoric might suggest.

Second, political movements against social spending are not new. The historical

⁶ Ian Urbina and Katharine Q. Seelye, "Beyond Beltway, Health Debate Turns Hostile," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2004. Web. Accessed March 17, 2012.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/12/health/policy/12townhall.html?scp=1&sq=august%202009%20town%20hall%20tea%20party&st=cse>

⁷ *USA Today/Gallup* polls, March 26–28, 2010 and June 11–13, 2010. These figures are further explained in Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 25-44.

precedent for anti-welfare state sentiment dates back to the Great Depression. After creating numerous government programs under his New Deal agenda, President Franklin Roosevelt faced political blowback. Only three years after passing the Social Security Act, Republicans eroded the Democrat's political control "when the party lost over seventy House seats in the 1938 midterm election."⁸ Then, in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson passed another string of federal programs—from Head Start to Medicaid—as a part of his Great Society initiative. The results were nearly identical to FDR's experience: "1966 election was akin to that of 1938, producing large losses for congressional Democrats."⁹ Barack Obama's presidency repeated history for a third time when, after passing his Stimulus Package and the Affordable Care Act in 2009 and 2010, the midterm elections of 2010 erased Democratic gains from 2006 and 2008 and resulted in the highest loss of either party in a House midterm election since 1938.¹⁰ In context, the surging political opposition over government social expenditures is neither as monolithic nor as unprecedented as it may seem at first glance.

And yet for those who seek to retain the welfare state for reasons of justice, this is still a call to action. The emerging political trend, though less alarming, is no less an impediment to anti-poverty efforts and to the well being of millions of Americans who depend on government benefits to keep their heads above water. Although I do not seek to provide a defense of the justice or of the policies of the welfare state, the import of this opposition highlights the indelible role of politics in manifesting ethics and policy. Hence, the paper opens with a consideration of the harms of a political trend hostile to government social spending. Based on evidence from the current U.S. model as well as European welfare states, I assume that government social

⁸ Christopher Howard, *The Welfare State Nobody Knows: Debunking Myths About U.S. Social Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, 55-56.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ronald Brownstein, "Heartland Headache," *National Journal*. National Journal, Nov. 5, 2010. Web. Accessed March 17, 2012. <http://nationaljournal.com/columns/political-connections/a-heartland-headache-for-dems-20101104>

expenditures, when properly constructed and implemented, can successfully address the issues of poverty; therefore, opposition to spending constitutes a real threat to improvements in Americans' well-being. Next, the paper works to understand the political movement. This begins by identifying peculiarities of the trend, including two unique political puzzles that counter long-held theory on voting behavior and complicate a traditional view of opposition movements. In order to explain the motivations behind both paradoxes, the paper offers several factors that might elucidate the trend's dynamism. Lastly, the paper will present a series of recommendations for addressing the anti-welfare state political movement.

Harms of a Political Trend Against Social Spending

A political trend hostile to government social spending injures America's capacity for social justice. Reducing poverty in the United States will require a deliberate debate over program effectiveness and a willingness to entertain all policy options, even if that means increasing government spending. However, the current political climate precludes both possibilities. While polling data indicates that opposition to the American welfare state is neither coherent nor uniform, a recent analysis of voting behavior reflects growing support for an anti-government message among Democrats, Republicans and Tea Party members alike. Calls for smaller government and, in particular, cuts to the social safety net, impute a generalized solution—decentralization, cuts, and repeal—where policy nuance is required. Even supporters of spending reductions retreat from their position when asked about cutting specific programs. For example, 61% of those polled supported generic cuts to domestic spending, while only 30% of those also supported cuts to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and “Anti-poverty programs.”¹¹ When offered specifics, Americans are hesitant to dismantle the welfare state; but,

¹¹ *Pew Research Center* poll, March 8-14, 2011. <http://www.pollingreport.com/budget5.htm>

unfortunately, the ballot box does not offer specific policy options. Candidates supporting “across the board” cuts have little incentive to clarify their position on specific components of the social safety net. Thus, the real danger of this political trend is its categorical objection to government social spending—a position that overlooks even prudent government expenditures.

Although retrenchment has enjoyed increased public support, this approach fails to consider the potential efficacy of government spending to reduce poverty and improve capabilities. On the one hand, voters, rightfully, voice their substantive complaints with American welfare state. Despite being of comparable size and cost to European welfare states, the U.S. has the highest rate of relative poverty of any industrialized country.¹² On the other hand, frustrated voters fail to connect their complaints with alternative welfare state models. Instead of retrenchment, the cross-country comparisons demonstrate how a more expansive government social safety net might improve outcomes. Research conducted by Timothy Smeeding, Janet Gornic, and Markus Jantti, finds that “the tax and transfer policies of other countries do far more to reduce poverty than similar policies in the United States.”¹³ According to their study, the ineffectiveness of U.S. policy correlates with “the level of expenditures; The United States ranks the lowest in non-elderly cash and near-cash social spending as a percentage of GDP, and it has the highest non-elderly poverty rate.”¹⁴ Even though scholars dispute causal links between social spending and program effectiveness, policy makers and scholars universally agree that European welfare states are more effective at reducing poverty.¹⁵ In light of cross-country comparisons, why has the political discourse not been a choice between the status quo

¹² Christopher Howard, *The Welfare State Nobody Knows: Debunking Myths About U.S. Social Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, 23-26 and Daniel R. Meyer and Geoffrey L. Wallace, “Poverty Levels and Trends in Comparative Perspective” in *Changing Poverty, Changing Policies*, ed. Maria Cancian and Sheldon Danziger (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 53.

¹³ Meyer and Wallace, 55

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Howard, 153

and a European-style approach? Instead, the current political divide pits those who would deconstruct the American welfare state against those who would protect, render more effective, and, perhaps, extend the current level of government benefits.

This lacuna between politics and policy reveals the harm of an anti-welfare state movement: the political trend portends cuts to the social safety net based upon a skewed political discourse. This is not to say that reasonable and justifiable opposition to the expansion of government benefits does not exist. Skeptics of government intervention provide a necessary check on the efficiency of expenditure.¹⁶ However, hesitance for government action does not warrant unconditional and non-negotiable calls for decentralization and cuts. Unlike historical precedent, the current political trend holds a position on social spending that is more conservative than ever before. In fact, according to political scientist Jacob Hacker, the Republican party has “moved farther to the right than the Democratic party has drifted to the left,” resulting in a degree of “asymmetric polarization” that has produced movements like the Tea Party.¹⁷ And with one political party offering more extreme policy positions, elections become even more consequential.

Two Political Puzzles

Harms of the anti-welfare state movement are rooted in the complexity of the opposition. Growing disdain for government social spending is not a straightforward phenomenon; it presents two electoral puzzles. The first concerns a paradox of voting behavior and economic self-interest: voters who support candidates promising to cut government spending are, more often than not, beneficiaries of the welfare state themselves. Take, for example, Ki Gulbranson

¹⁶ This will also be examined further as a possible causal factor in producing anti-self interest voting behavior.

¹⁷ Jacob Hacker, Paul Pierson. *Off center: the Republican revolution and the erosion of American democracy*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 56-80

from Lindstrom, Minn. A New York Times article described Mr. Gulbranson as someone who:

makes about \$39,000 a year and wants you to know that he does not need any help from the federal government. He says that too many Americans lean on taxpayers rather than living within their means. He supports politicians who promise to cut government spending. In 2010, he printed T-shirts for the Tea Party campaign of a neighbor, Chip Cravaack, who ousted this region's long-serving Democratic congressman. Yet this year, as in each of the past three years, Mr. Gulbranson, 57, is counting on a payment of several thousand dollars from the federal government, a subsidy for working families called the earned-income tax credit. He has signed up his three school-age children to eat free breakfast and lunch at federal expense. And Medicare paid for his mother, 88, to have hip surgery twice.

Over the past decade, voters like Mr. Gulbranson have become the rule, not the exception.

Increasingly, a person's electoral choice is made irrespective of their economic self-interest.

Studies by Dean Lacey at Dartmouth University show that since the 1980s, Republicans have gained seats in states where the federal government spends more than it collects, despite the GOP's calls for reduced government social spending. Lacey's results identify a peculiar

correlation, where the "greater the dependence [on government benefit programs], the greater support for Republican candidates," even after controlling for demographics and social issues.¹⁸

Evidence of antithetical voting behavior becomes even sharper in impoverished areas. According to a New York Times analysis, "in the 100 counties with the highest dependence on federal aid, John McCain, who campaigned on a platform of reducing government benefits, won two-thirds of them" in the 2008 Presidential election.¹⁹ The first puzzle, then, is: Why do poor Americans, and beneficiaries generally, support political candidates that promise to cut the social safety net?

