

1988

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Recommended Citation

Randall, Ronald (1988) "PUBLIC OPINION IN METROPOLITAN TOLEDO AND THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION POLICY TOWARD THE DISADVANTAGED," *The Journal of Economics and Politics*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59604/1046-2309.1078>

Available at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/jep/vol3/iss1/3>

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PUBLIC OPINION IN METROPOLITAN TOLEDO AND THE
REAGAN ADMINISTRATION POLICY TOWARD THE DISADVANTAGED¹

Ronald Randall, The University of Toledo

INTRODUCTION

President Reagan won over 50 percent of the 1984 presidential vote in Lucas County (Toledo), a remarkable showing for a conservative Republican candidate in a Democratic stronghold. Despite his strong electoral showing and his tele-genic skills of communication and persuasion, President Reagan has been largely unable to develop support there for his social-welfare philosophy.

Scholars will long debate the degree to which the Reagan administration succeeded in fundamentally restructuring our federal system of government in pursuit of its twin goals of privatization of governmental responsibility and devolution of much of the remaining domestic governmental responsibilities from the national to state and local levels of government.² However, there can be little argument about the success of the Reagan administration in gaining major budget cuts in domestic programs, especially those that are designed to assist the poor and disadvantaged. Congress has gone along with about half of the domestic cuts recommended by the President. Of course, many of the budget cuts came early in the Reagan administration, particularly with the passage of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981. Palmer and Sawhill estimate that in FY 1985, federal spending for social programs will be about 9 percent or \$38 billion less than under prior policies.³

President Reagan has struck a responsive chord in the American public with his criticism of programs aimed at improving the lot of the poor and disadvantaged. He seems to have tapped an enormous reservoir of resentment against the national government policy dating back to the New Deal of providing succor to those who suffer the ravages of unemployment, disability, and even old age. It might appear that there is a broad base of support for a fundamental reordering of governmental and private

sector responsibilities toward the poor and disadvantaged.

However, a growing body of survey data suggest that many Americans do not share President Reagan's hard-line conservative policies on controversial social issues. Exit polls in 1984 showed a clear coolness toward many Reagan positions--for example, a Los Angeles Times exit poll discovered that only 23 percent of the voters approved of the Reagan-endorsed constitutional amendment to prohibit abortion. Of those who had voted for President Reagan, only 32 percent approved of the proposed amendment. Louis Harris' election-period surveys show that by a 56-40 percent split, Americans agree that "under the Reagan administration the elderly, the poor, and the handicapped have been especially hard hit, while the rich and big business have been much better off."⁴

From survey results, it appears that President Reagan draws his electoral support less from his policy stands than from his persona and from the state of the economy. Declining economies assist, and improving economies hinder, presidential challengers. The U.S. economy in both 1980 and 1984 were good for candidate Reagan, respectively, as both challenger and incumbent.

President Reagan's dramatic social-welfare cuts and his more modest gains in privatization and devolution invite analysis about maintaining or furthering these cuts and restructuring once he has left office. In other words, do the cuts reflect President Reagan's personal success with the U.S. Congress or do they reflect a larger discontent in the American public with the federal government domestic involvement over the past two generations which will sustain the changes he has begun?

Data for this study come from the December, 1984 UT Metro Pollsm. This survey included a number of questions about President Reagan's social-welfare budget cuts, perceptions about their local effects, and the respondents' assessment of changes in their own behavior which President Reagan's policies of privatization and devolution of federal social-welfare responsibilities seemingly require of American citizens.⁵

TOLEDO ECONOMY

The Metro Poll was conducted during a period when metropolitan Toledo was still recovering from the recession of 1981-82, which was particularly severe in this area. Unemployment reached levels far above the national rate. Although the national economy enjoyed a robust recovery in 1983 and 1984, the metropolitan Toledo area continued to experience economic problems. Unemployment and welfare levels remained high; the homeless remained visible and of great concern to governmental, religious, and other non-profit social agencies; and other social problems vexed the community.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ASSISTING THE POOR

Financial assistance and other services for the poor and disadvantaged have traditionally been a responsibility shared by governmental and private, non-profit or charitable organizations. The President has made his preference for reduced governmental activity and greater charitable activity abundantly clear. Early in his administration, he named a Presidential Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives, composed of citizens from business, philanthropy, and religious and civic organizations. The panel was described by a special assistant to the President as part of the Administration's effort "to see that at least some services that will be curtailed by the budget cuts will be maintained with non-Governmental help."⁶

The sample of metropolitan Toledoans indicated their views on the appropriate balance between the public and private sectors for assisting the poor and disadvantaged. Based on the initial distribu-

tion of attitudes of these respondents, a politician would have trouble altering the existing balance. In Table 1, somewhat less than half the respondents (43.5 percent) feel the present balance between government and the private sector is about right. A tiny group of respondents (1.1 percent) want no welfare at all. Of the remaining respondents, there is an even split (27.7 percent each) between those who think government should assume more responsibility and those who agree with President Reagan that non-profit or charitable organizations should provide assistance and services to the poor and disadvantaged.

