

Framing the Poor

In 1960, 22 percent of the American public, some 40 million people, earned an income below the poverty line.¹ Fifteen years later, the rate had been reduced to 12 percent as spending on poverty assistance increased from three to about eight percent of US government spending.² The War on Poverty had a dramatic impact. Poverty, especially among the elderly, was indeed reduced, and substantially so (for a thorough discussion of how various demographics fared during the decades after the War on Poverty, see Danziger and Weinberg 1994). The poor were seen as victims of an economic system that had no place for them, trapped in dysfunctional schools,

harder, to throw off their pessimism about their chances in the American economy, and to free themselves from dysfunctional government programs that encouraged laziness, the break-up of families, and dependency. Government policy followed this shift in focus, we will show. Action declined then remained stagnant in the face of increasing numbers of poor, and deeper poverty among them. Fifteen years later a Democratic candidate declared his intention to “end welfare as we know it,” and proceeded to revamp cash assistance (Berke 1992). By the mid-1990s, policy was dramatically altered from the optimism of the Kennedy and Johnson eras.

Beginning in the earliest years, but accelerating in the 1970s, public discussion of the poor began to focus on the poor as cheaters, as lazy or unwilling to work, and on the dysfunctions of government efforts to help them. From less than 10 percent of all discussion of poverty in the nation’s news media, these “stingy frames” have grown steadily over time, so that today they represent the most prominent way of talking about the poor. Perhaps the most surprising element in the data we will present is the tremendous focus on the plight and anger of the poor and other elements that justified a more generous approach to poverty in the 1960s and 1970s. We trace how the nation’s conversation about the poor has changed over almost 50 years, and we demonstrate that these shifting frames constitute a simple and compelling explanation for equally substantial changes in the relative generosity of US policy toward the poor.

other factors such as growth in the economy and the degree of poverty. We then develop a new indicator, the Government Generosity Index (GGI), which represents the degree of government spending on the poor controlling for the severity of the poverty problem. This Index can be predicted statistically very we

time or another.

debate is not that easy, especially as the other side can fight back (see Druckman 2001; see also Chong and Druckman 2007; Entman 2007; and Nelson et al. 1997). Here, we have a simpler question, which is whether we can document changes over time in the framing of poverty and if these changes relate to the degree of government generosity toward the poor.

Studying the evolution of a policy frame over time differs substantially from studying the ability of a given political actor to “re-frame” a debate. While various political actors are constantly attempting to re-

poor as “deserving” or “undeserving” or on race as a determinant of public support (for example, Avery and Peffley 2003; Gilens 1999; Gilens 2003; Hancock 2004; Johnson 2003; Handler and

programs elicit many different responses in the mind of the public, which is why we focus here on shifting frames as opposed to any single public opinion indicator.³

Other scholars describe a more inter-sectional framing of the poor, as involving race, gender, class and other factors. Ange-Marie Hancock (2004), in her book about the political battle surrounding Welfare Reform in 1996, examines newspaper articles and congressional arguments and finds that the media and politicians constructed a public identity of AFDC recipients as “Welfare Queens,” defined by stereotypes such as laziness and a tendency to have many children. Hancock determines that this framing helped to play a role in the final policy of Welfare Reform. Misra and colleagues (2003) examine randomly selected magazine articles from eight time periods between 1929 and 1996, finding changing prominence in the dependency frame and a particular increase in the 1960s and 1970s. Guetzkow (2010), in his study of the Congressional hearings surrounding both the Great Society and Clinton’s Welfare Reform, suggests that poverty in the 1960s was framed as a breakdown of the community, while poverty in the 1980s and even more in the 1990s was framed by family breakdown, caused by inefficiencies in the welfare system.

Lawrence Mead disputes the effect of elite framing on support for welfare policies, instead associating support with the

the stories were “true hits”—stories about US poverty issues.⁴ Table 1 shows our string of search terms.⁵

(Insert Table 1 about here)

To determine whether the *New York Times* reflected a general focus that appeared in many newspapers across the country, or followed its own idiosyncratic trends with respect to welfare and poverty coverage, we compared it to four other newspapers: *Baltimore Sun*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1 shows the results of searching according to the terms laid out in Table 1 for five different newspapers, as indicated. The *New York Times*, in the dark solid line, peaks with over 1,000 articles in the late-1960s and declines from there. Other newspapers are available only for shorter time periods but they show remarkably similar trends, suggesting that media attention to the War on Poverty was not the invention of a single newspaper but truly reflected a national mood toward greater concern during the period of heightened governmental focus on this issue.⁷ Once we identified the total number of articles on poverty for a given year, we did additional key-word searches to identify what frames of poverty were most prominent in the debate.