The second puzzle grapples with inconsistent political reaction towards government social spending. As previously mentioned, the specificity of a poll can radically alter the survey results. For example, overall negativity towards the American welfare state evaporates when

¹⁸ Lacey, Dean. "A Curious Paradox of the Red States and Blue States: Federal Spending and Electoral Votes in the 2000 Election." *The Hoover Institution* (2002): 88

¹⁹ Appelbaum, Binyamin and Robert Gebeloff. "Even Critics of Safety Net Increasingly Depend on It" *New York Times*. New York Times, 11 Feb 2012. Web. 20 Feb 2012.

pollsters ask questions about individual programs. In one survey, a majority of likely voters supported generic cuts to government spending, but even larger majorities opposed specific cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and “Anti-poverty programs.”²⁰ Public opinion over President Obama’s healthcare reform experienced a similar “contrasting pattern” because “even as many Americans adopted more negative overall assessments of reform...six or more out of ten continued to favor many of the core elements of the new law.”²¹ The data suggest an ambivalent public, eager to make cuts to “wasteful” social expenditures but reticent to axe programs they rely upon. The second puzzle, therefore, is: why has overall support for government spending declined in recent years, while Americans continue to favor specific social programs and certain components of others?

Dynamism of the Political Trend

Although longstanding theory among economists and political scientists views voting behavior as a “rational calculus made by thrifty, self-interested taxpayers concerned only with maximizing their own utility income,” this is rarely the case.²² Research conducted by political scientist Donald Philip Green shows that “personal costs and benefits are rather poor predictors of how people want government to behave...either in the area of bilingual education, affirmative action, income redistribution, social security, or a host of other social issues and concerns.”²³ The American welfare state is no exception. Unique to government social expenditures, however, is the aforementioned paradox: public support for cutting government overall, but a reluctance to

²⁰ *USA Today/Gallup* poll, January 14-16, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145790/Americans-Oppose-Cuts-Education-Social-Security-Defense.aspx>

²¹ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Suzanne Mettler, “Structural Framing: Health Care Reform and Changing American Politics,” presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, WA, September 1-4, 2011.

²² Deborah Guber, “The Marketplace: Motivating the Citizen-Consumer” in *The Grassroots of a Green Revolution: Polling America on the Environment* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003), 154

²³ Donald Philip Green, “The Price Elasticity of Mass Preferences.” *American Political Science Review* 86, 2003: 128-148.

scrap specific programs. An obvious and unfulfilling response to the political trend simply chalks voting behavior up to irrationality. Indeed, voters cast ballots in complex and unforeseen ways that cannot be modeled through individual cost-benefit analysis. Other passions and interests compete for attention during the decision making process. In that way, voting behavior is just as ‘irrational’ as the sentiments that guide the rest of human existence. However, this does not prevent social science from achieving a greater understanding of how public opinion both forms and is formed by political discourse. It simply changes the way of approaching the question. Therefore, the aim is not to deduce from this political trend a single variable responsible for the motivating voting behavior. The whole of political opinion is something more than its individual parts. Instead, an exploration of voting behavior through the following five factors will elucidate the dynamism of the political trend without identifying a singular causal relationship.

Recognizing the interplay of multiple factors points toward the type of cumulative, large-scale response that this perilous political trend warrants.

1. Citizen-Consumer Dissonance

To some extent, anti-social spending voting behavior may be the result of well-meaning citizens. When persons act contrary to their self-interest, it is oftentimes out of a sense of altruism or prudence. They consider what obligations are owed to society at large. The conventional homo economicus model, however, fails to acknowledge interests beyond personal status. In reality, individuals are able to assess a political decision in both personal and national terms. Philosophy professor Mark Sagoff suggests that voters make a conscious distinction between acting as consumers, “to get what we want for ourselves,” and acting as citizens, “to

achieve what we think is right or best for the community.”²⁴ The dual roles of voters sometimes come into conflict, especially when preferences as consumers are inconsistent with judgments as citizens. Sagoff illustrates this point through anecdotal evidence: he used personal connections with a judge to “fix a couple of tickets” and “yet, at election time, I [Sagoff] helped to vote the corrupt judge out of office.”²⁵ Despite personally benefitting from the judge, Sagoff decided that the harms of cronyism outweighed his gains from the pursuit of rational self-interest.

Polling data, ostensibly, suggests that voting behavior and opposition to the American welfare state operates analogously to Sagoff’s example. Support for cuts to government social expenditures are the result of citizens concerned with the negative consequences of growing U.S. debt. Although public support for the social safety net has sharply declined since President Obama took office, events outside the political realm—namely the global financial crisis and the ensuing recession—have dramatically changed the priorities of voters. The severity and longevity of the economic downturn that began in 2008 has caused voters to reevaluate the American welfare state in light of the pressures of fiscal stringency.²⁶ Faced with depressed tax revenues and increased budget deficits, the issue of “the national debt and government spending” has become one of voters’ top concerns, second only to the economy.²⁷ Recent fall out from the sovereign debt crisis of other European nations has raised the alarm over a “crisis” of U.S. debt. Over 76 percent of those polled say that the debt represents “a major threat” to the “well-being” of the United States.²⁸ An overwhelming majority of Americans—78 percent—believe that

²⁴ Mark Sagoff, “At the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima, or Why Political Questions are Not All Economic” in *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book: Philosophy, Ecology, Economics*, ed Van De Veer & Pierce (New York: Wadsworth, 2003), 314

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John Karl Scholz, Robert Moffitt, and Benjamin Cowan, “Trends in Income Support” in *Changing Poverty, Changing Policies*, ed. Maria Canian and Sheldon Danziger (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 230

²⁷ CBS/*New York Times* poll, Jan. 12-17, 2012. <http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>

²⁸ *Pew Research Center* poll, Dec. 8-11, 2011.

http://poll.orpub.com/document.php?id=quest12.out_852&type=hitlist&num=1

profligate spending “on unneeded or wasteful federal programs is to blame for the budget deficit.”²⁹ Viewed in this light, the political trend supporting cuts in the social safety net seems to be the outgrowth of a concerned citizenry. The movement’s supporters exhibit a rational concern for America’s future: a worsening economy depresses tax revenues, increases budget deficits, and accelerates the U.S. toward an impending debt crisis. The political trend seeks to avoid this doomsday scenario by reducing government social spending. Americans, as consumers, are willing to sacrifice the benefits they receive in order to ensure, as citizens, the nation’s long-term health.

Also according to this dissonance model, the concerned citizen votes against his consumer preferences in order to promote more robust economic growth. While the U.S. currently struggles with 8.2 percent unemployment and growth rates consistently below 3 percent per annum, the situation in Europe is far worse.³⁰ In Spain, Portugal, and Greece the unemployment rate is over 20 percent and growth has been stalled since 2008; even the larger economies of Italy and Ireland have been heavily battered by the global downturn. Since the economic downturn originated in the U.S., many voters are left wondering why Europe has become “the economic sick man” of the world. Most Americans point to differences in government social spending as the independent variable. The severity of Europe’s recession, according to this narrative, is the consequence of countries running tremendous fiscal deficits in order to sustain an expensive welfare state.³¹ Purporting to learn from Europe’s example, conscientious American voters have decided to sacrifice government largesse for the sake of the

²⁹ *USA Today/Gallup* poll, January 14-16, 2011. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145790/Americans-Oppose-Cuts-Education-Social-Security-Defense.aspx>

³⁰ Statistics in this paper are current as of April 2012.

³¹ This narrative emphasizes a negative feedback loop: the increasing burden of government pushed tax revenues even lower because government intervention diminished economic growth. Paul Krugman, “What Ails Europe?” *The New York Times*. Feb. 26, 2012. Web. Accessed March 17, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/27/opinion/krugman-what-ails-europe.html>

overall economy. In a recent poll, 77 percent of likely voters believed that the economic problems overseas called for a “re-examination” of the European welfare model and a change of course here at home.³²

While plausible, fundamental aspects of the citizen-consumer dissonance model rest on dubious assumptions. First, the need to “learn from Europe’s mistake” is complicated by the fact that some European countries have actually fared better than the United States in the recent economic downturn. For example, the unemployment rate in Sweden is 8%; in Germany the rate is even lower, at 6.7%.³³ Contrary to most political narratives, an expansive welfare state does not go hand-in-hand with economic decline or a looming debt crisis. Second, even voters that fear a “European-style” debt-crisis are not uniformly convinced that turning back the welfare state is the best or only solution to the problem. When polled, those who identify the national debt as a “major threat” to the United States prefer a combination of spending cuts and tax increases in order to offset the budget shortfall.³⁴ In a more recent CBS/New York Times poll, 67 percent of likely voters suggested that the U.S. government “increase taxes on households earning one million dollars a year or more, in order to lower the nation’s budget deficit.”³⁵ Third, a majority of those polled reject austerity as the best approach for economic growth. Most respondents, instead, believe that a Keynesian approach of increased “government investments in infrastructure, education, and alternative energy” is “more likely to be successful in growing the U.S. economy and creating jobs.”³⁶ Although concern for growing debt may compel citizens to act on behalf of their country, it does not determine the form of their action. Preferences for a

³² *Harris Interactive* poll, July 14, 2010.

http://poll.orpub.com/document.php?id=quest10.out_6257&type=hitlist&num=11

³³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 2012. http://www.bls.gov/fls/flscomparelf/unemployment.htm#table1_2

³⁴ *Pew Research Center* poll, Dec. 8-11, 2011.