Those who have suffered the trauma of unemployment are less likely to share President Reagan's philosophy of privatization than those who have not. Breaking out responses by whether or not respondents have been unemployed during the past 10 years (in Table 1), fewer of those experiencing unemployment feel that the present governmental-private sector balance is about right (34.3 percent) than do their more fortunate counterparts (48.5 percent). Most of the dissatisfaction with the present balance among those who have been unemployed translates into a desire for a greater governmental share of the burden--35.0 percent of this group desires a shift toward greater governmental responsibility for providing services to the poor and disadvantaged, compared to 23.6 percent of those who have experienced no unemployment during this period.

In any breakout separating those who are better off from those who are worse off, there is a larger proportion of the worse-off who favor greater governmental over greater private provision of aid to the poor and disadvantaged. The second breakout in Table 1 depicts this clearly. Those who are satisfied with their financial situation prefer to shift more service delivery to the private sector than to the public sector. A clear majority, however, favor the present balance or a shift to government than favor President

Reagan's preference for a shift to the private sector (34.5 percent). Those who are not at all satisfied with their financial situation prefer to shift more service delivery to the public sector (30.6 percent) than to the private sector (22.2 percent).

Those who favored greater privatization of services to the poor and disadvantaged were asked a follow-up question about funding for privatized services. Results appear in Table 2. For those who favor greater privatization, there is greater consistency with the Reagan administration philosophy among those who have suffered unemployment or whose financial situation is unsatisfactory. They were more insistent than were their better-off counterparts that the private agencies should raise their own monies rather than receive governmental support.

Respondents who favored greater governmental responsibility for services to the poor and disadvantaged were asked a follow-up question about the appropriate level of government to assume the greater responsibility. From Table 3, more than half (58.3 percent) pointed to the federal government; 20.8 percent and 15.6 percent respectively thought that state or local government should assume that greater responsibility.

When we break these responses down by satisfaction with financial situation or experience with unemployment, we find that those who are least satisfied with their financial situation or who have experienced unemployment are more likely to favor the federal government over lower governmental levels to provide services than those whose finances and employment are more secure.

Thus we have a seemingly anomalous set of findings: in the group of respondents facing the most grim financial situation or having experienced a month or more of unemployment during the past 10 years we find one subgroup showing consistency with the Reagan administration philosophy and one subgroup showing opposition to it. The greatest support for the Reagan administration philosophy comes from the subgroup of respondents

which is least satisfied with its financial situation or which has experienced unemployment and which favors greater privatization. On the other hand, the subgroup furthest from the Reagan philosophy is the one least satisfied with its financial situation or which has experienced unemployment and favors a shift to greater governmental provision of services for the poor and disadvantaged. This subgroup generally asserted that the federal government should assume greater responsibility for providing services to the poor and disadvantaged.

CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

In pursuit of his goal to reduce governmental responsibility for the poor and disadvantaged, President Reagan has encouraged religious and other private, non-profit agencies to step up their efforts. He urges Americans to give more generously to their churches and other charitable organizations.⁷

If Americans fail to increase their giving substantially, his vision of private organizations in the community taking care of the poor will go unfulfilled. When we asked respondents if they are giving more to charitable organizations, 35.8 percent responded affirmatively; however, a substantially larger group (45.6 percent) is giving less (Table 4). Overall, 64.2 percent of the respondents were failing to heed President Reagan's call for greater charitable giving (18.6 had made no change in their giving).

There is an expected relationship between increased giving and family income in Table 4. For respondents with family income over \$40,000, 55.4 percent claimed to have increased their charitable giving, compared to 25.5 percent of the respondents with family income under \$15,000.

