

# The Association Between Social Factors and Income Concerning National Welfare Spending Preferences



Sangye Sherpa, Quantitative Analysis Center, Wesleyan University

## Introduction

- **Discord on Welfare Spending:** Americans are divided over the amount the government spends on welfare. These attitudes have been consistent and politically consequential, shaping decisions both on national expenditure and social policy (Hansen, 1998). Furthermore, they have a historically outsized influence not only electoral outcomes but also the political feasibility of policies, particularly during periods of economic disruption.
- **Income and Class-Based Models:** Economic position is a predictor of welfare preferences: higher-income individuals typically express less support for redistribution whereas lower-income individuals favor increased government spending (Jacoby, 1994; Hansen, 1998).
- **Current Findings:** More recent work emphasizes that public support for spending programs is shaped by perceived trade-offs and fiscal constraints. When citizens are asked to evaluate spending priorities jointly, preferences reflect relative valuations rather than absolute support for expansion or retrenchment (Köln & Wlezien, 2023). This suggests that spending attitudes are multidimensional and sensitive to context
- **Gap in Literature:** While prior research establishes that income and demographic factors influence spending preferences, fewer studies examine how income interacts with multiple social characteristics simultaneously and in relation to each other. Using the 2021 General Social Survey, this project looks at models of spending preferences to assess how race, gender, and other factors shape the relationship between income and attitudes toward government welfare spending.

## Methods

### Sample

- Respondents (1,484) were **American adults** who participated in the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS), a national sample of English-speaking, non-institutionalized adults in the United States.

### Measures

- Opinions about **welfare spending** were assessed with answers coded on a scale of 1 (too much) to 3 (too little) under the **natfare** variable.
  - Separate welfare spending questions conducted as a result of survey design, such as **natfarey**, were not observed due to marked differences in their wording.
- Respondent **income** was identified by their total family income reported in item **income16**.
  - The categories were collapsed into five levels, with 1 representing the lowest income group and 5 representing the highest, for simplification.
  - Family income was assessed over individual income due to its more accurate bearing on conditions affecting respondent attitude.
- **Demographic and social traits** were assessed and controlled against spending opinion and income.
  - Respondent race was encoded as 1 “White”, 2 “Black”, and 3 “Other”.
  - Education was encoded with the **degree** variable, representing the highest degree attained.
  - Gender was encoded dichotomously using variable **sex** as “Male” and “Female”.

## Research Questions

1. How do income, education, race, and other factors relate to preference for government spending on welfare?
2. How do social and demographic variables alter or interact with income-based trends in welfare spending opinion?

## Results

### Univariate

- A total of 30.66% of the respondents responded that they felt the spending was “too much”, while 32.94% indicated “too little” and 36.40 % as “just right”.

### Bivariate

- Analysis of variance (ANOVA) verified the significant effect of **income** on welfare spending preferences across all models.
- ANOVA also established the **significant effect of race**,  $F(1, 1542) = 34.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , revealing substantial differences in welfare attitudes across racial groups. These effects were observed independently.
- ANOVA suggested little to **no significant difference** in relationship between sex and welfare attitude.
- Furthermore, ANOVA revealed that **education**, recorded as highest degree attained, has **significant relationship** with welfare opinion separate of income.