³⁵ *CBS/New York Times* poll Jan. 12-17, 2012.

³⁶ Bloomberg National Poll conducted by Selzer & Company. March 8-11, 2012. N=1,002 adults nationwide. Margin of error ± 3.1 . <http://www.pollingreport.com/budget.htm>

Keynesian stimulus and a more progressive tax rate present policy alternatives with cross-party appeal. Therefore, government social spending has become the target of noble citizenship by choice. Rather than suggesting a policy to curb tax expenditures, this political trend has linked the issue of U.S. debt almost exclusively with the “wasteful” government social programs of an “entitlement society.” Ambivalence over the issue of debt within the anti-welfare state opposition movement ultimately diminishes the value of the consumer-citizen dissonance model. Some Tea Party supporters are, no doubt, motivated out of a sense of being a prudent citizen; however, this is not likely the case for most.

2. Rational Self Interest

Contrary to the citizen-consumer dissonance model, support for dismantling the welfare state may, in fact, be self-interested. This hypothesis begins with the assumption that cuts to government social programs are inevitable, if not imminent. Polls show that a majority of voters believe that the present level of government spending is “unsustainable”—an opinion shared by Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner.³⁷ News reports and analyses from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) also substantiate these claims. If the government continues to spend at current levels, the national debt will exceed 100 percent of GDP by 2021; the cost of interest payments in 2021 alone would trump what the government is expected to spend on defense, Medicare or all of the non-defense discretionary programs.³⁸ Acknowledging that spending cuts, or some combination of cuts and tax increases,

³⁷ Susanna Kim, “Bernanke: Fed Stands Ready to Aid Economy,” ABC News, July 13, 2011. <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/ben-bernanke-federal-reserve-prepared-stimulate-economy/story?id=14061644#.T2UxdIE6LzI>

³⁸ Congressional Budget Office, “Long Term Budget Outlook” *Congressional Budget Office*, June 2011. http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/06-21-Long-Term_Budget_Outlook.pdf

are unavoidable, the emergent opposition movement represents a bold tact of opportunism. By determining the “winners” of the political debate, the movement will dictate the terms of reform.

But, as previously mentioned, the campaign against social spending proposes a systematic dismantling of the welfare state. According to this categorical objection, no program would receive preferential treatment; each would face cuts and decentralization. With the terms of reform fixed, there seems to be no advantage in guiding the axe provided that the movement’s rhetoric matches its legislative intent. Here, the self-interest model assumes a subtler reading of the trend’s sweeping language and, subsequently, reveals the movement’s partiality for certain programs. Republicans and Tea Party officials may profess a categorical objection to all levels of government social spending, but there is evidence of a rhetorical subtext—principally understood by the movement’s supporters. This is entirely a matter of messaging and perception. To the movement’s outsiders, calls for “cuts to government spending” seem ambiguous, generic, and crude. To supporters, that same language articulates a clear plan of action, because the rhetoric aligns with preconceived notions of what “reducing the size of government” actually entails. For example, as observed by the second puzzle of voting behavior, Americans overwhelmingly favor cuts to “wasteful” social programs, but disagree over which areas of the welfare state to excise. When parsed further, a few distinctions emerge: only 11 percent of those polled support cuts to Social Security and Medicare; at the same time, a majority supported cuts to “federal welfare projects,” “federal housing programs,” and “the food stamp program.”³⁹ Specifically among Republicans, a plurality of those polled cited reducing “aid to the unemployed and poor” as their preferred way to decrease government spending.⁴⁰ According to these findings, anger towards government spending is directed at only one half of the American welfare state—the “lower

³⁹ *Harris Interactive* poll, Feb. 16, 2011.

http://poll.orpub.com/document.php?id=quest11.out_16975&type=hitlist&num=17

⁴⁰ *CBS/New York Times* poll, Jan 15-19, 2011.

tier.” Supporters, then, take “cuts to government spending” to mean reductions to means-tested programs, not the entire welfare state.

Furthermore, the nature of cuts proposed by the opposition movement suggests the role of demographics in the self-interest model. When Republicans and Tea Party voters single out “lower tier” federal programs from the broader welfare state, the self-interest model observes a severe racial bias in spending cuts. Political scientist Thomas Edsall supports this view, believing that “the anti-tax, anti-government view of the electorate...is directed at programs serving heavily minority and poor populations.”⁴¹ His theory seems to resolve a contradiction within the polling data, in which education, health, Social Security, crime control, and environmental protection “retain unstinting, and in some cases growing, majority support” while other programs, like TANF, are increasingly maligned.⁴² A recent statement from Rick Santorum confirms, at least anecdotally, Edsall’s suspicion of racism. At a campaign stop in Iowa earlier this year, CBS News reported that Mr. Santorum “singled out blacks as being recipients of assistance through federal benefit programs, telling a mostly-white audience he doesn't want to ‘make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money.’”⁴³

The comments made by Mr. Santorum are not jarringly new. Ronald Reagan’s story of a woman from South Side Chicago committing fraud to keep government benefits remains an enduring piece of the American political lexicon: the stereotypical black female “welfare queen.” Edsall and other proponents of the self-interest model believe that the contemporary anti-welfare state movement is built from racially charged scaffolding. Supporters hear specifics in the generic calls for “government cuts” because of an unconscious perception of racial stereotypes.

⁴¹ Thomas Edsall. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. (W. W. Norton & Company: August 1992), 152-53.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 154

⁴³ Lucy Madison, “Santorum targets blacks in entitlement reform” *CBS News*, Jan. 2, 2012.

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57350990-503544/santorum-targets-blacks-in-entitlement-reform/

Supposed “wastefulness” in minority-serving programs also stems from this engrained bias. The racial dynamic of the American welfare state prompts “doublespeak,” where the spending axe is, in reality, a careful scalpel used to protect programs that serve the movement’s political base: those who are white, male, and middle to upper class. Not surprisingly, polling data indicates that over 90 percent of Tea Party supporters are white, nearly 60 percent are male and 56 percent have incomes over \$50,000 a year.⁴⁴ If the opposition movement does reward its supporters through preferential treatment of certain programs, then supporters are not unknowingly voting against their economic self-interest, thus solving both political puzzles.

In some ways, the self-interest model provides a compelling account of what fuels this political trend, but overall the hypothesis overreaches in both its assumptions and causal explanations. First, the model’s initial premise—that cuts are inevitable—is suspect. Similar to the critique of the citizen-consumer dissonance model, public polling suggests that even among those Americans opposed to government social spending, a large majority prefer a strategy of tax increases and spending cuts in order to trim the budget deficit and national debt. Still, proponents of the self-interest model might argue that the likelihood of some spending cuts is extremely high. As a result, the political movement intends to guide those reductions, no matter how large or small. But an “inevitability” argument relies upon the model’s second premise—that supporters actually favor targeted cuts and not a systematic dismantling of the welfare state—which is yet another dubious claim. The available polling data are unclear about which programs voters favor for cuts. Some polls, like the one mentioned above, find that opponents of the welfare state support cuts to means-tested programs instead of Social Security or Medicare. Others polls, wording the question differently, report the opposite result. For example, when

⁴⁴ *New York Times/CBS News* poll, April 5-12, 2010.
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/04/14/us/politics/20100414-tea-party-poll-graphic.html?ref=politics#tab=9>

cutting “aid to the unemployed and poor” is instead specified as a program like “Medicaid—the federal health program for the poor,” respondents overwhelmingly say that it is “more important to prevent Medicaid from being significantly cut” than “reducing the federal budget deficit.”⁴⁵ In the exact same poll, voters believed that federal funding for “college loans,” “the child tax credit,” “assistance to the unemployed,” and “the tax deduction for homeowners with mortgages” were all more important than reducing the deficit.⁴⁶ The only exception to this was “welfare,” which 55 percent believed it was “more important to reduce the deficit” than to protect the program from funding reductions.