Five Frames

By reading some 560 articles in *The New York Times* that resulted from our search, we were able to see the many different arguments about poverty and group them into broad themes. We identify five distinct frames. Each of these encompasses considerable diversity, but we can summarize them as follows:

Misery and Neglect: the poor constitute a separate society living in urban slums.

Social Disorder: the poor commit crimes or riot in the streets, causing policymakers to focus on the dangers of failure to address the concerns of the poor.

Economic and Physical Barriers: the poor are without money because of temporary economic conditions, disabilities, or old age.

the non-*New York Times* newspapers and excluded articles that contained a number of different terms.

⁷ Correlations between the total coverage in the *New York Times* and the four other papers shown in Figure 1 are: .92, .90, .84, and .92. Other newspapers correlate with each other at similar levels; the lowest correlation among all the newspapers reported is .84.

Laziness and Dysfunction: the poor avoid work and are content to stay at home and have children.

Cheating: the poor take advantage of the welfare system, to get rich and reap undeserved benefits.

Each of those five frames encompasses many subframes. For example, the misery and neglect frame includes articles about homelessness and slum living. The laziness and dysfunction frame includes single mothers and welfare dependency. Through reading dozens of articles as well as a review of the relevant literature, we identified the language that most often accompanies each frame in newspaper articles. In an interactive manner similar to how we refined our searches for poverty stories in general, we developed a string of search terms for each of the five frames, and these are shown in Table 2.⁸

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Table 2 shows the different search strings we used to identify the five ways of thinking about poverty that are common in the US discourse. Figure 2 shows the trends for the *New York Times* in how many times each frame occurred over time.⁹ (See Appendix B for a discussion of how closely the framing found in the *New York Times* data corresponds to that in other newspapers.)

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

⁸ To check the accuracy of the data, we read 20 *New York Times* articles in each decade for each frame. Out of the 500 articles, 467, or 93.7%, were positive hits. Because the positive hits represent such a majority of the framing searches, we use all of the articles.

⁹ Note that the keyword searches conducted to construct Table 2 are not mutually exclusive. An article selected through the procedures explained in Table 1 might appear in none, one, or more than one of the categories in Table 2. However, despite the non-exclusive and non-exhaustive nature of the search process used, the results do show trends over time that correspond with qualitative research in the area and with our own understandings of shifts in the nature of the debate.

Figure 2 shows the percent of stories identified by frame in a stacked-area format, summing therefore to 100 percent for each year. The frames are ordered with the three more generous ones at the bottom and the two stingy frames at the top. The data make very clear that the early period of media discussion of poverty was marked by a distinctly positive tone of discussion. The poor were discussed in terms of the notion of “misery and neglect;” there was significant discussion of the threat of violence and social disorder associated with hopelessness and despair; and the economic and physical barriers to rising out of poverty were important elements of the debate. Together, these positive or generous frames toward the poor constituted over 90 percent of the coverage in the first years of the series. Attention to “welfare queens” and other “cheating” or “lazy” frames was rare at first but grew significantly in the 1970s. The “cheating” frame grew especially quickly in the 1970s and declined in later years; it may never have had the numerical dominance in the debate that it may have had in some elements of popular culture and scholarship (at least not in the mainstream media sources surveyed here). The “lazy” frame grew throughout the period, from a tiny percentage of the total to the single largest element of the debate by the early 21st century.

The way in which the public views a public issue determines the possible solutions,

education. In this study, the misery and neglect and economic and physical barriers frames would likely lead to consideration of alternatives associated with more expansive government programs, so we call those “generous frames.” The laziness and dysfunction and cheating frames would result in the consideration of more restrictive alternatives, and we call those “stingy frames.”

The social disorder frame is more complex, as

response to the LA riots was different from that of those of the 1960s, as Americans were much less supportive of the uprising.

There is no doubt that media discussion of the poor has shifted. While there is no single date on which we can pinpoint a shift in framing, we see a gradual movement from greater focus on the structural causes of poverty, individual barriers to moving out of poverty, and the collective dangers of having too many people living in conditions of despair. Slowly, elite conversations shifted to focus on the poor exploiting the welfare system for un-deserved financial gains and the dysfunctional nature of poverty assistance programs. This may be part of a larger process in which individual rather than collective frames have become increasingly prominent, and they may correspond to an increase in what Mark Smith has dubbed “The Right Talk” in which conservative rhetoric has simply become more prominent over the decades (see Smith 2007). Robert Cox has suggested that this shift, from social policy based on universality and solidarity to social policy based on individuality, has taken place throughout the Western world because of the collective impact of small changes to the welfare state (Cox 1998). Michael Katz cites three factors contributing to a new policy and rhetoric: the use of market models, a dispersion from federal to the states of authority for making policy, and a coordinated effort against perceived dependency (Katz 2001). Rather than focus here on where these shifting frames came from, in the next sections we address the question of what effect they may have had on public spending toward the poor.

