Support for welfare depends on how secure we feel on our rung on the social ladder, new research shows

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Support for welfare policies goes up when economic difficulties strike higher up the social scale, new research shows.

Where the risk of unemployment or other misfortunes threatens people already on low incomes and at the bottom of the social scale, opposition to the welfare state is strongest. When that threat begins to climb the social ladder, for example in times of widespread recession, support for welfare policies tends also to migrate up the ladder and to widen out among a larger proportion of the population.

The findings, reported in the American Political Science Review, emerge from a study by three researchers from Yale and Ohio State University. Philipp Rehm (Ohio State), Jacob S Hacker and Mark Schlesinger (Yale) examined attitudes to welfare policies within the US and across 13 other countries to conclude in their paper, 'Insecure Alliances: Risk, Inequality, and Support for the Welfare State', that when the disadvantaged and job-insecure are mostly one and the same, the base of popular support for the welfare state is narrow. When the disadvantaged and job-insecure represent two distinct groups, popular support is broader and opinion less polarized.

Rehm, Hacker and Schlesinger surveyed citizen's support for unemployment insurance across 13 nations (Portugal, Switzerland, Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Finland, Ireland, Germany, Australia, United Kingdom, United States). They then surveyed US residents alone on their support for specific social policies within the United States and asked people to assess major economic risks (both their level of worry about them and their level of expectation that they themselves would experience them).

"We also probed their attitudes about spending on existing programs, the role of government relative to the private sector in providing economic security, and hypothetical social programs that could be created to deal with major economic risks," said Rehm. "Our research all produced highly consistent results across nations and within the US."

Rehm, Hacker and Schlesinger found that economic events that make better off people feel insecure are likely to reduce their traditional opposition to welfare. This has the effect of raising a nation's average support for welfare intervention as those who normally perceive themselves as self-sufficient feel at greater risk of losing jobs, homes and other major fundamentals of life.

Conversely, the trio also found that when economic hardships strike only those who are generally on low incomes most of the time, opposition to the welfare state remains strong higher up the social scale. It takes a more widespread misfortune, such as national or global recession, to shift attitudes. They write:

"To create cross-class coalitions - that is, a wider proportion of the population supporting the welfare state - risks have to broaden in reach, not just deepen in impact on the already disadvantaged."

Rehm, Hacker and Schlesinger conclude that a broad coalition of support across the social divide is necessary for welfare states to survive: "There seems little question that welfare states cannot long swim in a sea of public hostility, that widespread support is a necessary condition for their sustenance."

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