Whether or not respondents had experienced unemployment made no perceptible difference in changes in charitable giving. However, there is a curious relationship between respon-

dents' views about the economic future of Toledo and changes in charitable giving. Those most optimistic about Toledo's economic future were more likely to have decreased their charitable giving (51.4 percent) compared to those least positive about the city's economic future (36.4 percent). It does appear strange that the respondents most optimistic about the community's future would be the very ones to take the action (decreased giving) to make their prophesy self-denying. Either that or their optimism is so unrestrained that they see Toledo's future improving even in the face of their decreased charitable giving. In any event, it is not good news for the Reagan administration when those with the most optimistic view about the economic future of their community are least responsive to the President's grass-roots philosophy of local, charitable contributions in lieu of federal, state or local taxes.⁸

We asked those who increased their charitable giving for their reasons. From Table 5, only 2.9 percent did so because they were responding to the Reagan administration philosophy that the private sector should offset a reduction in spending on social programs by the government. Most people who were giving more explained that they could afford the increased contributions (51.8 percent) or had other reasons (45.3 percent). When we break out this response by family income, the wealthy (over \$40,000 family income) tend to be doing so more because they are able to afford it and the less well-off for other reasons. These, however, are minor differences. At no income level do substantial numbers of respondents give in response to Reagan philosophy.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL-WELFARE CUTS

As President Reagan won major social-welfare reductions in the federal budget, he argued that a social safety net continues to protect the "truly needy." Respondents shared their views of the impact of the social-welfare cuts in this community. In Table 6, a small proportion (8.2 percent) assert that this area has not experienced any major federal cuts. Of the remaining respondents, there is a fairly even split among

those who feel that the cuts have hurt the poor and disadvantaged in this community (47.1 percent) and those who feel that the cuts have been a blessing in disguise, by forcing able-bodied persons who had become dependent on welfare to enter the labor market (44.7 percent).

Interestingly, the experience with unemployment makes no apparent difference in the perception about the impact of the social-welfare budget cuts. Those having experienced unemployment respond the same as those who have not.

Major differences in perceptions about the impact of social-welfare cuts appear when we break out this issue by the respondents' views of the economic future of Toledo. Those who are most optimistic about Toledo's economic future also feel that the cuts have hurt the poor. Those least optimistic about the economic future of Toledo disagree, saying instead that the cuts are a blessing in disguise.

Thus, the respondents who are most optimistic about the future of Toledo feel that the cuts have hurt the poor, and they are less likely to have increased their own charitable giving. Moreover, they do not show any overwhelming desire to have government pick up a larger portion of the burden of providing services to the poor and disadvantaged.

The breakout by family income reveals another interesting pattern. Our wealthiest respondents (over \$40,000 family income) were most likely to assert that the poor had been hurt (56.0 percent) and least likely to assert that the cuts were a blessing in disguise (34.0 percent). In contrast, respondents with a family income in the lower-middle to middle class range (\$15,000 to \$24,999 family income) were least likely to assert that the poor had been hurt by the cuts (40.8 percent) and most likely to believe that the cuts had been a blessing in disguise (52.6 percent). This pattern is particularly interest-

ing in view of the general belief that President Reagan's greatest support comes from the wealthy. At least on the policy issue of domestic-welfare cuts in the metropolitan Toledo area, the greatest agreement with the President's views are found in a less-well-to-do segment of the population.

SUMMARY

President Reagan's efforts to privatize and devolve federal government responsibility for assisting the poor and disadvantaged represents a radical attempt to reverse public decisions taken in the 1930s to 1970s. The President justifies his policy efforts with a conservative philosophy of government that includes a heavy emphasis on voluntarism and activity by the private, non-profit sector to compensate for the federal government retreat from more than two generations of responsibility.

The degree to which a fundamental restructuring of governmental and private responsibility for assisting the poor and disadvantaged has occurred is not yet clear. The President has achieved remarkable success with Congress in obtaining major budget cuts in social-welfare programs. This raises the central question about the long-run impact of the Reagan administration upon domestic policy. Is there public support to retain the changes already made and to sustain the momentum necessary to insure the radical restructuring of governmental and private responsibility which President Reagan envisions?

Comparing 1980 and 1984 election results with survey responses in metropolitan Toledo indicates a greater enthusiasm for President Reagan personally than for his governmental philosophy and policies toward the poor and disadvantaged. Although 43.5 percent of our sample feel that the present balance between government and the private sector is about right, only 27.7 percent agree with President Reagan that even more responsibility for the poor and disadvantaged should be shifted from government to the private sector. Of those who feel that government should assume greater responsibility, the overwhelming

majority had the federal government in mind.

President Reagan, who has enjoyed great success in persuading the U.S. Congress to devolve social-welfare functions to the states, has had less success in persuading metropolitan Toledoans about the virtues of devolution. Moreover, while he has emphasized the need for religious and other charitable organizations to assume more responsibility for the poor and disadvantaged (financed through increased charitable giving), more respondents are reducing contributions than are increasing them. Of those who have increased their giving, only a small percentage do so at the President's behest.