Measuring Poverty and the Scope of Governmental Response

Having documented important shifts in how we discuss the poor, we want to know if this is related to government spending to alleviate poverty. To do this we first need to have adequate measures of the severity of the problem, then of the size of the response. In this section, we

develop a new measure of the amount of domestic poverty and then a measure of total government spending on the poor. This allows us to assess the generosity of government spending, controlling for the severity of the problem.

The Poverty Gap

There is no agreement on the best way to measure poverty, and scholars use a variety of different

of living, or recognize that non-food living expenses of an average household have changed greatly over time. So there is nothing perfect about the income approach to the definition of poverty thresholds. However, the national poverty levels provide a single indicator that is available over a long period of time, allowing assessment of trends. Even if the official poverty line may wrongly suggest that one person is poor and another is not, newly developed measures have shown similar amounts and changes in poverty over time.¹¹ Therefore, the official levels may accurately measure the trends in the number of poor. Another value of the official poverty rate, no matter what its level of accuracy, is that policymakers are “judged by their success or failure in reducing the officially measured prevalence of poverty,” as James Tobin predicted upon its adoption (O’ Connor 2001, 185). That is, if we want to know the nature of the response to poverty, we should know the understanding of the problem. And there is no doubt about that. For better or worse, Orshansky’s poverty measure has become the official indicator of the number of poor.

Each year, the U.S. Census Bureau, in the Current Population Survey and more recently the American Community Survey, calculates the nation’s poverty statistics based on thresholds for different family sizes. Tthe natio3 1 19 f 1 5oduc Tmp 0 1 372.cc19.89 65ntETBT16ofaA202mJETSu-()] T

the Census also produces estimates describing the number of poor people and the “income deficit,” or the average distance of people in poverty from the poverty line.

The “income deficit” is a useful concept because it incorporates something that the poverty rate does not: the depth of poverty. If the poor are close to the poverty line it would not take much to bring them out of poverty. At the same poverty rate, but with the poor further below the income threshold, the deficit is greater. From the income deficit, many have calculated the poverty gap, or the difference between the total aggregated income of the poor and the poverty threshold. This can be thought of as the amount of money that would have to be transferred to the poor to bring every person in poverty to the poverty line. It is a single indicator of the depth of poverty and has been used by scholars of all ideological stripes to measure the depth of poverty (Burtless and Smeeding 2001, 52; Scholz and Levine 2001; Weinberg 1985, 1987; Ziliak 2003, 2006). The Census has calculated annual numbers for the income deficit since 1975.

Because of disagreements as to what income should count towards the poverty gap, several different versions exist (Weinberg 1987). However, the most cited measure lines up with Census estimates by using the income level calculated after receiving certain government benefits (Weinberg 1987, 231). That measure trends closely with the poverty gap measured before government benefits, which we outline in Appendix C. Because it makes little difference for our purposes, we use the post-transfer version of the gap, with data provided by Arloc Sherman, a senior researcher with the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a left-leaning think tank that works on poverty and fiscal issues. Sherman’s data extends between 1975 and 2005.

Our period of coverage is 1960 to 2008, so we must extend this series, and we do so through a simple regression procedure. The CBPP measure can be predicted almost perfectly with a linear regression based on three variables: 1) the number of poor; 2) the poverty rate; and 3) the amount of government spending on non-medical poverty assistance.¹² For the 31 years when the official Census-based poverty gap data are available, our three-variable regression explains more than 98 percent of the variation in the poverty gap.¹³ We therefore extend the Census-based measure backwards to 1960 and forward to 2008, as shown in the thinner line in the upper-left graph in Figure 3.¹⁴

(Insert Figure 3 about here)

The upper-right graph in Figure 3 shows two more common measures of poverty: the number of poor, and the percentage of Americans living in poverty. The number of poor (indicated by the solid line and measured on the left-hand scale) declined from 40 million to below 25 million from 1960 to 1970; since then it has increased almost to its previous value. Of course the US population has increased dramatically since then as well, so the poverty rate is

¹² Our measure of total government spending on poverty assistance comes from data provided by Rachel Sherman, of the Heritage Foundation, and tracks closely with a Congressional Research Service report. It incorporates spending at the local, state, and federal levels on means-tested programs (see Appendix A for more details).

¹³ The Poverty Gap = $8.37582 + (6.11472 \times \text{millions of people in poverty}) - (8.548732 \times \text{the poverty rate}) + (.016533 \times \text{non-medical poverty spending at all levels of government})$. Adj. R-sq. = 0.9837; N = 31. Using total poverty spending rather than non-medical spending produces nearly identical results to those shown below (R-sq = 0.9855); we use the non-medical measure for reasons explained below.