With nebulous polling data, an alternative approach to evaluating the opposition’s unspoken preference for targeting the welfare state’s “lower tier” involves looking at recent legislative proposals. According to the self-interest model, politicians associated with this political trend would avoid cuts or an overhaul of “top tier” entitlement programs. Instead, legislators would focus their energies on dismantling means-tested programs. Over the past two years, House Republicans have approved two budget proposals that tend to validate the self-interest model.

In 2011, Congressman Paul Ryan, the House Budget Committee Chairman, proposed a federal budget that would have overhauled Medicare, Medicaid, and, to a lesser extent, Social Security.⁴⁷ His plan sought caps on Medicare and Medicaid spending, via block grant funding, and would have eliminated the traditional-fee-for-service program in favor of government

⁴⁵ CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll, Nov. 11-14, 2010.

http://poll.orpub.com/document.php?id=quest11.out_5150&type=hitlist&num=7

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ John Parkinson, “Paul Ryan’s Budget Proposal Passes House; Democrats say Medicare, Medicaid Threatened” *ABC News* April 15, 2011. Web. Accessed Mar. 19, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/paul-ryans-budget-proposal-passes-house-democrats-medicare/story?id=13384520#.T2eVbVE6LzI> and Lisa Mascaró, “Rep. Paul Ryan’s budget plan, with Medicare changes, is back” *The Los Angeles Times* Mar. 16, 2012. Web. Accessed Mar. 16, 2012. <http://www.latimes.com/health/la-na-ryan-budget-20120317,0,3175431.story>

subsidies for private insurance.⁴⁸ The Republican controlled House of Representatives, which came into power on the strength of the anti-welfare state movement, passed Rep. Ryan's bill.⁴⁹ In addition to cutting programs for low-income Americans, the 2011 budget proposal ran counter to several elements of the self-interest model: first, the proposed cuts range from "top tier" programs like Medicare to the means-tested, "lower tier" Medicaid; second, the anti-welfare state rhetoric seemed to match the legislative reality as no group received preferential treatment; lastly, the broad scope of cuts mitigates allegations of racial bias.

Following their vote on the 2011 Ryan budget, House Republicans suffered from political attacks over the proposed reforms to Medicaid and, in particular, Medicare.⁵⁰ According to the 2011 budget, both programs would be converted into voluntary government subsidies, which, according to the CBO, would make more Americans responsible for paying a greater share of their healthcare costs: "a typical 65-year-old with a private health-insurance plan covering standard Medicare benefits could be liable for 61% of his or her total health care costs in 2022 under Ryan's plan. By 2030, the figure could be 68%."⁵¹ Public outrage prompted Congressman Ryan to introduce an altered budget for the 2012 Congressional session. His new proposal budget adopts a bipartisan approach to Medicare, co-drafted by Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, scraping plans for a full privatization of Medicare in favor of "a partial privatization, which incorporates the option for seniors to stay on traditional Medicare, using a framework known as

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Albeit, this was partly the result of the Democratic Party's coordinated strategy to suggest that the House Republican plan would "kill" or "end" Medicare. Politifact named this their "Lie of the Year in 2011." Bill Adair and Angie Drobic, "Lie of the Year 2011: 'Republicans voted to end Medicare'" *Tampa Bay Times*, Dec 20 2011. Web. Accessed April 2, 2011. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/dec/20/lie-year-democrats-claims-republicans-voted-end-me/>

⁵¹ Kate Pickert, "The Nitty-Gritty Details of Paul Ryan's Medicare Plan" *TIME Magazine*, April 6, 2011. Web. Accessed. March. 19, 2012. <http://swampland.time.com/2011/04/06/the-nitty-gritty-details-of-paul-ryan's-medicare-plan/#ixzz1pb83vFsI>

competitive bidding.”⁵² Yet, while easing reforms to Medicare, the 2012 budget continues to lean hard on low-income Americans. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan’s budget plan would get at least 62 percent of its \$5.3 trillion in nondefense budget cuts over ten years (relative to a continuation of current policies) from programs that serve people of limited means.”⁵³ Of particular note, the budget makes deep eligibility cuts to SNAP. The CBPP estimates “between 8 and 10 million people would be knocked off the program.”⁵⁴ On March 29, 2012, the House Republicans passed Congressman Ryan’s budget by a vote of 228-191, with no Democratic votes and only 10 Republican deflections.⁵⁵

Changes made between the 2011 and 2012 proposals confirm the merits of the self-interest model. The anti-welfare state movement initially supported the Ryan proposals based on their promises of large cuts to government spending. Not coincidentally, the bulk of those reductions are drawn from programs serving low-income Americans. However, when the 2011 budget proposed significant reform to a traditional entitlement—Medicare—the political fortunes of the House Republicans reversed. In 2012, Congressman Ryan responded to anti-welfare state supporters by listening to the doublespeak: rhetoric that calls for universal cuts and ‘sharing the burden’, but actually concentrates the budgetary axe on programs for the poor. Moreover, the model identifies wealthier Americans as the movement’s self-interested party. As previously

⁵² Avik Roy, “Paul Ryan’s New-And-Improved Plan for Medicare and Medicaid Reform” *Forbes Magazine* Web. March 20, 2012. Accessed April 8, 2012.

⁵³ Kelsey Merrick and James Horney, “Chairman Ryan Gets 62 Percent of His Huge Budget Cuts from Programs for Lower-income Americans” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 23, 2012. Web. Accessed April 8, 2012. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3723>

⁵⁴ Dottie Rosenbaum, Ryan Budget Would Slash SNAP Funding by \$134 Billion Over Ten Years: Low-Income Households in All States Would Feel Sharp Effects, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 21, 2012, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.com?fa=view&id=3717>. Web. Accessed April 8, 2012.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Weisman, “House Passes Republican Budget Plan” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2012. Web. Accessed April 8, 2012. <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/house-passes-republican-budget-plan/>

mentioned, nearly one in four Tea Party Members earns more than \$100,000 per year.⁵⁶ In addition to cutting government programs for low income beneficiaries, the Ryan budget also included significant tax cuts for the rich, proposing to lower the tax rate for top earners down from 35 to 25 percent.⁵⁷

3. Demographics & Culture

However, the example of Ki Gulbranson, the Tea Party supporter who also benefits from EITC and Medicare, seems to suggest that the anti-welfare state movement involves more than just wealthy Americans. For instance, most of the poorest states in the country—Mississippi, Alabama, and Kentucky, among others—consistently vote for Republicans in both federal and state elections. States that benefit the most from government social expenditures are more likely to elect representatives in favor of slashing those same benefits. To understand this paradox, a third model posits demographic and cultural traits as potential factors motivating the anti-social spending political trend.

Much has been written about the cultural divide in America and its political implications. States with more Wal-Mart stores per-capita are generally more Republican; states with more Starbucks are tend to be more Democratic. Pundits splice and dice the electorate between the wealthy, urban, college-educated liberal elite and the rural, religious, NASCAR loving, lower- and middle-income conservatives. Transposing demographic and cultural elements on top of the red-state-blue-state electoral map, supposedly, illuminates something more than what is captured by political or consumer choices. Proponents of this model believe that in order to understand

⁵⁶ *New York Times/CBS News* poll, April 5-12, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/04/14/us/politics/20100414-tea-party-poll-graphic.html?ref=politics#tab=9>

⁵⁷ United States. House Committee on the Budget, Chairman Paul Ryan, “The Path to Prosperity: Fiscal Year 2012 Budget Resolution,” Washington, GPO 2011. <http://budget.house.gov/UploadedFiles/PathToProsperityFY2012.pdf>

political movements, one must establish an understanding of the character of those choices. According to this perspective, cultural differences are elevated above economic interests in three important ways.

First, a majority of poor voters are believed to engage in cognitive dissonance at the ballot box. Their status as beneficiaries of the welfare state comes at odds with cultural beliefs that cherish independence and freedom. For voters like Mr. Gulbranson and his neighbors, this political paradox is more than an abstract set of psychological, economic, and political factors. It is a painful, internal cacophony that causes tremendous bouts of “frustration over needing help, and guilt for taking it.”⁵⁸ Accepting an expanded role for the American welfare state, then, requires a reevaluation of the larger cultural framework. Political scientists and psychologists alike recognize the tremendous difficulty in rejecting engrained societal beliefs. Therefore to resolve the dissonance, middle- and low-income voters lament the government for putting them in this uncomfortable position in the first place: “they resent the government for providing [benefits]. They say they want less help for themselves; less help in caring for relatives; less assistance when they reach old age.”⁵⁹ In this way, Mr. Gulbranson’s desire “to reduce the role of government in his own life” represents a desire to eliminate his internal strife.⁶⁰

But the power of cognitive dissonance diminishes the influence of political messages on voting behavior. No matter how politicians or policymakers try to convey the benefits of the American welfare state, the cognitive dissonance of poor families resolves differences in favor of a preexisting cultural belief system. Only by appealing to a voters’ “hearts,” rather than their “heads,” could change attitudes and allow political messages to take hold. Leading political

⁵⁸ Appelbaum, Binyamin and Robert Gebeloff. "Even Critics of Safety Net Increasingly Depend on It" *New York Times*. New York Times, 11 Feb 2012. Web. 20 Feb 2012.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

authors and columnists, like David Brooks and Thomas Frank have admonished Democrats and proponents of the welfare state for their inability to connect with middle to low-income voters. According to Brooks, supporters of the welfare state often describe government benefits in the language of cost-benefit analysis. Instead, cultural considerations require a political lexicon that is more personal and better able to contextualize the benefits of government programs. Yet even with the proper messaging, mitigating the cognitive dissonance of Mr. Gulbranson would require a much larger cultural paradigm shift. Cultural change reaches well beyond the realm of politics. More than just campaign promises, shifting the paradigm requires a persuasive articulation of the justice facilitated by government social spending.

