

Latent coalitions for egalitarianism may be dormant in Britain, but they are a sleeping giant

David Brady argues that there is still a great deal of support for social policy in Great Britain; people overwhelmingly agree the government should be responsible for providing such things as housing for the needy and health care for the sick. A vast, broad and crosscutting coalition in favour of government action could change the face of UK politics.



Among egalitarians in the UK, there is often a frustrating sense that the public does not fully appreciate social policy. Advocates for the poor feel that the British do not understand the effectiveness or even necessity of social policy. Leftists routinely bemoan the public's susceptibility to Tory calls for cutting back social policy. With the dramatic increase in inequality that the UK saw from the 1970s to the 1990s, there was a widely held impression that the British had forgotten the role of social policy in addressing society's problems.

One valuable source for thinking about this issue is the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The ISSP asks a variety of interesting questions to a nationally representative sample in a broad set of countries. In 1996 and 2006, the ISSP focused on "the role of government." They asked many questions about social policies for the unemployed, for reducing the gap between rich and poor, for healthcare, etc. My favorite questions are a set that ask, "On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to..." Then, the ISSP asks about several social policies. For simplicity, it is helpful to collapse respondents into those who support and oppose.

The UK is quite interesting in this survey in at least four regards. Before getting into the details, I should note that the ISSP data only refer to Great Britain and not the UK. Also the numbers below resulted after I deleted cases that were missing on key individual characteristics (i.e. listwise deletion).

First, Great Britain actually does NOT stand out for being particularly opposed to social policy. One way to show this is to compare Great Britain against the 17 other affluent democracies for which we have data (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.S.). Controlling for the individual characteristics of respondents (education, income, age, family structure, work status, religion, etc.), I estimated the effect of a respondent residing in Great Britain.

In 2006, British respondents were not significantly different from other affluent democracies on questions about whether the government has a responsibility to "reduce income differences between rich and poor;" or "provide a job for everyone who wants one." The British were significantly less likely to support the view that government should "provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed."

Nevertheless, the British actually were significantly more likely to believe the government has a responsibility to "provide decent housing for those who can't afford it;" "provide healthcare for the sick;" and "provide a decent standard of living for the old." So, the British are less supportive of social policy than the typical resident of affluent democracies on one dimension, are not different on two dimensions, and are actually more supportive on three dimensions. Hence, the British do not stand out as unusually opposed to the view that the government has a responsibility for social policy.

Second, there are very high levels of support for social policy in some domains. More than 85 per cent of British respondents supported the government's responsibility for housing. More than 97 per cent supported the government's responsibility for the old. And, almost 99 per cent of respondents supported the government's responsibility for healthcare. What is more, clear majorities supported all six social policy questions. Perhaps the most controversial question asks if government has a responsibility to reduce income differences between rich and poor. In 2006, more than two-thirds of British

respondents supported this item.

One could argue that these questions set the bar too low and that everyone agrees with a generic sense that government should take care of the sick, old and homeless. One of my friends jokes that it is like asking people if they should eat healthy – of course they will say yes. Yet, one only need compare the UK against the US to see that these views are not universal. In the US, less than 77 per cent support the housing question, and only about 90 per cent support the healthcare and retirement questions. Almost half of Americans oppose the view that the government should reduce income differences between rich and poor.

Third, the British have declined somewhat in their support for some dimensions of social policy. The ISSP asked the same questions in 1996. Support for the view that government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed fell from 79 per cent in 1996 to 57 per cent in 2006. Also, support for the view that government should provide a job for everyone who wants one fell from 69 per cent in 1996 to 57 per cent in 2006. Still, there is cause for optimism as support was quite stable for reducing differences between rich and poor, housing, retirement and healthcare.

Fourth, pooling the 1996 and 2006 data, British support for all aspects of social policy is strongly and consistently associated with only one characteristic. Unsurprisingly, higher incomes predict opposition for all six dimensions of social policy. Of course, some characteristics predict one or two questions (e.g. being female increases one's support for the housing and job for everyone questions). Yet, it is rather surprising that age, education, religion, marital status, and even employment fail to have a consistent pattern across all six items.

What does all this mean for the politics of social policy? It is important to stress that there is still a great deal of support for social policy in Great Britain. In some domains, support is nearly universal. Support has only declined in a few domains, and clear majorities support all six dimensions of social policy. Aside from those with high incomes, opposition to social policy is not concentrated in one demographic group. One can find support for some dimensions of social policy among the well- and less-educated, among the old and young, among women and men, and among the religious and secular. One can still mobilize a lot of voters based on defending and advocating generous social policies for the sick, the old, and those without adequate housing.

Even though the Tories enthusiastically campaign against social policy, Labour need not feel like it is in a vulnerable position. Labour can improve its standing by being vocal about the core themes of social policy exemplified by these questions. If Labour insists that support for the old, sick and under-housed requires support for Labour, it has the potential to build a vast, broad and crosscutting coalition. In my book *Rich Democracies, Poor People*, I call such coalitions “latent coalitions for egalitarianism.” Just as in the past, and as in several other affluent democracies, the British still support the government's responsibility to take care of the vulnerable. Latent coalitions for egalitarianism may be dormant in Britain, but they are a sleeping giant.

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