

This study examines general and comparative public support for government's providing benefits to older persons using data gathered from a probability sample of 1,015 adult residents of Alabama. Although the priority given to benefits for older persons when compared with other possible uses of tax dollars is high, the relationship between comparative and general support is low. The results suggest support for this function of government may be tenuous and that it will be difficult for advocacy groups to develop coalitions to maintain and/or expand current benefit levels.

Predicting General and Comparative Support for Government's Providing Benefits to Older Persons¹

David L. Klemmack, PhD² and Lucinda L. Roff, MSSW³

The degree to which the public favors governmental provision of benefits to older persons has been a topic of study for some time (Gallup, 1972; Harris, 1975; Peterson, 1970; Schlitz, 1970). Among the purposes of these studies have been gauging the political acceptability of already existing programs and examining the political feasibility of extending old age benefits. According to Cook (1979a,b), however, such efforts may not be particularly helpful to those interested in policy development for the aged since they fail to take into account the fact that decision makers frequently must make tradeoffs in allocating fixed sums among a variety of uses. She argues that benefits for the old compete with a myriad of other possible uses of tax dollars and that simply knowing the general level of support that the public gives to a program may not be indicative of how popular that program is when compared with other ways of spending the same tax dollars. Others (Derthick, 1979; Hudson, 1978a,b; Klemmack & Roff, 1980; Ragan, 1977; Schram, 1977) concur with Cook arguing that older persons currently are and, in the future, increasingly will be in competition with other groups for public funds.

The first objective of this study addresses the issue of the level of comparative support

for benefits for older persons. It first examines the priority the public gives to government's providing benefits to older persons in comparison with other possible uses of Federal tax dollars. It then compares the support given to programs for older persons to programs for other selected groups of persons who receive categorical assistance from government (e.g., disabled, unemployed).

A second issue to be addressed in this study is what factors help to account for the level of public support for government's providing benefits and services to older persons. If Cook's argument is correct, those interested in advocacy on behalf of older persons and/or in how public support for older persons changes over time might benefit more from knowledge about the factors which account for comparative support than from knowledge about the factors which account for general support. There is, however, little reason to believe that predictors of comparative support will bear much, if any, relationship to predictors of general support. Logically, predictors of comparative support can be similar to, different from, or even the reverse of predictors of general support. More critically, each of these situations presents different problems for those attempting to understand changing levels of political support for benefits for the aged and for those attempting to develop advocacy strategies for maintaining and/or improving benefits for older persons. The second objective of this study addresses this issue both by examining the relationships among measures

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²Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology, Univ. of Denver. On leave from The Univ. of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35486.

³Assistant Professor of Social Work & Assistant Director, Ctr. for the Study of Aging, The Univ. of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35486.

of general and comparative support for benefits for older persons and by examining the relationships between predictors of general and predictors of comparative support.

Relationship Between Predictors of General and Comparative Support

Cook (1979a,b) contends that the level of comparative support for a program may bear little similarity to the level of general support for that program. This means that those who believe that it is a good idea for government to provide benefits to older persons may not place a high priority on this function of government when compared with other possible uses of tax funds. This position, taken to its logical extreme, suggests that those variables that predict comparative support may be different from those that predict general support. Furthermore, it may be that generalized support cannot be translated into comparative support, and comparative support may well change as a function of the comparison categories used. Finally, since this framework suggests that support for benefits is particularized, it is reasonable to anticipate that public endorsement of governmental provision of benefits to older persons could be quite tenuous.

Contrary to Cook's conjecture, however, it is possible that predictors of comparative support for government's providing benefits and services to older persons may be similar to predictors of generalized support for governmental provision. In this situation, identification of those who support government's providing benefits to older persons in general would also result in identification of those who place a high priority on benefits for older persons when compared with other possible uses of public funds. Such a pattern of findings would result in the clear identification of those who support government's providing benefits to older persons and would suggest that advocates for the aged need not be concerned with possible differences between general and comparative support.

