

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

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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.

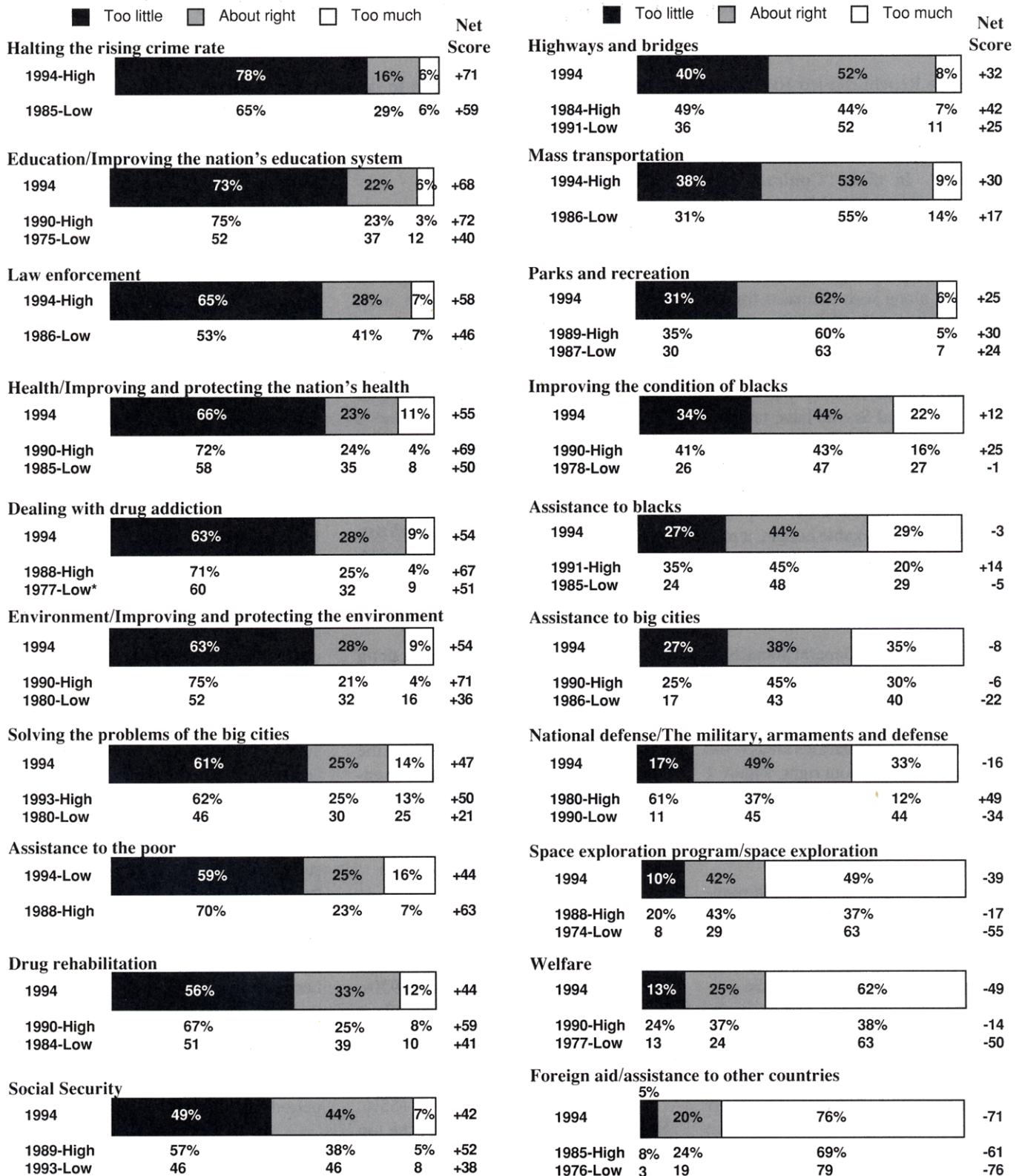
In seventh place comes **solving the problems of the big cities** with +47%. This category has edged up over the last decade and reached its best absolute score (+50%) in 1993 and its best relative rank in 1994. However, only the promise of actually solving urban problems attracts majority public support. 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...?



* 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?

eighth and is down from a high of +52% in 1989.

Next comes support for transportation spending. Spending for **highways and bridges** is 11th with +32% and in 12th place is support for **mass transportation** with +30%. Support for highways and bridges shows no clear trend, but mass transportation spending has grown more popular in recent years and had its best score in 1994.

Thirteenth is **parks and recreation** with +25%. Spending support has been stable (high +30% and low +24%) and its relative rank has changed little.

Spending for blacks appears at 14th and 15th place. When phrased as a promise to **improve the conditions of blacks**, there is a small positive tilt (+12%), but for the more neutral **assistance to blacks** the edge is narrowly towards less spending (-3%). The relative position of spending to improve the condition of blacks has varied little, but support is down from a high point of +25% in 1990. Assistance to blacks shows a similar decline.

Seventeenth is spending for **defense** with -16%. While up appreciably (+17 points) from its near historical low in 1993, support for military spending remains weak. Defense spending shows more flux in public backing than any other area. Support recovered slowly from a Vietnam low of -28% in 1973 to +7% in 1978, before soaring to +49% in 1980 in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By 1982 support fell back to pre-invasion levels. After remaining stable from 1984 to 1988, support began to wane as the Soviet threat collapsed and reached an all time low of -34% in 1990. The Gulf War temporarily boosted support to -13%, but, as was the case after the Afghanistan invasion, by 1993 support returned to pre-war levels.

Space exploration places 18th with -39%. Space has never ranked far from the bottom of the stack, but in absolute terms support rose from the early 1970s to a high point in 1988. Since then its popularity has again fallen.

After welfare at 19th (see above), comes **foreign aid** in last place with -71%. It has always finished dead last, has scored well below its nearest competitors, and has not varied greatly.

Spending Trends

Trends in overall spending (i.e. the average net spending for all items included) has always shown more people favoring increases than cuts. Support, however, declined in the early 1970s to low points in 1976-77 (+11%). The public then generally increased its overall support for spending during the next dozen years to highs of +24-25% in 1988-90. The spending index then declined to a moderate +17 level in 1994.

Support for domestic social spending (average net spending for health, education, welfare, solving the problems of the big cities, and improving the condition of blacks) has also always been positive. It fell from an early high of +29% in 1974 to a low of +13-14% in 1977-78. Support then generally moved up to a record high of +40% in 1990. Since then, the domestic spending score dropped back to +26% in 1994.

Conclusion

Current spending priorities show a mixture of liberal and conservative leanings. Support for domestic social spending in general is positive, with more people favoring expansion than cuts. Public backing of increased spending for education, health, and the environment is especially strong (all +50 or better). But support for domestic social spending has slipped in recent years and even the high support for education, health, and the environment is down somewhat from peaks 3-5 years ago.

Moreover, a conservative tilt is shown by crime regaining its first place position with a near record net spending score. Likewise, support for defense spending rebounded from a near-low point of -33% in 1993 to -16%. However, with a 17th place finish and a negative spending score, defense is hardly a popular favorite.

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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