But even if cultural changes were made, this still assumes that voting behavior is solely determined by a person's attitude toward government social spending. The cultural decision model, however, does not believe that a single issue determines a person's vote. Economic considerations share the agenda with other items, like social issues or foreign policy. And the more issues under consideration, the more idiosyncratic electoral choices become. For example, in David Shipler's *The Working Poor* he tells the story of Caroline Payne, a poor American hovering between \$8,000 and \$12,000 a year, who in 2000 election preferred George W. Bush because "Clinton did not set a good example by running around with that girl; [S]he felt that Gore shared responsibility."⁶¹ The personal behavior of President Clinton injured the Democratic ticket, despite the role of the Clinton administration in expanding Caroline's benefits, like the Earned Income Tax Credit. The cultural decision model views Caroline's thought process as emblematic of a majority of voters. In *What's Wrong with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Thomas Frank finds that the growing influence of moral and cultural issues overshadows the tangible benefits of government social spending. Frank goes so far as to suggest

⁶¹ David Shipler, *The Working Poor*, 69.

that Conservatives raise controversial social issues precisely for political gain among poor and working class voters. He points to 2004, where the term “values voter” came into broad cultural consciousness. Karl Rove’s coalition of “religious conservatives” insisted on “dropping the class language” and eliminating the importance of economic considerations, in order to raise “cultural wedge issues like guns and religion and the rest.”⁶² Frank is not alone in his analysis. New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote in 2005 that “we’ve seen poorer folks move over in astonishing numbers to the G.O.P. George W. Bush won the white working class by 23 percentage points in this past [2004] election.”⁶³ The primary reason for this shift, according to both authors, stems from a Republican message aimed at saving American cultural values. The role of government assistance in assisting families was purposefully de-emphasized. In essence, Republicans understood the power of culture and its impact on the shared agenda.

No matter how convincing cultural thesis appears, there is little evidence to support its claims. Statistics, cited by David Brooks and others, mischaracterize low income voters based upon vague definitions of “poorer folks” and the “working class.” The peculiar terminology does not reflect trends in voting behavior based upon income. For example, Brooks’s column extrapolates from a different demographic category, “white voters without degrees,” which is not representative of middle and low-income voters. Princeton scholar Larry Bartles, a leading critic of the cultural decision model, notes that “the correlation between educational attainment and economic status is quite imperfect; [I]n 2004 two-thirds of white voters qualified as ‘poorer

⁶² Thomas Frank, *What’s Wrong With Kansas?*, 245

⁶³ David Brooks, “Meet the Poor Republicans.” May 15, 2005
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/15/opinion/15brooks.html>

folks' by this standard."⁶⁴ Many other political scientists bemoan the imprecise language and mangled statistics of pundits, which have proven terribly inaccurate and misleading.⁶⁵

By using an income threshold, Bartles and other scholars provide an answer contrary to the fear mongering of Brooks and Frank: "Has the white working class abandoned the Democratic Party? No. White voters in the bottom third of the income distribution have actually become more reliably Democratic in presidential elections over the past half-century."⁶⁶ Political scientist Andrew Gellman of Columbia University also challenges the conventional thinking of the cultural decision model, finding that although poor states trend Republican overall, poor voters remain overwhelmingly Democratic. A New York Times analysis of exit polls from the 2010 midterm elections validates the findings of Bartles and Gellman: nearly 60 percent of individuals making less than \$30,000 voted for Democrats, as well as winning 52 percent of those making \$30,000 to \$50,000.⁶⁷ The Republicans, on the other hand, excelled with those making more than \$50,000 and more than \$100,000 per year.⁶⁸ The pundits rightly identify an urban-rural divide, but, as Bartles predicted, education levels fall opposite of the cultural-claim: 60 percent of those who did not graduate high school voted Democrat and 77 percent of those with either a high school degree, some college, or a college degree voted Republican.⁶⁹ A majority of political commentators simply misread the patterns of voting behavior, on account of bias, imprecise terminology, data error, or all of the above. Proximity to a Starbucks or a Wal-Mart is a clever way to conceptualize regional idiosyncrasies, but is less relevant in the voting booth. Voting patterns actually reaffirm the prioritization of economic considerations among low

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Larry Bartles, "What's Wrong With: *What's Wrong With Kansas?*" 9

⁶⁶ Ibid., 30

⁶⁷ Bill Marsh and Majorie Connelly, "Rightward, March" *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2010. Web. Accessed Mar. 19, 2010. <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/weekinreview/20101107-rightward-march-poll-graphic.pdf>

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

and middle income Americans. Returning to the example of Caroline Payne, while she disapproved of Gore for Clinton's transgressions she nevertheless spoke of her ideal politician as "somebody who has sense enough to help these people who need the help."⁷⁰ Indeed, a minority of individuals will always continue to vote according to non-economic preferences—i.e., based on a candidate's appearance, likeability, charisma, etc.—however, the data affirm that a majority of low and middle income Americans vote for Democratic candidates for economic purposes.

Furthermore, exit polls from the 2010-midterm elections also dismiss the shared agenda phenomenon, by which moral, religious, social, or foreign policy issues drive low to middle income Americans to vote for Republican candidates. Contrary to conventional thinking, the poor are less likely to be swayed by social issues or voting according to their "religious conscious." First, Bartles' work shows that over the past twenty years, "positions on social issues are considerably *less* relevant to the partisanship and voting behavior of working-class whites."⁷¹ Bartles arrives at this conclusion by testing Thomas Frank's hypothesis that "working class moral values trump economics." The study constructed voter preference indices on social and economic issues using the past twenty years of National Election surveys (NES). The results demonstrate that low-income voters are least concerned with social issues. Instead, "values voters increase rather considerably with each step up the income scale."⁷² Even specific and controversial issues, like abortion, do not sway a majority of low-income voters as "the abortion coefficient for low-income white voters is almost 40% smaller than the coefficient for government jobs over the entire period from 1984 to 2004, and almost 80% smaller in 2004."⁷³

Political scientist Andrew Gelman in *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* similarly

⁷⁰ Shipler, 69

⁷¹ Bartles, 26

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 26.

observes a phenomenon of poor states voting for Republicans and poor voters voting for Democrats, irrespective of social issues. Gelman attributes this paradox to the fact that “the poor are similar in Red and Blue America, but the rich are different.”⁷⁴

Across the U.S., low-income voters continue to support Democrats and their pro-government benefit policies, regardless of cultural differences. The real cultural divide, according to Gellman and Bartles, occurs at high incomes. For example, “Kansas has been a symbol of working-class Republicanism and, indeed, low-income Kansans gave George W. Bush half of their votes—but high income Kansans gave him 70%.”⁷⁵ To a limited extent, geography, social issues, and religiosity all influence voting behavior. Yet the voting patterns of low-income Americans suggest strong support for the American welfare state.

4. Political Participation

If the poor actually vote in favor of government social spending, then how has the anti-welfare state movement proven so electorally successful? The example of Caroline Payne is, again, illuminating. Despite Caroline’s strong opinions and desire to support a candidate that would give “more resources” to the poor, “November 7 came and went without her vote.”⁷⁶

Although Caroline is only one example, she is not an anomaly. Exit poll data over the past twenty years consistently shows that the poor are less likely to vote and remain underrepresented in elections. In the 2010 midterms, individuals with incomes of more than \$50,000 per year comprised 63 percent of the electorate compared to only 18 percent making less than \$30,000. Nearly one-third of the electorate made more than \$100,000.⁷⁷ At the same time, 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that over 75 percent of Americans make less than \$50,000 a year

⁷⁴ Andre Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 167

⁷⁵ Gellman, 176.