A third possibility is that those predictors that help to identify strong supporters of government's providing benefits to older persons in general also serve to identify those who place a low priority on such benefits when compared with other possible uses of public funds. This pattern would be expected whenever individuals are forced to rank a number of alternatives that are perceived to be very attractive or unattractive. For example, an individual could

be a strong supporter of both military defense and benefits for older persons. When asked to rank these two in importance, however, the individual might rank benefits for older people as less important. If this pattern of responding were characteristic of the majority of respondents, there would be a negative relationship between support for older persons in general and the rank that this option receives when compared with military defense. The priority given to government's providing benefits to older persons in situations characterized by this pattern of results could be expected to be highly volatile such that slight changes in the comparison categories or in the environment could result in radical changes in rankings.

The second objective of this study involves determining which of the three aforementioned alternatives (i.e., difference, similarity, or reversal) best describes the relationship between predictors of general and comparative support. This issue is examined in the context of six predictor sets (21 variables) including attitudes toward older persons, attitudes toward government, attitudes toward welfare, socioeconomic status, age status, and sociodemographic characteristics.

Sampling Procedure and Profile

The target population for this study was the adult (18 or older), noninstitutionalized population of residents of Alabama in July, 1979. A two-stage, probability sampling plan was used to identify a sample. First, a stratified, random sample of telephone directories serving the state was selected. Second, a sample of names from each directory selected was obtained using interval sampling with a random starting point. The final sample included 2,002 residents of 167 communities within the state.

Data were gathered using a mailed questionnaire. Four different waves were used so as to ensure as large a response rate as possible. Of the 2,002 questionnaires mailed, 231 were undeliverable as addressed and, of the 1,771 delivered, 1,015 (57.3%) were completed and returned.

The sample is predominantly male (63.5% of the respondents are male) and underrepresents those under age 25 (6.4% of the respondents are under 25). These biases are probably a function of the data collection technique employed. Although the cover letter indicated that the questionnaire could be completed by any adult member of the household, the question-

naire was addressed to the name listed in the telephone directory. Thus, the mailing was directed to a somewhat older, predominantly male population.

Respondents tended to be life-long residents of Alabama (56.1% had lived their entire life within the state, and 73.9% had lived more than 60% of their life within the state). Whites accounted for 85.9% of the respondents, and 72.4% of the respondents were currently married. Over 80% of the respondents had one or more children.

In terms of socioeconomic status, the sample, like those in virtually all mail surveys, is somewhat upwardly biased. The median level of educational attainment is 12.2 years, with 69.0% having completed the equivalent of high school or beyond. The median yearly household income of the respondents is \$15,980, with 27.8% reporting a family income of under \$10,000 and 20.0% reporting an income over \$25,000. All occupational levels are represented, with the number of white and blue collar workers being approximately equal.

Measures of Support

The measure of general support used in this study is a six item index developed to measure attitudes toward government involvement in economic provision for the elderly. The index includes two items first used in the Harris (1975) study of attitudes toward the elderly and four items developed for this study (see Table 1 for the items used). Items were presented in a Likert-type format. Preliminary analysis of the index suggests that it is internally consistent. Correlations among items are moderate; the item to total correlations are high; and coefficient alpha is moderate ($\alpha = .78$). According to Nunnally (1967), items with these characteristics are likely to sample the same content and measure the same dimension.

Rank-order format, constant sum scales (Tull & Hawkins, 1976) were used to measure comparative public support for government's providing benefits to older persons. In this approach, respondents are given a fixed number of points (100 in this study) and informed that they are to allocate these points among a set number of programs. Since the total number of points they can use in this exercise is fixed, the more points they give to one area, the fewer there are to give to the remaining areas. Thus, the areas to be evaluated are in competition with one another, and the number of points allocated

to a program reflects the priority placed on that program compared with the other programs presented. Two constant sum scales, one involving setting priorities for 10 different uses of Federal tax dollars including benefits for older persons and one involving setting funding priorities among programs employing 10 commonly used eligibility criteria including attainment of age 60, were used as the measures of comparative support for governmental provision of benefits to older persons in this study (see Table 2 for the categories used).

Predictor Variable Measures

The first predictor variable set, attitudes toward older persons, includes 6 variables. These are Palmore's (1977) Facts on Aging Quiz and associated measure of net bias in knowledge, an abbreviated version of Rozencranz and McNevin's (1969) three dimension measure of image of older persons (old persons as instrumental, autonomous, and personally acceptable), and personal anxiety about being older (Klemmack et al., 1980). The second predictor set, attitudes toward government, consists of 4 variables. These are a modified version of Milbrath's (1968) measure of political participation, Olsen's (1969) measures of political incapability and political cynicism, and Comrey and Newmeyer's (1965) measure of weak central government. The third predictor set, attitudes toward welfare, consists of two variables, Comrey and Newmeyer's (1965) measure of welfare orientation and a three item measure of belief that welfare recipients defraud the government.