¹⁴ Our regression is a measurement model, not a theoretical one. We simply want to extend the

- 1) Cash support, such as TANF
- 2) Provision or subsidization of necessities, such as health care or food
- 3) Educational programs for youth, such as Head Start
- 4) Employment-related programs, such as job training, economic development, or direct public employment.

Most means-tested programs provide assistance to people with a range of incomes, as high as several times the poverty threshold. Program eligibility

Figure 4 shows the huge and continued growth of medical poverty spending, a trend that has affected government aid just as in other areas of the economy. Non-health related poverty spending has increased much more slowly than the health-care component, as the figure makes clear. Health-related poverty spending expanded dramatically with the creation of the Medicaid program, quickly reaching an equal share with all other forms of poverty assistance combined. Although originally limited by the stigma coming from its attachment to AFDC, the number of

An Index of Government Generosity

In order to understand more completely the impact of framing on policy in the case of poverty, here we develop a single Index of Government Generosity (GGI). The GGI is the percent of total government spending on non-medical means-tested programs divided by the poverty gap. We call it the “generosity” i

108, just 8 percent higher than it had been in 1960. In 1978, it reached its peak value of 267.

Comparing the data in Figure 3 with that in Figure 6 shows that spending as a percent of government budgets has been relatively flat, but our index has steadily moved downward during this time. This is because the depth of poverty has continued to increase and government assistance to the poor has not kept pace. The numbers in Figure 6 thus provide us with a simple indicator of the degree of prioritization of poverty, controlling for the scope of the problem. It tells a story of increased concern, dramatic aid increases, and then an equally dramatic reversal: a slow withering away of public and government concern with helping the poor.

Stinginess and Generosity

The regression we presented with Figure 5 showed that, controlling for relevant factors such as the growth of the economy and the depth of poverty, the tone of media coverage was a significant predictor of government spending on the poor. Figure 7 shows the linkage even more clearly.

(Insert Figure 7 about here)

Figure 7 presents a simple overlay of the GGI with our media variable, the net tone of media stories (that is, the number of generous stories minus the number of stingy ones). In the table below the figure, we present a simple regression reflecting the ten-year lag that is statistically the best fit between the two series presented. This simple regression predicts over 80 percent of the variation in our measure of government generosity. The period of great expansion of the War on Poverty is associated with a dramatic increase in the GGI, and indeed with a very positive and optimistic media portrayal of the problems of the poor. This media portrayal shifts steadily toward a more negative stance, and, about 10 years later, government policy responded with a similarly timed and gradual decline in generosity.

up, tired, frustrated, and discouraged. Collectively, attention now focuses on what we have called the “stingy” frames: the poor are individually responsible for their problems, and

and put an end to hunger world-wide (see Baumgartner and Jones 1993); the civil rights movement seemed destined to transform society; and so on. Perhaps it is best to view our collective enthusiasm about the War on Poverty in light of these other efforts. In the case of poverty, as in these others, the initial enthusiasm associated with the earlier period has given way to great pessimism. In contrast to the dangers of nuclear power or th

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Search Terms Used to Identify Poverty-Related Stories, 1960–20

Table 2. Identifying Five Frames of Poverty through Electronic Search Terms

Frame	Search Terms
Misery and Neglect	poverty-stricken OR "urban renewal" OR despair OR shelter OR bleak OR blight OR hunger OR ghetto OR "neediest cases" OR homeless OR slum
Social Disorder	

2007	596.58	327.18	269.40	4040.3	134.05
2008	647.71	337.68	310.03	4234.3	144.02

Notes: Total US spending on poverty programs comes from The Heritage Foundation, which put together measures of total poverty spending as part of a report, “Obama to Spend \$10.3 Trillion on Welfare.” Thank you to Rachel Sheffield, a research assistant and co-author of the report, who provided the data and helped in repeated requests for additional parts of the data that went into their calculation.

Poverty Gap from Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, which calculated the gaps from Census data. Thank you to Arloc Sherman, a senior researcher, who provided data the data and answered follow up questions.

Overall government spending: White House Office of Management and Budget. Table 15.1 – Total Government Receipts in Absolute Amounts and as Percentages of GDP: 1948–2010. Washington D.C.

Number of poor and poverty rate: U.S. Census Bureau. Table 2. Poverty Status, by Family Relationship, Race, and Hispanic Origin. Washington D.C.

All numbers are reported in billions of 2005 dollars.

Figure 1. Attention to Poverty in Five US Newspapers.