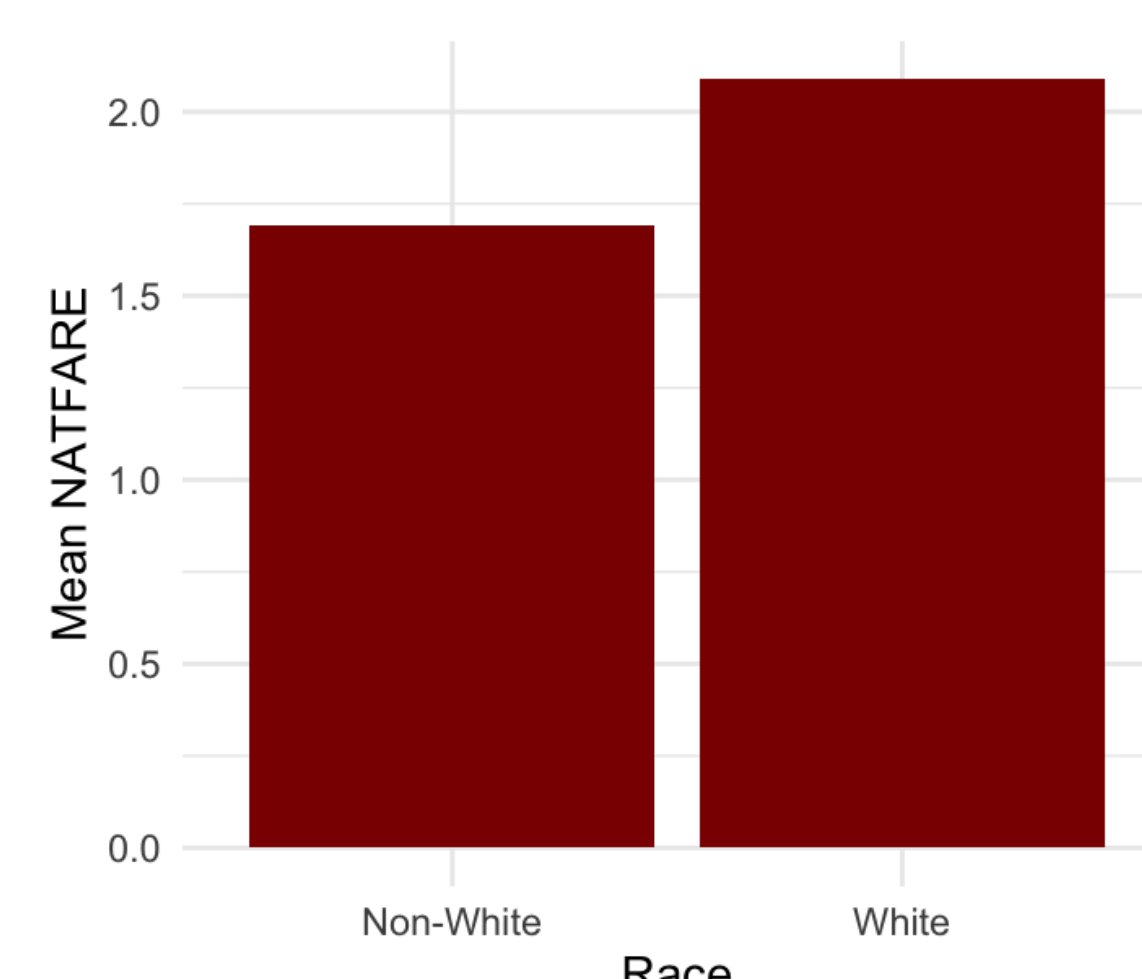


Figure 1. Spending Opinion Departure by Sub-Group.