On the impact of social-welfare cuts, respondents are about evenly split on whether or not the poor and disadvantaged have been hurt. President Reagan draws the greatest support for his approach from lower-middle-class to middle-class respondents and the least support from our wealthier respondents.

To the extent that we can generalize from one major community of the industrial heartland of America, it is highly dubious that public support exists to maintain the changes made by the Reagan administration, let alone sustain the momentum to achieve anything like the President's final vision of the federal government responsibility in domestic policy areas. At bottom, the survey results from this community add additional evidence to the argument that President Reagan has been extraordinarily successful in changing governmental funding and somewhat successful in his efforts to privatize and devolve national governmental responsibility in domestic-program areas. His success is due in part to adept leadership and in part to luck. Lacking wide-scale public support, the Reagan domestic-government revolution will be sustained only if his successors are endowed with similar charm, political skill, and luck.

ENDNOTES

1. The author acknowledges the assistance of Neil Palmer, former director of the University of Toledo's Opinion Research Institute, in crafting the questions in the survey instrument and for his helpful suggestions.

2. For an important effort to assess the Reagan impact, see Lester M. Salamon and Michael S. Lund (eds.), The Reagan Presidency and the Governing of America (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1985).

3. John L. Palmer and Isabel V. Sawhill, "Overview," in John L. Palmer and Isabel V. Sawhill (eds.), The Reagan Record: An Assessment of American's Changing Domestic Priorities (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1984), p. 13.

4. Cited in Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Elections, the Economy and Public Opinion: 1984," PS XVIII (Winter 1985), pp. 29-30.

5. The UT Metro PollSM is conducted by the Opinion Research Institute (ORI) of the University of Toledo's Urban Affairs Center. The target population consists of households located within what the U.S. Bureau of the Census defined in 1980 as the "urbanized area" of the Toledo (Ohio-Michigan) Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area.

In its telephone surveys, ORI uses a random-digit-dialing method of sampling. ORI staff have developed a computer program to generate random exchange and subscriber numbers. Based on the Haines Criss-Cross Directory, large blocks of unused subscriber or commercial numbers are excluded from the initial listing of random numbers. The initial sample is subsequently screened for additional commercial listings which are then deleted from the sample.

A listing is made of all members of the household who are 18 years of age or older. Each person is assigned a "person number" based on sex (males first) and age (oldest first). The interviewer is referred to one of twelve selection tables to determine which person is to be

interviewed. No substitutions are permitted.

6. Kathleen Teltsch, "Reagan to Pick Panel on Voluntarism," The New York Times (October 5, 1981).

7. Given some of its actions and proposals, there is good reason to question the sincerity of the Reagan administration in its efforts to encourage the private sector to compensate for spending cuts in social programs in the public sector. For example, the 1985 Department of Treasury tax proposal included provisions that the private, non-profit sector considered disastrous. The Treasury plan allowed taxpayers who itemize to deduct only charitable contributions that exceed two percent of their adjusted gross income; it let lapse the 1981 law which allows non-itemizers to deduct charitable deductions; and it limited the value of charitable contributions of property to the original cost (plus some factor for inflation) but excluded any appreciation in value. The first two provisions of the Treasury plan would hurt the non-profit organizations which concentrate in social-welfare services and the latter one would hurt the "rich-person" charities like museums. The nation's charities were said to be "outraged" over the Treasury plan. Jeffery H. Birnbaum, "Plan to Reshape U.S. Tax Code on Contributions May Pit 'Rich' Against 'Common Man' Charities," Wall Street Journal (March 26, 1985), p. 64. The major tax code revision of 1986, which President Reagan actively supported, will require more time before the effects on charities are fully known, but it is clear that the lowering of tax rates increases the cost to the giver of charitable contributions.

8. Of course, one can raise the question about the economic rationality of making charitable contributions. The rational person will follow the philosophy of "Let thy neighbor give charitably so that I may enjoy both my money and the greater-level of services created by thy

neighbor's giving." See the persuasive expression of this argument in Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action:

Public Goods and the Theory of Groups (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

Table 1

Attitudes About Government or Private Sector Responsibility for Assisting Poor and Disadvantaged (percent)