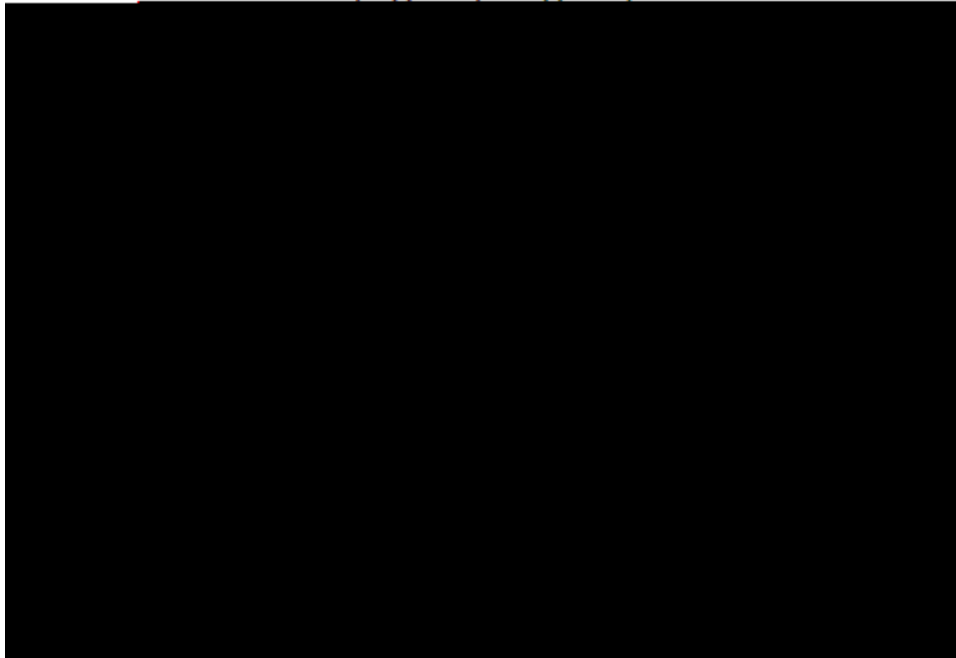


Figure 2. Five Frames of Media Attention to Poverty.

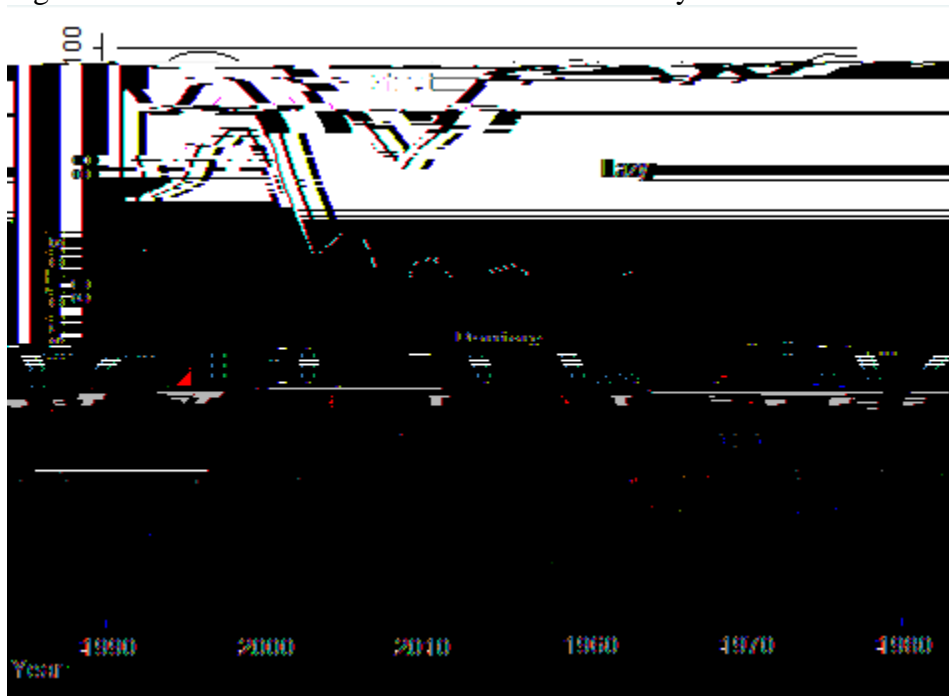


Figure 3. Three Measures of Poverty.

Note: The

Figure 4. Percent of Government Spending on Medical and Non-Medical Poverty Assistance.