⁷⁶ Shipler, 70

⁷⁷ Ibid.

and only a little more than 6 percent make over \$100,000.⁷⁸ According to these figures, the views of wealthier Americans are overrepresented in elections—they have 4.5 times the expected voting strength. The recent *Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy* sponsored by the American Political Science Association found that “nearly nine out of 10 individuals in families with incomes over \$75,000 reported voting in presidential elections while only half of those in families with incomes under \$15,000 reported voting.”⁷⁹ Overall voter turnout has declined since the 1960s, largely because of the disappearance of poor voters. This trend continues in spite of legislation increasing the eligibility pool, like the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and other election reforms. Numerous studies correlate rising income inequality with depressed election turnout, as more Americans face formal and informal barriers to voting. For instance, “laws in many states forbid former prisoners from voting,” whereby “millions of minority men have been excluded from basic participation in our democracy by such laws.”⁸⁰ Low income Americans also “vote less because they lack the skills, motivation, and networks that the better advantaged pick up through formal education and occupational advancement.”⁸¹ Lastly, existing political parties largely ignore the poor electorate and “place more emphasis on raising money and persuading the already active, rather than mobilizing eligible citizens who do not vote.”⁸² As a result of these barriers, the silence of poor voters has been deafening. Political scientists Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler show that in nearly every election since 1972 the voting electorate has become substantially more conservative than non-voters on class-based issues.⁸³ Therefore, the threat to the American welfare state does, in fact, emanate from a disproportionately wealthy electorate

⁷⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey 2010”

http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032011/perinc/new01_001.htm

⁷⁹ APSA, 6

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, “Who Votes Now? And does it matter?” Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 12-15, 2007, 18

with more incentive for cuts and reform.

But even the votes of affluent Americans are, perhaps, not as important as their participation in other political activities. Shaping the national conversation requires some combination of activism (i.e. protests, demonstrations), financial contributions (to campaigns and political advocacy groups), and/or working on a candidate or issue campaign—all of which are activities that go beyond voting. While poor voters are significantly underrepresented in local, state, and federal elections, the disparity is even more pronounced outside of the ballot box. For instance, only 6 percent of individual Americans with incomes below \$15,000 made some form of campaign contribution, while 56 percent of those with incomes of \$75,000 and over gave to a candidate or advocacy group.⁸⁴ The importance of campaign contributions cannot be overstated. Oftentimes a candidate's viability in the race is determined by his or her ability to raise money.

Donors not only influence politicians on specific issues, but the allegiance of wealthy backers can narrow the potential pool of contenders from the outset. The tremendous influence of money in American politics is a sobering reality for the less fortunate. Because a vast majority of the poor do not donate, they are less likely to have a champion of their causes. Moreover, candidates have less of an incentive to defend programs that benefit low income Americans, knowing they will not face any financial repercussions.

Aside from political campaigns, protecting the American welfare state is also a legislative project. And, once again, income inequality produces an imbalance of political power in the halls of Congress and in the state legislatures. Even if lawmakers support government social spending, the message they receive from constituents may not reflect the sentiment of low income Americans. The political active reach out to their representatives and express their opinions—but the politically active are much more likely to be well off: “half of the affluent contact a public

⁸⁴ APSA, 7

official as compared with only 25 percent of those with low incomes.”⁸⁵ Even lobbying groups, represent one step forward and two steps back for low income Americans. Although advocacy groups have become increasingly diverse and enable once-marginalized groups to acquire a political voice, lobbying has only solidified the dominance of the affluent. Industry groups, with tremendous financial resources, hire former politicians and their staffers to effectively infiltrate the legislative process. For example, Americans for Tax Reform and its chief Grover Norquist, have been extraordinarily successful in forcing candidates into a “no-new-taxes pledge,” which has, arguably, prevented Republicans from considering raising taxes in order to trim the deficit. Groups lobbying on behalf of the poor generally do not have comparable resources or influence. Moreover, political groups do not focus on low income Americans because of their passivity.⁸⁶

The Tea Party exemplifies the tremendous influence of wealthy backers in shaping legislation. An established lobbying organization, known as Freedom Works, undergirds the anti-welfare state movement through the support of wealthy donors, like the billionaire Koch brothers. As a result, the political trend is frequently accused of being “an AstroTurf campaign—a fake grassroots movement” that purports “to be a spontaneous uprising of concerned citizens, but in reality it is founded and funded by elite interests.”⁸⁷ Whether a protest is contrived or authentic is always unclear. Usually a movement is a mixture of both. Developing the necessary lobbying and organizing apparatus, requires a consolidation of leadership and impressive financing; otherwise, a totally organic movement falls apart under the weight of its disorganization. Moreover, the effectiveness of the Tea Party movement stems from its ability to shape the national dialogue via political participation. The opposition may be divided over

⁸⁵ Ibid., 8

⁸⁶ Ibid., 9

⁸⁷ George Monblot, “The Tea Party movement: deluded and inspired by billionaires” *The Guardian* Oct. 25, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/25/tea-party-koch-brothers>

specific questions and cuts, but the movement offers a coherent and compelling narrative, which garners national media attention. Still, how did the controversial message spread so effectively? Because the voting booth, the campaign office, and the halls of Congress are arenas dominated by affluent Americans—those with little self-interest in protecting the welfare state.

5. The Hidden Welfare State

The composition of the American welfare state may also have prompted its own political opposition. Look again at the case of Mr. Gulbranson who, interestingly, is not below the official poverty line: he earns \$39,000 a year. And yet Ki benefits from the social safety net, which Americans traditionally think of as benefiting the very poor.⁸⁸ On closer inspection, however, scholars like Christopher Howard have noticed the “increasingly middle-class character of the American welfare state.”⁸⁹ The earned income tax credit, for instance, has seen tremendous expansion up the income ladder; “in 1975, eligibility was limited to households making the current equivalent of up to \$26,997. In 2010, it was available to families making up to \$49,317.”⁹⁰ Howard finds that many recent social policy achievements “benefit middle- and upper-middle-class individuals more than the poor and near poor.”⁹¹ But as the middle class has increasingly captured the benefits of the American welfare state, those more affluent beneficiaries have given rise to the anti-welfare state movement. The most fervent supporters of the anti-social spending political trend are among those beneficiaries between \$30,000 and

⁸⁸ Leading Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney confirmed this commonly held belief in an interview on CNN where he stated that he was “not concerned about the very poor” because “we have a social safety net there.” Z. Bryon Wolf, “Romney: Campaign ‘Not Concerned About the Very Poor’”, *ABC NEWS* Feb. 1, 2012. Web. Accessed March 28, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/02/romney-not-concerned-about-the-very-poor/>

⁸⁹ Howard, 202

⁹⁰ New York Times, Feb. 2012

⁹¹ Howard, 205

\$75,000 annual incomes; they are just like Ki Gulbranson.⁹² And when the New York Times reporters asked Mr. Gulbranson about the types of help he receives from the government, he listed EITC and his children's participation in the federal free-lunch program. However, Suzanne Mettler and Christopher Howard see more government involvement than meets the eye. Most likely, Mr. Gulbranson benefits from a host of other government social expenditures, especially tax breaks on home mortgages and health care. In this way, the American welfare state eludes sight. Although the role of government meshes into the daily lives of so many Americans, few can readily identify the contours of state intervention because of its indirect character.

Regulations, tax exemptions, and subsidies to private actors fail to register as state actions to beneficiaries, thus "many Americans express disdain for government social spending, incognizant that they themselves benefit from it."⁹³ Cornell political scientist Suzanne Mettler

has coined this voting behavior as "the paradox of the submerged state."⁹⁴

Disconnecting government social spending from individual beneficiaries portends a

couple of negative consequences—all apparent in the current political trend. First, voters are not driven to political action based upon on personal experience with a government program. A 2008 Government Issues survey asked respondents about their level of political participation relative to their use of government programs. Most importantly, the survey connected policy and politics by asking respondents whether they had "taken into account the position of a candidate on the [program used] in deciding either how to vote or whether to vote."⁹⁵ The results affirm Mettler's theory of disconnect within the submerged state. According to the data, policy does not seem to drive of political action. Of those who had benefitted from food stamps, only 21 percent had ever

⁹² See the 2010 Midterm Exit Polling results from the New York Times

⁹³ Mettler, 6

⁹⁴ Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6

⁹⁵ Social and Government Issues and Participation Study of 2008: U.S. national survey conducted by Survey Research Institute at Cornell University, August 23, 2008-November 1, 2008

taken a candidate's position into account before deciding how to vote.⁹⁶ The political apathy towards the food stamp program, especially among its beneficiaries, is striking. Food stamps are one of the most direct and recognizable forms of government social spending, and yet even this program does not compel voters to act. Suzanne Mettler's analysis of the 2008 survey sees a correlation between increased policy-focused voting and more direct government intervention (i.e. programs like SNAP, Social Security, and Medicare relative to other elements of the welfare state, such as the Child Tax Credit or the home mortgage interest deduction).⁹⁷ The responsiveness and visibility of government programs, according to Mettler, has tremendous "bearing on their [citizens'] attitudes about government more broadly."⁹⁸