In addition to attitudinal variables, three sets of sociodemographic characteristics are employed as predictors. These include four measures of socioeconomic status (family income, perceived adequacy of family income, level of educational attainment, and eligibility for government benefits including disability assistance, unemployment compensation, food stamps, and Medicaid), three age related attributes (chronological age, currently receiving a pension, and definition of self as in poor health), and two other characteristics (race and marital status).

Overall Level of Support

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that support for government's providing benefits to older persons is extremely high. There is high endorsement for government's involvement in assuring the economic security of older persons (see Table 1). Only a small

Table 1. General Support for Government Involvement in Economic Provision for the Elderly.

	%	(N)
	Agreeing	
(1) Government should help other people by making sure they have enough income to live comfortably.	72.5	(947)
(2) Government should help older people by paying the bills for necessities like food and medical care.	54.7	(943)
(3) If it weren't for special programs for older people, the elderly wouldn't get their fair share of the country's resources.	61.4	(938)
(4) As the cost of living increases, Social Security payments to retired people should increase also.	91.2	(948)
(5) Government should help support older people with taxes collected from all Americans.	68.8	(948)
(6) The government spends too much money on older people. ^a	6.3	(946)

^aThis item was reverse coded prior to its addition to the other item scores in the creation of the measure of general support.

number of respondents (6.3%) indicate that they believe that government spends too much money on older people. A majority (61.4%) report that categorical programs for older people are necessary if the elderly are to share equitably in the nation's resources. Furthermore, a majority (54.7%) indicate that they believe that government has the obligation to help older people obtain food and medical care.

High support for old age programs persists even when respondents are asked to compare these programs with other possible uses of tax dollars. Benefits for older persons ranks second only to national defense among the list of 10 possible uses of Federal tax dollars (see Table 2). The priority given to benefits for older persons is substantially higher than that given to benefits for categories of individuals who often are defined as needy (e.g., disabled, poor, and unemployed). Respondents also would have government allocate more funds to programs for which attaining age 60 is the sole eligibility criterion than to programs for people in nine other eligibility groups. The priority placed on funding programs for those 60+ is higher than that placed on funding programs for persons with a physical disadvantage (e.g., physical disability, blindness, poor health). Furthermore,

the budget priority given programs for which attainment of age 60 is the eligibility criterion is at least twice as high as that given to programs whose eligibility criteria suggest social disadvantage (e.g., unemployment, low income, membership in a minority group). Thus, these data support the view that programs designed to benefit older persons are popular both in general and when compared with other possible uses of public funds.

Relationship Between General and Comparative Support

Two issues are involved in the examination of predictors of public support for government's provision of benefits to older persons. First, is the measure of general support highly related to either or both of the measures of comparative support? If this should be the case, then the measures of support are to some degree substitutable for each other, and predictors of one type of support should be predictors of the other type. Second, if the different measures of support are not highly related to one another, are the predictors of general support similar to, different from, or the reverse of predictors of comparative support? In order to examine these issues simultaneously, the method of canonical correlation is used (Cooley & Lohnes, 1971).

Canonical correlation represents a combination of factor analysis and correlation analysis. In this approach, the items in each set of variables (e.g., predictors of support and measures of support in this study) are weighted so as to maximize the correlation between the linear combination of each. The canonical correlation is a measure of the total variance accounted for in the system, and the redundancy index is a measure of the degree to which the predictor variables account for the measures of support. As in factor analysis, the solution for the first canonical correlation is independent of the solution for any other canonical correlations. Finally, the canonical coefficient associated with each item is a measure of the contribution of that item to the linear combination of which it is a part, while the structural coefficient for the item is its correlation with the linear combination.

Correlating the 21 predictor variables with the three measures of support results in two statistically significant canonical correlations (see Table 3). Viewed from the perspective of the measures of support, the first canonical correlation centers on general support, and the

Table 2. Budget Priority for Benefits for Older Persons Compared with (a) Other Uses of Federal Taxes and (b) Programs for Persons Who Meet Other Eligibility Criteria.