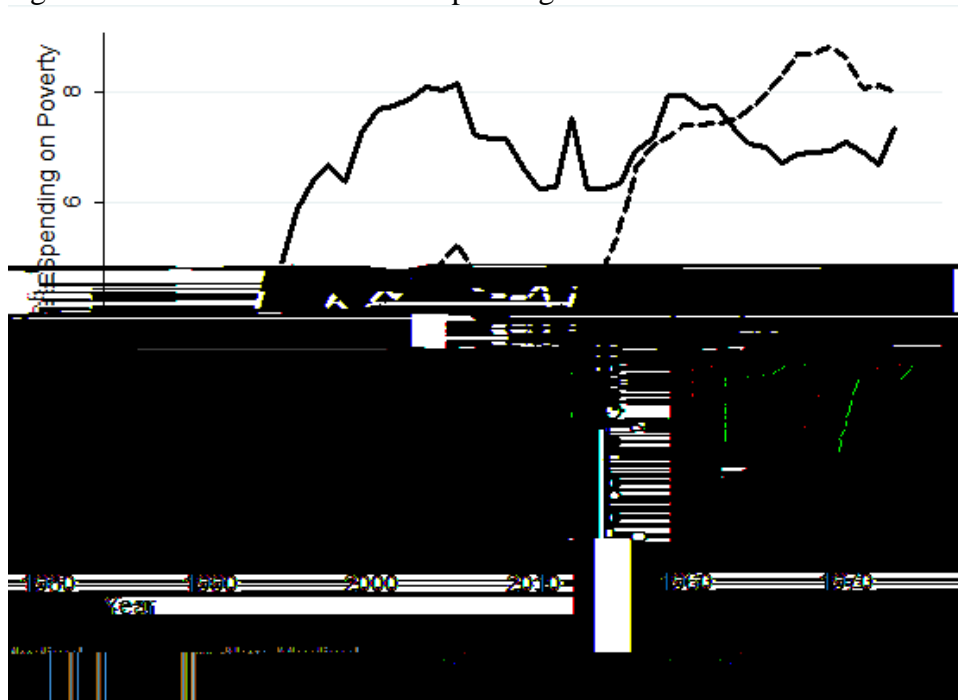


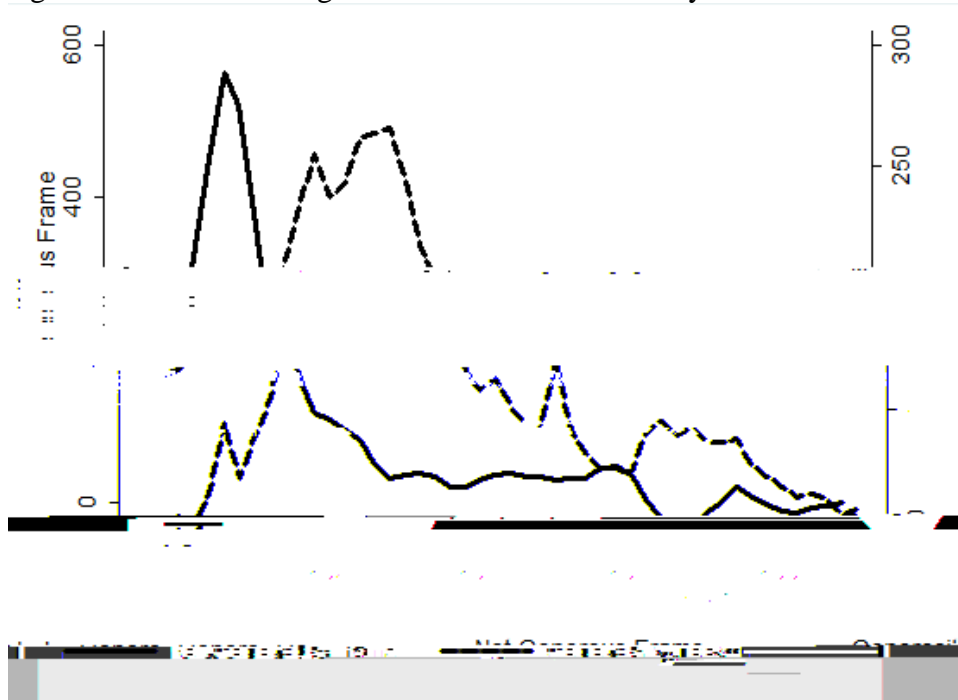
Figure 5. Predicting Total Spending on Poverty Assistance.

Note: The figure shows that the following regression predicts total spending almost perfectly.

Variable	Coefficient	St. Error	T	Prob.
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of the data. Residuals from this specification show no correlation with the dependent variable ($r = -0.0000$) or over time ($r = -0.0035$).

Figure 7. Media Framing and Government Generosity toward the Poor.



Note: The Government Generosity Index can be predicted with the value of the net tone of newspaper coverage of poverty ten years previously. This simple model explains 82 percent of the movement in the GGI.