Second, the "submerged" or "hidden welfare state" preserves gross political inequalities. Organized interests utilize their financial dominance to contribute to candidates, hire lobbyists, and to mobilize campaigns to receive preferential treatment during the legislative process. For example, campaign donations by health maintenance organizations have "quadrupled between 1992 and 2008," which gives the health services industry greater access and influence to shape policies for the average beneficiary.⁹⁹ As a result, even "watershed" moments like the Affordable Care Act maintain the status quo of the "submerged" framework, because organized interests thwart more direct roles for government. In fact, many argue that President Obama's success in passing health reform was largely a result of health-industry groups, who supported the legislation based upon potential economic gains from the legislation's universal mandate. Industry groups' political power dims the prospect of systemic reform. Other elements of the American political system reinforce the "submerged state." Whereas the rewards of policy

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Mettler, 45

⁹⁸ Ibid., 43

⁹⁹ Ibid., 34

reform are long term, the political world operates in the short term, from election to election. The vacillating fortunes of President Obama, in light of his health reform legislation, offer another cautionary tale for future presidents: the political risks outweigh the potential benefits of changes to social policy. Moreover, the example of Obama's health care package shows how reform is self-defeating. If one cannot see the welfare state in the status quo, reform within the current structure produces invisible results. The Affordable Care Act continues to be opposed by more Americans than those who support it, according to Metter, because it works within the existing framework and does not allow citizens to see their relationship with the law.

The invisibility of government may share some responsibility for generating the political opposition, but Mettler's theory fails to encompass all elements of the trend. The Government Issues survey cited in her book shows how few Americans consider the benefits of government.

And even when voters acknowledge benefits, they consider direct programs only marginally better than indirect expenditures. Howard also analyzes attitudes between entitlement programs of the upper tier and means-tested programs in the lower tier. His work finds that "public opinion does not appear to follow the traditional lines separating the upper and lower tiers."¹⁰⁰

Regardless of a program's character or composition, Americans seem to look straight through a perfectly visible welfare state. Howard also addresses Mettler's concern for the inequality of political voice by looking at the example of the American Association of Retired People (AARP), ranked as one of "the most powerful interest groups in America."¹⁰¹ U.S. social policy's favoritism of elderly voters is thought to be a result of AARP's political influence; however, Howard disagrees with this narrative. "AARP is not as strong as many people think,"

¹⁰⁰ Howard, 48

¹⁰¹ Howard, 125

in part because the motivations of its members are varied and not directly political.¹⁰² The limits of AARP's power have been shown repeatedly throughout history. According to Howard, AARP "deserves little credit" for creating or expanding any part of the American welfare state.¹⁰³ Still, Howard's specific treatment of AARP does not mitigate Mettler's broader argument. Though one individual interest group may not dominate U.S. social spending policy, the aggregate dominance of affluent interests effectively stalls any attempt at systemic reform.

According to the hidden welfare state model, the hand of government seems invisible to most individuals. Yet, at the same time, voters oftentimes stare through perfectly visible social programs. This incongruity is likely result of a displeasing image; government, whether seen or unseen, frustrates voters. Americans spend nearly as much as their European counterparts, but the U.S.'s diversity of social programs and tax expenditures is "less effective at reducing poverty and inequality."¹⁰⁴ Faced with disappointing results, voters become seduced by calls for reducing the size of an "ineffective" or "wasteful" government. Suzanne Mettler argues that by "restoring the connection between the government and citizens," supporters of the welfare state might be able to curb the anti-social spending movement.¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, the complexity of the political trend renders her antidote inadequate. The character and composition of the welfare state certainly plays a role in generating political opposition, but transitioning to more overt government intervention might further Mr. Gulbranson's paradoxical protest.

Recommendations

A satisfactory solution to the anti-welfare state movement must be commensurate with the complex nature of the problem. The following recommendations tie together disparate factors of

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 194

¹⁰⁵ Mettler, 30

the movement, utilizing the five theoretical constructs as an important barometer of a majority of the movement's supporters. Some solutions target specific problems; others weave through a diverse set of underlying factors. Overall, the recommendations amount to a cumulative, macro-level approach towards the political opposition. Still, enacting the following agenda nowhere guarantees a protection of American social programs from reform. Nor will it eliminate anti-welfare state sentiment or calls for retrenchment. Forecasts of slowed economic growth, depressed tax revenues, and a ballooning national debt, portend an age of austerity for the United States.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, alterations will be made to our nation's welfare state going forward. The following recommendations, if implemented, will curb a political movement that approaches fiscal deficits with blunt tools and a fixed-menu of ideas. And while the American welfare state has faced political threats throughout its history, the unprecedented levels of partisanship and polarization make this iteration, perhaps, the most extreme and most significant opposition movement ever faced. Therefore, the political trend must be addressed properly and promptly.

Accomplishing this task requires solutions that confront the political paradoxes fueling the anti-spending movement. Although widespread perceptions of anti-self interest voting behavior have been debunked through this analysis, individuals like Mr. Gulbranson continue to defy conventional wisdom. Unfortunately, a silver bullet to the opposition movement does not exist. Rather, enacting the following recommendations offers the best strategy for reversing the political trend and creating a more effective pathway forward for the American welfare state.

1. The Poor Vote

The opposition's continued success is contingent upon increasing political inequality. If in 2000 "people with family incomes under \$25,000 had cast ballots at the same rate as those

¹⁰⁶ For more on how the future of the American political system will be indelibly changed by the issue of debt reduction, see Thomas Esdall's latest book *Age of Austerity* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

above \$75,000, more than 6.8 additional voters would have gone to the polls...reversing the results, electing Gore.”¹⁰⁷ Viewed in this context, the anti-welfare state movement fills the political vacuum left by low-income Americans. The first recommendation, therefore, addresses the opposition movement by decreasing political inequality.

In an era of hyper-partisanship, elections hinge upon the smallest of margins. According to the Pew Research Center, the 2012 election will be determined by approximately 7 percent of voting Americans.¹⁰⁸ Adding 6.8 million low-income votes would mean an increase of nearly 6.5 percent of the electorate. Therefore, decreasing political inequality would radically alter the entire political landscape overnight. Shipler believes that “in many races for Congress and state legislatures as well, those in or near poverty could hold the balance of power.”¹⁰⁹ Considering the stronghold of Democratic votes among the poor in the 2010 midterm election, Shipler’s statement is not the slightest bit hyperbolic. But the difficulty lies in motivating someone like Caroline Payne to vote. Currently, the poor are “the least likely to vote, attend political meetings, join political organizations, write to their elected officials, contribute to candidates, and influence policy makers.”¹¹⁰ This political inequality must be resolved if the American welfare state hopes to become more effective at mitigating poverty.

First, advocates of the welfare state must develop an effective strategy for mobilizing the poor. Neither “the Democratic Party nor anti-poverty organizations have mobilized sufficiently” to encourage low-income Americans to be heard at the ballot box.¹¹¹ Here, Democrats stand to learn from their Republican rivals. The Tea Party provides an effective model for combining top-

¹⁰⁷ Shipler, 288

¹⁰⁸ Pew Research Center, “With Voters Focused on Economy, Obama Lead Narrows” 17 April, 2012. Web. Accessed 17 April, 2012. <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/4-17-12%20Political%20Release%20.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Howard, 198

¹¹¹ Ibid.

down organization with grassroots support. But the model is not wholly transferrable because the poor face particular barriers to political organizing. Low income Americans cannot commit the time or financial resources to a campaign on par with the wealthier opposition movement. Moreover, the corporate backers of the Tea Party movement are unlikely to donate comparable levels to a left-leaning political organization. Despite these concerns, a new 527 organization, a Super PAC, and a centralized lobbying group should be founded with the sole objective of increasing the political clout of low-income voters. The 527 and Super PAC organizations will reach out to voters that are traditionally overlooked by Democratic groups. The 527 will primarily coordinate with other anti-poverty organizations to filter their message of electoral empowerment through preexisting programs while, concurrently, the Super PAC will raise funds for a television, radio, and Internet advertising campaign.

In addition to registering low-income voters, a new lobbying effort will work to ease voting registration laws across the country. Recently, state and local Republicans have focused their efforts on tightening voter registration laws. The New York Times reports that “since Republicans won control of many statehouses in the November 2010 elections, more than a dozen states have passed laws requiring voters to show photo identification at polls, cutting back early voting periods or imposing new restrictions on voter registration drives.”¹¹² Not only do these changes emphasize the urgency of a coordinated lobbying effort for low-income American, the news also implicitly concedes the role of political inequality in empowering the anti-welfare state movement.

