Public Support for Public Spending, 1973-1994

By Tom W. Smith

As the Republican-led 104th Congress completes its first 100 days, it continues to grapple with the complex problems of government taxing and spending. In their “Contract with America,” House Republicans emphasized a series of fiscal and budgetary items including a balanced budget amendment, spending cuts for welfare programs, along with increases for defense and “tax relief” for the middle class.

More recently, Republican leaders in the House and Senate have targeted various government programs for cuts or elimination, ranging from foreign aid to public television and radio. As Congress tries to convert these proposals into a concrete, workable budget, it may wish to consult survey data to better understand the public’s governmental spending priorities.

Since 1973, the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago have asked people whether government spending in various areas is too much, too little, or about right. Figure 1 presents the spending preferences of Americans for 1994, as well as the high and low years for spending support.

To help distill this crunch of numbers, public support for spending has been summarized in net spending scores. Net spending is the percentage saying too little is being spent minus the percentage saying too much. For example, in 1994 31% said too little was spent on parks and recreation and 6% thought too much was being spent. This gives a net spending score of +25% (31 - 6 = 25). If everyone favored more spending for an item, the maximum net score would be +100% and if everyone wanted less spending, the net score would be -100%. Positive scores indicate that more people want to increase spending than to decrease it and negative scores mean that cutters outnumber the adders. The following analysis will be in terms of these net spending scores.

Current Priorities

Crime has regained its long-time top rank as the area for which most people want to increase spending, being favored by an edge of +71% (which nearly ties education’s score of +72% in 1990 as the highest net spending level of any item in any year). Close behind is support for law enforcement spending, which comes in third with +58%. The related category of dealing with drug addiction follows closely at fifth with +54%, while the more treatment-oriented drug rehabilitation finishes further back at ninth with +44%. Unlike the categories of halting crime and law enforcement, which have gained ground in recent years, support for both dealing with drugs and drug rehabilitation is down from peaks in the late eighties.

Education finished second with a pro-spending rating of +68%, gaining in both absolute and relative terms since a stable 6th place rank in the early 1970s. While down a bit from its first place position and record score of +72% in 1990, education remains a high priority.

Health comes in fourth with +55%. Health has always been among the top priorities, but its position among the leaders has varied over the years. Relative peaks were reached with second place rankings in 1974-5, 1987, and 1991 (with an all-time high score of +69%).

Sixth is the environment with +54%. Environment, like education, has gained considerable ground over the last 20 years, rising from the middle of the field to first place finishes at +70 in 1989 and +67% in 1991. Since then, like health, it has lost ground in both relative and absolute terms.

In seventh place comes solving the problems of the big cities with +47%. This category has edged up over the last decade and reached its best absolute score (+50%) in 1993 and its best relative rank in 1994. However, only the promise of actually solving urban problems attracts majority public support. Support for assistance to big cities ranks 16th, with more people favoring cuts than backing increases (-8%). It has not changed its low absolute level or rank much in recent years.

Eighth is assistance to the poor with +44%. While there is substantial support for helping the poor, few people feel that welfare is the way to help them (“Welfare” and “assistance to the poor” are asked separately.) Welfare spending ranks 19th with a strong negative score of -49%. Support for both assistance to the poor and welfare has declined since 1990, when assistance to the poor reached its high point in fifth place at +63% and welfare achieved its best recent score of -14%. Support for these categories peaks at the end of recessions, when unemployment is high and more people perceive the need for public assistance, and then falls during periods of economic expansion.

Social Security appears in tenth place with +42%. Not only is Social Security far from the top of the spending list, but it has never ranked higher than
Figure 1: How Americans View Overall Spending

Question: We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. First... are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on...

### Halting the rising crime rate
- **1994-High**: 78% Too little, 16% About right, 5% Too much
- **1985-Low**: 65% Too little, 29% About right, 6% Too much

### Education/Improving the nation’s education system
- **1994**: 73% Too little, 22% About right, 3% Too much
- **1990-High**: 75% Too little, 23% About right, 3% Too much
- **1975-Low**: 52% Too little, 37% About right, 12% Too much

### Law enforcement
- **1994-High**: 65% Too little, 28% About right, 7% Too much
- **1986-Low**: 53% Too little, 41% About right, 7% Too much

### Health/Improving and protecting the nation's health
- **1994**: 66% Too little, 23% About right, 11% Too much
- **1990-High**: 72% Too little, 24% About right, 4% Too much
- **1985-Low**: 58% Too little, 35% About right, 8% Too much

### Dealing with drug addiction
- **1994**: 63% Too little, 28% About right, 9% Too much
- **1988-High**: 71% Too little, 23% About right, 4% Too much
- **1977-Low**: 60% Too little, 32% About right, 9% Too much