Federal Budget Priorities			Eligibility Criteria Priorities		
Category	Percent of Budget	Grouping ^a	Criteria	Percent of Budget	Grouping ^a
Military defense	17.5	A	60 or older	15.5	A
Benefits for older people like Medicare, Social Security	16.2	B	Blind	14.1	B
Benefits for disabled people	11.9	C	Physical disability	12.8	C
Aid to elementary and secondary schools	10.6	D	Victim of a natural disaster	12.6	C
Benefits for poor people such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, housing	9.7	E	Veteran	11.2	D
Aid for highways and other transportation systems	9.1	E	Poor health	10.4	E
Benefits for unemployed like job training, unem. compensation	7.8	F	Unemployed	7.0	F
Environmental protection	7.1	G	Low income	6.9	F
Direct payments to farmers	5.2	G	Children and students	6.8	F
Aid to local governments to do with as they wish	4.9	H	Member of a minority group	2.6	G
Total	100.0		Total	100.0	

^aMeans with the same letter are not statistically significantly different from each other, $\alpha < .05$.

second centers on comparative support. This result suggests both that general support for government's providing benefits to older persons is not highly related to comparative support for government's providing such benefits and that the predictors of general support will be different from the predictors of comparative support. Furthermore, since there are not separate canonical correlations for each of the measures of comparative support, respondents do not appear to differentiate between the two measures of comparative support.

The magnitude of the first canonical correlation ($CC = .67$) is substantially higher than the magnitude of the second ($CC = .24$) suggesting that the predictors account for general support more adequately than they account for comparative support. The values of the redundancy indexes add further credence to this claim. The predictor variables account for 22% of the variance in general support (the first canonical variate) and only 4% of the variance in comparative support (the second canonical variate). This finding suggests both that the predictors of general support are different from the predictors of comparative support and that there is a need to develop alternative models to explain comparative support.

Correlates of General Support

Correlates of general support for government's providing benefits to older persons, the first canonical variate, are dominated by support for welfare and concern for the personal consequences of being old. Those who support welfare generally and those who are concerned that being old will result in negative consequences for themselves are more likely than others to support governmental provision of benefits to older persons. These findings suggest that actual and/or perceived improvement in the living conditions of older persons could result in the erosion of public support for government's providing benefits to older persons. Hudson (1978a,b) and Ragan (1977) argue that efforts to eliminate stereotypes of the aged can result in their removal from the ranks of the "deserving need." The results of this study suggest that such efforts could reduce anxiety about becoming older thereby reducing public support for governmental provision to older persons even further.

Correlates of Comparative Support

The predictors employed in this study are not very effective in accounting for comparative support. The relationships that are present,

Table 3. Canonical Correlations Among Three Measures of Support for Government's Providing Benefits to Older Persons and 21 Predictor Variables.

	General Support ^a		Comparative Support ^b	
	Canonical Coefficient	Structural Coefficient	Canonical Coefficient	Structural Coefficient
Support Measures^c				
Comparative support (Federal budget)	.05	-.07	.63	.79
Comparative support (Eligibility category)	.13	-.02	.64	.80
General support	1.02	.99	.05	-.14
Predictors of Support^c				
Knowledge about aging	-.04	-.31	.03	-.12
Net negative bias in knowledge about aging	.13	.37	-.23	.00
Concern about being older	.41	.64	.15	.19
Old person as instrumental	.01	-.08	-.22	-.15
Old person as autonomous	-.09	-.13	.09	-.05
Old person as personally acceptable	.26	.13	-.12	-.12
Age	-.13	-.01	-.37	-.10
Receive pension	-.07	.31	.10	-.08
In poor health	.00	.16	-.37	-.06
Family income	.03	-.40	-.02	-.25
Perceived income adequacy	-.07	-.38	-.05	-.21
Educational attainment	-.13	-.44	-.60	-.49
Eligible for benefits	-.02	.25	.45	.32
Politically active	.04	.05	-.14	-.26
Politically incapable	.09	.31	.23	.55
Politically cynical	.05	-.21	.08	.30
Belief in weak central government	-.04	-.08	-.04	.22
Support welfare	.62	.82	-.32	-.19
Believe high fraud in welfare	-.09	-.16	.37	.47
Race (1 = white)	.06	.32	.05	-.04
Marital status (1 = single)	.02	.13	.09	-.02

^aCanonical correlation = .67, $\chi^2 = 566.75$, $df = 69$, $\alpha < .001$, Redundancy = .22.