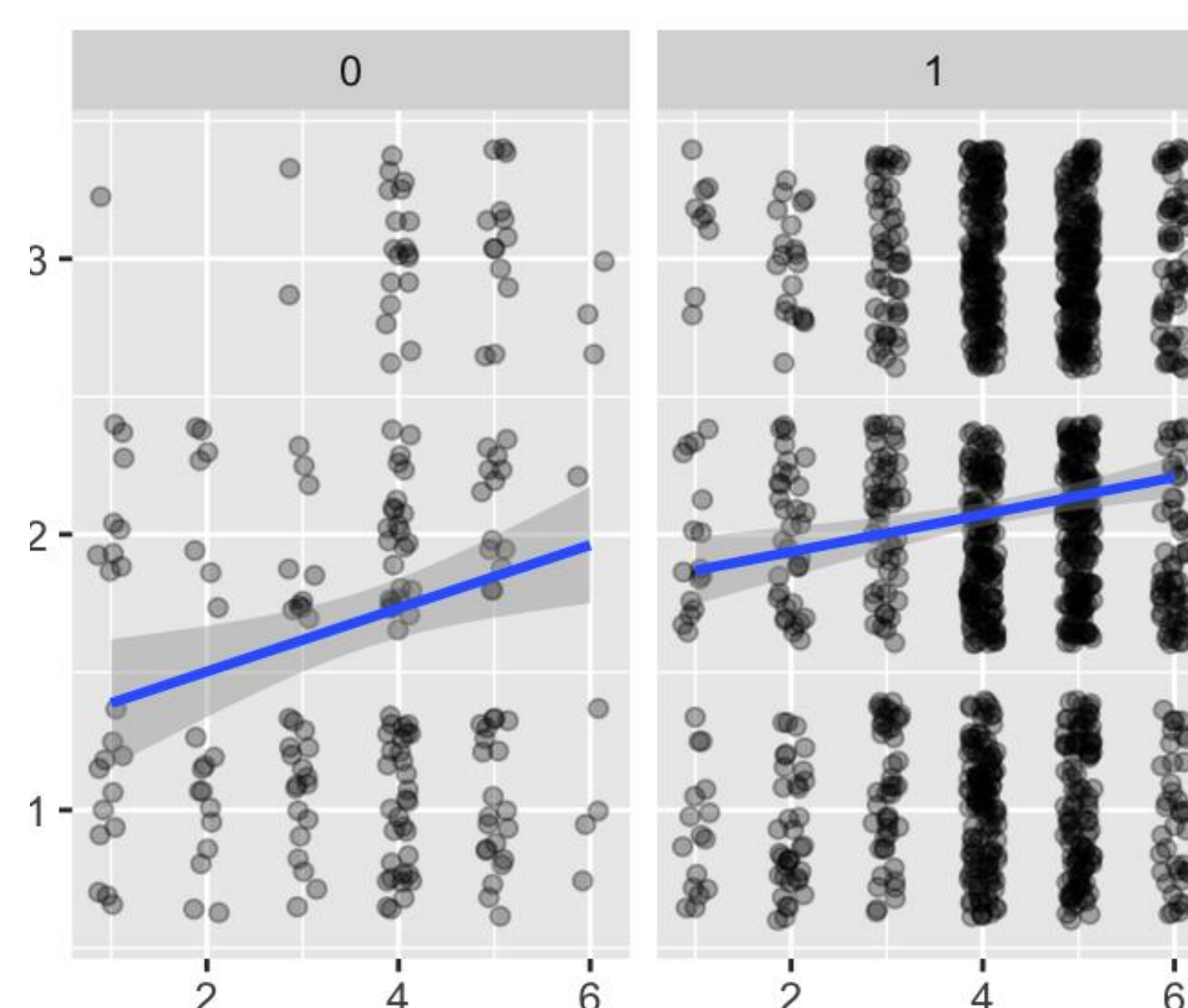


Figure 2. Regression of Spending Opinion on Income Quintile by race, White (1) and Black (2)

### Multivariate

- Regression of welfare spending preferences on income group indicates a **strong relationship** between income and attitudes toward welfare highest income categories scoring approximately 0.35 points higher than the lowest.
- Sex **does not condition** the relationship between income and support for welfare spending in any significant way.

## Discussion

- The result of controlling for income and sex shows that welfare attitudes are not significantly varied across genders and that they **do not moderate** income and welfare opinion.
- The lack of disruption when factoring in highest degree attained signals that education is **not a disruptor of the attitude inflected by economic conditions** towards welfare spending.
- The data suggests that when race is introduced, the previous observed income gradient in welfare attitudes largely disappears. This indicates that the relationship between income and welfare preferences is **not uniform across racial groups**.
- The **inconsistency between sub-group** sample sizes limits the accuracy of the results.
- In the future further investigations should pursue:
  - Finding a **larger sample** and ensuring sub-group samples are relatively consistent.
  - Focusing on more **specific instances**, such as proposals or bills for greater significance.
  - **Factoring time** into the examination of income for better accuracy and understanding of its influence

Jacoby, William G. (1994). “Public Attitudes toward Government Spending.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 38(2), 336–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111407>

Köln, Ann-Kristin, and Christopher Wlezien. (2023). “Measuring Public Preferences for Government Spending under Constraints: A Conjoint-Analytic Approach.” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 34(2), 375–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2023.2189255>

Eismeier, Theodore J. (1982). “Public Preferences about Government Spending: Partisan, Social, and Attitudinal Sources of Policy Differences.” *Political Behavior*, 4(2), 133–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/586322>

Hansen, John Mark. (1998). “Individuals, Institutions, and Public Preferences over Public Finance.” *American Political Science Review*, 92(3), 513–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2585478>

Bartels, Larry M. (1994). “The American Public’s Defense Spending Preferences in the Post-Cold War Era.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 58(4), 479–508. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749605>