### Environment/Improving and protecting the environment
- **1994**: 63% Too little, 28% About right, 9% Too much
- **1990-High**: 75% Too little, 21% About right, 4% Too much
- **1980-Low**: 52% Too little, 32% About right, 16% Too much

### Solving the problems of the big cities
- **1994**: 61% Too little, 25% About right, 14% Too much
- **1993-High**: 62% Too little, 25% About right, 13% Too much
- **1980-Low**: 46% Too little, 30% About right, 25% Too much

### Assistance to the poor
- **1994-Low**: 59% Too little, 25% About right, 16% Too much
- **1988-High**: 70% Too little, 23% About right, 7% Too much

### Drug rehabilitation
- **1994**: 56% Too little, 33% About right, 12% Too much
- **1990-High**: 67% Too little, 25% About right, 8% Too much
- **1984-Low**: 51% Too little, 39% About right, 10% Too much

### Social Security
- **1994**: 49% Too little, 44% About right, 7% Too much
- **1989-High**: 57% Too little, 38% About right, 5% Too much
- **1993-Low**: 46% Too little, 46% About right, 8% Too much

### Highways and bridges
- **1994**: 40% Too little, 52% About right, 8% Too much
- **1984-High**: 49% Too little, 44% About right, 7% Too much
- **1991-Low**: 36% Too little, 52% About right, 11% Too much

### Mass transportation
- **1994-High**: 38% Too little, 53% About right, 9% Too much
- **1986-Low**: 31% Too little, 55% About right, 14% Too much

### Parks and recreation
- **1994**: 31% Too little, 62% About right, 9% Too much
- **1989-High**: 35% Too little, 60% About right, 5% Too much
- **1987-Low**: 30% Too little, 63% About right, 7% Too much

### Improving the condition of blacks
- **1994**: 34% Too little, 44% About right, 22% Too much
- **1990-High**: 41% Too little, 43% About right, 16% Too much
- **1978-Low**: 26% Too little, 47% About right, 27% Too much

### Assistance to blacks
- **1994**: 27% Too little, 44% About right, 29% Too much
- **1991-High**: 35% Too little, 45% About right, 20% Too much
- **1985-Low**: 24% Too little, 48% About right, 29% Too much

### Assistance to big cities
- **1994**: 27% Too little, 38% About right, 35% Too much
- **1990-High**: 25% Too little, 45% About right, 30% Too much
- **1986-Low**: 17% Too little, 43% About right, 40% Too much

### National defense/The military, armaments and defense
- **1994**: 17% Too little, 49% About right, 33% Too much
- **1980-High**: 61% Too little, 37% About right, 12% Too much
- **1990-Low**: 11% Too little, 45% About right, 44% Too much

### Space exploration program/space exploration
- **1994**: 10% Too little, 42% About right, 49% Too much
- **1988-High**: 20% Too little, 43% About right, 37% Too much
- **1974-Low**: 8% Too little, 29% About right, 63% Too much

### Welfare
- **1994**: 13% Too little, 25% About right, 62% Too much
- **1990-High**: 24% Too little, 37% About right, 38% Too much
- **1977-Low**: 13% Too little, 24% About right, 63% Too much

### Foreign aid/assistance to other countries
- **1994**: 5% Too little, 20% About right, 76% Too much
- **1989-High**: 5% Too little, 24% About right, 69% Too much
- **1976-Low**: 3% Too little, 19% About right, 79% Too much

* Results for 1977 and 1975 were the same net score with an almost identical distribution.

**Note:** Net score is calculated by subtracting percentage responding too much from the percentage responding too little. Subtractions are made prior to rounding.

**Source:** Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, latest that of January 27-May 31, 1994.
How Much Government?

In terms of basic priorities the public's messages are: 1) deal with crime first, but do not neglect social needs, and 2) butter before guns.

Also instructive are the apparent cross-signals sent out by the public about "assistance to the poor" and "welfare" spending. Support for "the poor" ranks 8th and is a solid +44%, while welfare spending finishes 19th at -49%. This distinction between wanting to help those in need and disdain for welfare indicates that the public wants to reform our public assistance programs. However, the public does not want to punish or neglect the poor, but to provide them with more assistance. They are equally clear that traditional welfare spending is not the mechanism for providing the poor with that increased aid. Thus, people want to be generous like liberals, but question current government efforts like conservatives.

That pattern runs through the public's attitude toward spending in general. People see many pressing social problems from crime-plagued cities to poverty and homelessness that need governmental action. For most problems, the majority of people see additional spending as needed. But they want that spending to be effective, to actually ameliorate the problems that they are designed to address. Rather than less spending, what the public wants is spending that works.

Endnote:

The General Social Surveys (GSS) are conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith are the principal investigators. The GSS are full-probability samples of adults living in households in the United States. Full technical details on the survey are presented in James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith, General Social Surveys, 1972-1994: Cumulative Codebook. Chicago: NORC, 1994.

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