^bCanonical correlation = .24, $\chi^2 = 73.80$, $df = 44$, $\alpha < .003$, Redundancy = .04.

^cAll measures are scored so that a high score corresponds to a high degree of the attribute in question.

however, suggest that predictors of comparative support are either the reverse of or different from predictors of general support. Welfare orientation, the primary predictor of general support has a negative rather than a positive relationship with comparative support. Consistent with this finding, belief that welfare recipients defraud government, a variable which is not related to general support, is positively related to comparative support for government's providing benefits to older persons. These findings are consistent with those of Schram (1979) who notes that benefits for older persons do not fare well among those who are actually responsible for allocating funds among human service programs. They further suggest that those who are the strongest advocates for benefits

for older persons in general may also be those who place the lowest priority on such benefits when compared with other possible welfare functions of the state.

The primary predictors of comparative support are level of educational attainment and eligibility for government funded benefits (i.e., disability payments, unemployment compensation, food stamps, and Medicaid). Those with low levels of educational attainment and those who are eligible to receive benefits are more likely than those without these characteristics to place a high priority on benefits to older persons.

Although neither are related to general support, both chronological age and self-reported health status are predictors of comparative

support. As others have noted (Clemente, 1975; Klemmack & Roff, 1980), those who are older are less likely than those who are younger to support benefits for older persons. Finally, those who report that they are in poor health are less likely than those who report that they are in good health to support government's providing benefits to older persons.

Implications

Despite fears that rising income levels and improved health status among older persons would result in an anti-aging backlash among taxpayers (Hudson, 1978a,b; Ragan, 1977), these data suggest that there continues to be substantial support for government's providing services and benefits to the elderly. Moreover, taxpayers appear to believe that such provision should have a prominent position in the Federal budget. The results of this study suggest that programs clearly identified as "for the aged" enjoy widespread popular support.

Programs which provide substantial assistance to the vulnerable aged (e.g., Medicaid, food stamps) as well as to other groups, on the other hand, receive considerably less public endorsement. This suggests that public support for government's helping the aged might be limited to clearly identifiable aging programs. Thus, those who would merge current age segregated programs into an age irrelevant service system (Binstock, 1979; NASW News, 1981) may do so at the risk of losing a high level of public support. Indeed, since public support for helping the aged is so high, these findings suggest that those concerned about funding levels of programs which serve the elderly as well as other groups might well emphasize in their advocacy efforts that high proportions of the budgets of these programs are used to help elderly persons.

Although public support for aging programs is high, the results of this study suggest that the potential for backlash remains. The primary predictors of general support for government's assisting the elderly are welfare orientation and concern about being older. Individuals who score high on either of these measures may well believe that government assistance is appropriate for the elderly because they are needy, not because such assistance is a right to which older persons are entitled. This type of support might wane if the consequences of becoming old are perceived to be less onerous.

More disturbing from an advocacy perspective is the pattern of predictors of comparative support for government's providing benefits to older persons. Although the magnitude of the effect is small, the results indicate that those to whom advocates for benefits for the aged might turn first for support (e.g., supporters of welfare and the aged themselves) place a lower priority on such benefits than do others. Those who place a higher priority on benefits for the elderly, on the other hand, are either difficult to mobilize (e.g., the poor) or those with whom advocates for the elderly are likely to have little in common (e.g., those who believe that welfare recipients defraud the government).

Although support for government's providing benefits to older persons when compared with other uses of Federal funds and support for the use of age 60 as an eligibility criterion when compared with other possible eligibility criteria are relatively high, the relationship between comparative and general support for the aged is low. The failure to find a relationship between general and comparative support suggests that the priority placed on benefits for older persons is tenuous and may be subject to radical shifts. Changes in the economic situation, in perceptions of the elderly, or in the comparison categories used could result in substantially lower support for benefits for the elderly. Thus, while current support is high, the future of that support is ambiguous.

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