Variable	Coefficient	St. Error	T	Prob.
Net Tone (lagged 10 years)	.305	.02	13.13	.000
Constant	129.9	4.41	29.48	.000

N = 39; Adj. R² = 0.82

Figure B.1. Percent Generous Poverty Coverage in Five US Newspapers

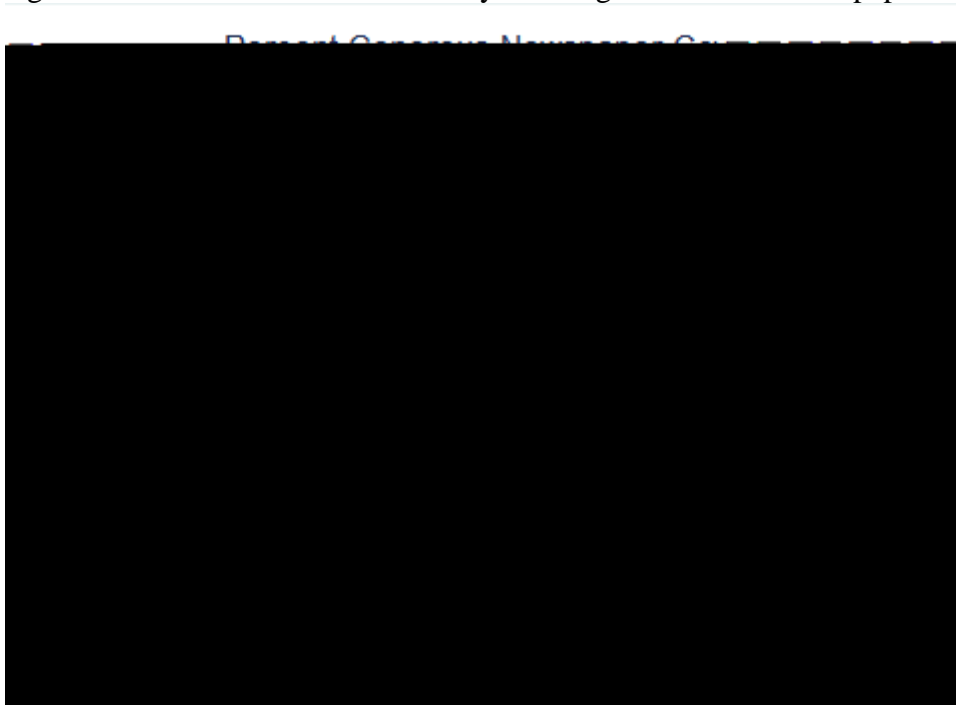


Figure C.2. Pre- and Post-Transfer Estimates of the Poverty Gap.

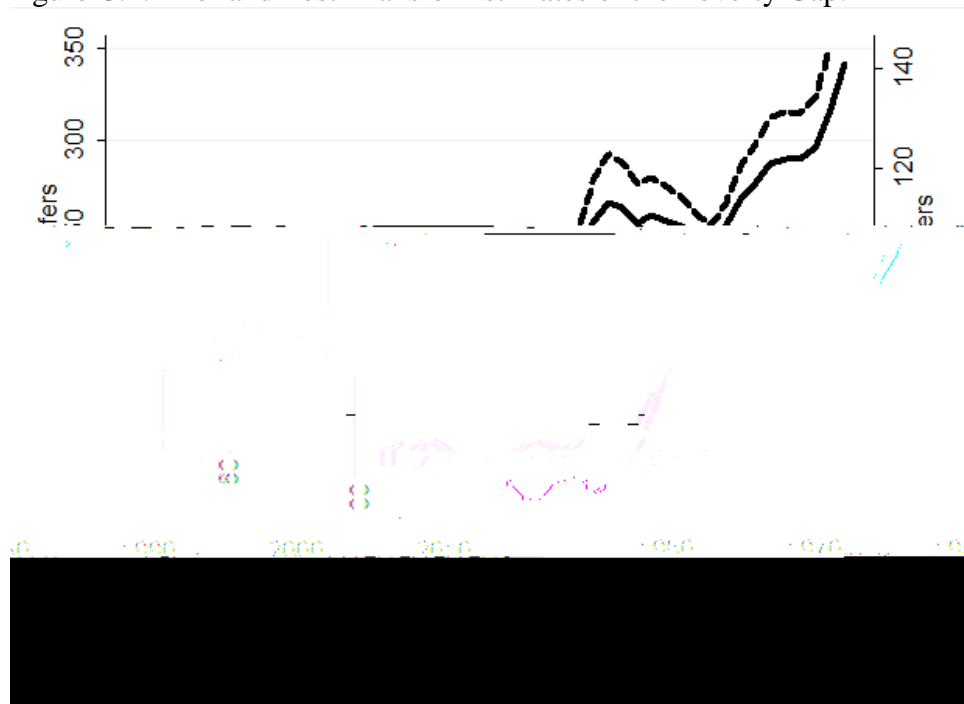
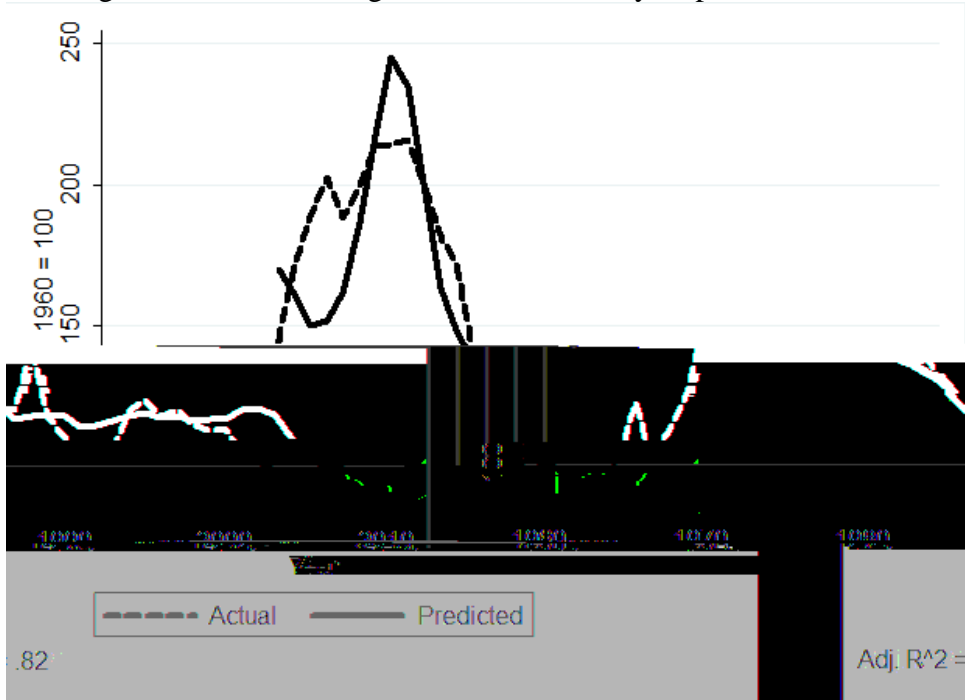