Assistance and Services to Poor and Disadvantaged	Total (N=368)	Unemployed for 1 Month in Last 10 Years		Satisfaction with Present Financial Situation		
		Yes (N=137)	No (N=229)	Pretty Well Satisfied (N=113)	More or Less Satisfied (N=145)	Not At All Satisfied (N=108)
Shift more responsibility from government to the private sector	27.7	29.9	26.6	34.5	26.9	22.2
The present balance is about right	43.5	34.3	48.5	38.1	45.5	45.4
20 Shift more responsibility from the private sector to the government	27.7	35.0	23.6	25.7	27.6	30.6
Should not have any welfare (volunteered)	1.1	.7	1.3	1.8	---	1.9

Table 2

Attitudes About Funding Source for Private Organizations Which Provide Assistance to Poor and Disadvantaged (percent)*

Funding Source for Private Organizations Providing Services to Poor and Disadvantaged	Total (N=101)	Unemployed for 1 Month in Last 10 Years		Satisfaction with Present Financial Situation		
		Yes (N=41)	No (N=60)	Pretty Well Satisfied (N=39)	More or Less Satisfied (N=39)	Not at All Satisfied (N=23)
Continue federal government funding of private organizations	50.5	53.7	48.3	53.8	48.7	47.8
Require private organizations to raise their own funds	49.5	46.3	51.7	46.2	51.3	57.2

*Includes only respondents who believe that more responsibility for assistance to the poor and disadvantaged should be shifted from government to the private sector.

Table 3

Attitudes About Level of Government Responsible for Service to Poor and Disadvantaged (percent)*

Level of Government That Should Assume Biggest Share of Responsibility for Service to the Poor and Disadvantaged	Total (N=96)	Unemployed for 1 Month in Last 10 Years		Satisfaction with Present Financial Situation		
		Yes (N=44)	No (N=52)	Pretty Well Satisfied (N=27)	More or Less Satisfied (N=37)	Not at all Satisfied (N=32)
Federal	58.3	63.6	53.8	55.6	59.5	59.4
State	20.8	15.9	25.0	18.5	16.2	28.1
Local	15.6	15.9	15.4	18.5	21.6	6.3
Federal-State Govern- ment combined	1.0	---	1.9	3.7	---	---
State-Local Govern- ment combined	1.0	---	1.9	---	---	3.1
Federal-State-Local Government combined	3.1	4.5	1.9	3.7	2.7	3.1

*Includes only respondents who believe that more responsibility for assistance to the poor and disadvantaged should be shifted from the private sector to government.

TABLE 4

Change in Charitable Giving (percent)

Change in Past Few Years, in Charitable Giving as Portion of Income	Total (N=377)	Family Income (\$)				Unemployed for 1 Month in Last 10 Years		View About Economic Future of Toledo			
		Over 40,000 (N=56)	25,000- 40,000 (N=116)	15,000- 24,999 (N=86)	Under 15,000 (N=102)	Yes (N=140)	No (N=233)	Very Good (N=37)	Fairly Good (N=240)	Not Very Good (N=74)	Not at All Good (N=22)
Larger portion now	35.8	55.4	44.8	25.6	25.5	36.4	35.6	37.8	37.9	27.0	31.8
No Change	18.6	7.1	9.5	24.4	29.4	20.7	17.2	10.8	18.3	18.9	31.8
Smaller portion now	45.6	37.5	45.7	50.0	45.1	42.9	47.2	51.4	43.8	54.1	36.4

Table 5

Reason for Increased Charitable Giving (percent) *

	Total (N=137)	Family Income (\$)			
		Over \$40,000 (N=32)	\$25,000- \$40,000 (N=52)	\$15,000- \$24,999 (N=23)	Under \$15,000 (N=26)
Better Able to Afford It	51.8	65.6	50.0	47.8	42.3
Responding to President Reagan's Request	2.9	3.1	---	4.3	3.8
24 Some Other Reason	45.3	31.3	50.0	47.8	53.8

*Includes only those respondents who said that they had increased their charitable giving in the past few years.

Table 6

Perceived Impact in This Area of Social Welfare Cuts of Reagan Administration (percent)

Impact of Federal Government Cuts	Total (N=340)	Family Income (\$)				View About Economic Future of Toledo			
		Over 40,000 (N=50)	25,000- 40,000 (N=108)	15,000- 24,999 (N=76)	Under 15,000 (N=90)	Very Good (N=31)	Fairly Good (N=219)	Not Very Good (N=67)	Not At All Good (N=20)
No Major Cuts	8.2	10.0	11.1	6.6	5.6	6.5	8.7	9.0	5.0
Hurt the poor and disadvantaged	47.1	56.0	49.1	40.8	46.7	64.5	47.0	43.3	40.0
Blessing in disguise, forcing able-bodied to enter labor market	44.7	34.0	39.8	52.6	47.8	29.0	44.3	47.8	55.0