Still, the difficulty of mobilizing poor voters is a problem of quid pro quo. Decreasing political inequality requires money, which low income Americans do not have. Though daunting,

¹¹² “Times Topics: Voting Rights and Registration” March 12, 2012. Web. Accessed March 30, 2012. http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/v/voter_registration_and_requirements/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=voter%20registration&st=cse

the negative cycle of constricted political access can be opened. Setting up the initial 527, Super PAC, and lobby groups will require early investment from wealthy backers. However, incremental gains will pay off. Over time, the slow but steady results will exponentially generate a “bandwagon” effect, where low-income advocacy groups can transition from a handful of wealthy backers, to a diverse, small donor network. Finally, it should not be the sole burden of this new 527 group to solve to the entire issue of political inequality. The Democratic Party must move electoral reform higher up on its agenda. If elected to a second term, President Obama should use some of his political capital to enact a series of reforms that increase the poor’s access to political power, including: writing new election finance laws that challenge the Citizens United decision, passing ethics reform that limits the access of lobbyists and interest groups, and making election day a national holiday. At a minimum, this package would shift the national conversation towards fairness in the electoral system; at a maximum, it would begin the transition to publicly financed elections and a total overhaul of interest group functions.

Admittedly, a coordinated strategy for increasing the electoral muscle of low income Americans may fail to garner the media attention that launched the Tea Party movement. The poor are typically unable or unwilling to find time around laborious shift-work to protest or demonstrate, limiting opportunities for publicity. As a result, untraditional and creative organizing methods must be employed to work around these constraints. Hence, the Super PAC must develop a persuasive ad campaign that encourages low-income voters to express their political power.

Even if the poor were to become more engaged in political, Howard questions if “they would really tell officials anything new” because even the average American does not favor a more distributive welfare state. Here, Howard misreads politics and public opinion. While low income Americans may not embrace redistributive policies, every single vote represents a choice

between two opposite approaches to the American welfare state. To some extent Howard is correct by saying that an increase of poor voters would not tell our current officials anything new. A more equal politics would make for new officials altogether.

2. A “Poor” Education

After encouraging low income Americans to exercise greater political voice, other citizens must be informed about issues of poverty and the welfare state. This inquiry has shown the difficulty of ascertaining public opinion about government social spending because pollsters do not articulate a coherent understanding of the welfare state. The jargon of entitlements, welfare, and poor programs gets mangled into a mess of multiple definitions. In American political discourse, the welfare state has even become a loaded term for “wasteful government spending,” and the political opposition feeds into these stereotypes. More dangerously, the complexity and diversity of social programs leads voters to make harmful generalizations that overlook the benefits of government and emphasize the shortfalls.

Education provides a way to reset the political discourse on U.S. social spending policy. First, Americans need an improved understanding of the unique character of their welfare state. Rather than thinking about the social safety net as a set of programs for the “very poor,” scholars like Howard and Mettler recognize the increasingly middle class character of social programs. Americans should be informed of exactly who benefits from the diversity of government expenditures. The Shepherd Program at Washington and Lee University provides a model, albeit limited, for this type of educational approach. The curriculum explores the complexity of poverty and government policy, but not with any political bend. The intention is not to change votes or minds overnight. Instead, education will temper the polemic debate by casting the issues of government spending into personal narratives, like the story of Caroline Payne, and by

witnessing the function of the welfare state first hand during an extra-curricular internship experience. The Shepherd Program should become a standard department in the American university. However, this recommendation encourages educational outreach to the broader public, not just students at elite universities. When high school and community college students enroll in their first and formative classes on American government, the curriculum must provide a better depiction of government social spending. No longer will schools be permitted to vaguely describe the contours of “the social safety net.” Students must be informed about the diversity of programs, which income groups and demographics they serve, their costs, and any non-financial impacts, like psychological or educational benefits. Just as the federal government instituted changes to state educational standards with the No Child Left Behind law, legislation should require states to make a survey of the American welfare state a required portion of U.S.

Government curriculum for public education students.¹¹³

Finally, to recapture the political discourse, a policy institute should be established that focuses exclusively on generating legislative proposals to reduce poverty through an improved American welfare state. Indeed, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities does a significant amount of work related to social spending and poverty. However, this is not the CBPP’s sole focus. To be effective in changing the national dialogue, a think tank must do more than offer policy ideas. A policy center exclusively dedicated to issues of the welfare state must cultivate unmatched credibility in the area of government social spending and develop a network of legislative and media supporters to push its proposals. The flood of conservative think tanks since the 1960s speaks to the power of policy ideas to alter the course of political discourse.¹¹⁴ For example, a definitive think tank on the American welfare state might offer counter proposals

¹¹³ Like No Child Left Behind, an improved welfare state curriculum would be tied to federal funding.

¹¹⁴ George Easterbrook, “Ideas Move Nations: How conservative think tanks have helped to transform the terms of political debate” *Atlantic Magazine*, January 1986 *Volume 257, 1* (pages 66-80).

to the Ryan budget, mitigating Republican arguments. Both recommendations one and two suggest more offensive strategies—more voters and more ideas—to meet the strengthening opposition.

3. A “New” View

The third and final recommendation looks to reaffirm the justification for the American welfare state. Before approaching the ballot box, voters establish a framework for making their judgments. However, when a person’s choice architecture suffers from contradictory claims or inconsistencies, voters face tremendous difficulty sorting out the issues. Without a reliable form of context or prioritization, the problem of the paradoxical voter emerges. Beneficiaries, like Mr. Gulbranson, that comprise the anti-welfare state movement express guilt and anguish over taking government assistance, but do not know how to solve the U.S. fiscal deficit:

‘How do you tell someone that you deserve to have heart surgery and you can’t?’ Mr. Gulbranson said. He paused. ‘You have to help and have compassion as a people, because otherwise you have no society, but financially you can’t destroy yourself. And that is what we’re doing.’

Notice how Mr. Gulbranson struggles to sort between these two options—both of which deal with more than simply political issues. When placed in a different context, Ki might have made a different choice. Had a different paradigm of thinking influenced his decision-making, the paradoxical voter might come to terms with his guilt and resolve cognitive dissonance in favor of the American welfare state.

Ultimately, politics is not a matter of institutions, but a subtle and refined rhetorical and deliberative art. The final recommendation is to increase the discussion of justice within our political discourse—to provide a framework for making decisions about the future of our welfare state. While some politicians gesture to doctrines of fairness and justice, the political climate

largely prevents office-seekers from articulating a clear vision of our obligations to America's poor. In a climate of hyper-partisanship, ideology and loaded-terminology oftentimes biases an audience from hearing a philosophic message. Odd as it seems, addressing the political threat to the welfare state requires a depoliticization of the issue. A pivot towards justice, instead of politics, will adjust the public discourse enough to elect responsible officials—lawmakers able to preserve and properly reform the American welfare state.

Conclusion

Political opposition to the American welfare state is both new and familiar. History remembers the electoral backlash to FDR's New Deal, LBJ's Great Society, and now Obama's health care reform. However, the latest iteration of anti-government spending comes at the height of political polarization and the dawn of the age of austerity—magnifying the implications of this political trend. In fact, political observers predict that by December of 2012 the Obama administration and Congress will have made a “grand bargain” that significantly reshapes the American welfare state for the next decade. This moment offers a tremendous opportunity. The government could realize a more progressive tax code and Americans could seek to readjust the welfare state to more effectively address poverty. But this requires implementing all three recommendations.

Above all, a politically disengaged poor presents the largest threat to the future of the welfare state. Under the status quo, the opposition benefits from an inequality of political voice, which, if corrected, would sway power to those who need government most. Even then, some individuals will continue to act against their economic self-interest as a variety of factors, including cognitive dissonance, will sway a minority of voters into an unsound decision making process. To quell the internal strife of the paradoxical voter, the recommendations for education

programs and a new articulation of justice will prove instrumental in reshaping the political discourse. Albeit, these are long-term goals and impending political decisions might alter the course of the welfare state before the fruits of the recommendations might be realized. The solution, then, must move fast and slow. If, in his reelection campaign, President Obama were to deliver a framework of justice for his policies, he might begin to nudge the conversation in the right direction.

Lastly, and most importantly, a new discussion of justice will enable the other two recommendations to take hold. The impetus to protect the American welfare state is grounded in a framework for justice and supplemented by the promise of improving our anti-poverty efforts. The politics of the American welfare state matters, because justice to poor Americans matters. By enacting these recommendations, voters like Mr. Gulbranson—the members of an unlikely opposition—might realize the importance of the American welfare state and take the improbable, but possible, steps to safeguard government social spending.

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