Figure C.3. Predicted and Actual Government Generosity Index based on Regression Estimate from Figure 7; Revised Using Pre-transfer Poverty Gap



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Appendix A. Measuring Government Aid to the Poor

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) and the Heritage Foundation have produced the two most thorough datasets of government aid to the poor. CRS, the professional staff that produces research for Congress, writes a regular report on poverty policy, *Cash and Noncash Benefits for Persons with Limited Income: Eligibility Rules, Recipient and Expenditure Data* (Spar 2006). The report sums the budget totals for 84 government programs to produce an annual estimate from 1975 to 2004. The U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means uses the historical table from this report to produce its quadrennial Green Book, cited widely in policy literature (Levitan et al. 2003, 32–37).

The other set of data comes from the Heritage Foundation, a right wing think tank, as part of calculations for *Obama to Spend \$10.3 Trillion on Welfare: Uncovering the Full Cost of Means-Tested Welfare or Aid* (Rector et al. 2009). The authors only slightly alter the list of programs in the CRS report, eliminating educational programs that also provide aid to higher income levels and adding community grants. The Heritage report calculates poverty expenditures from 1950 until 2008, with predictions through 2018. Presented in a Congressional hearing and available widely on the Internet, the report attempts to cast doubt on the spending choices of the Obama Administration. While they approach the issue with different motivations, CRS and Heritage produce similar calculations.

(Insert Table A. 1 Here)

Appendix B. Media Fram

In Figure 1 we showed the corre issues as
compared to four other newspap

Appendix C. Pre- and Post-Transfer Estimates of the Poverty Gap.

A possible concern in the analysis presented in the paper is that our measure of the poverty gap is based on estimates of poverty after the payment of income taxes and the receipt of transfer payments. We therefore test here the robustness of our findings when using a pre-transfer estimate of the poverty gap. We thank Prof. James Ziliak of the University of Kentucky for providing data from 1979 to 2009.

First: Extend the series.

As we did in Figure 3, we start by extending the series to cover our entire time span. We use the same regression as reported above, but we omit government spending on poverty, as that should affect post-transfer numbers, but not those *before* government transfers have taken place; indeed this is the entire reason for the robustness test we do here. The simple model including the number of poor and the poverty rate explains 85 percent of the variance in Ziliak's measure of the pre-transfer poverty gap. Table C.1 shows these results and Figure C.1 shows the resulting series.

(Insert Table C.1 and Figure C.1 about here)

Second: Compare Pre- and Post-Transfer Gap

The two measures of the poverty gap are substantially different, as one might imagine. Indeed, the difference between them can be seen as a measure of the effectiveness of the tax and spending system. If spending were sufficient to eliminate the poverty gap, then the pre-transfer number could be substantial but the post-transfer number would be zero. Figure C.2 shows the comparison of the two series.

(Insert Figure C.2 about here)

