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Université 
de Montréal

Ambiguous Agreement?

Attitudes to Homelessness Policy Interventions in Canada

Carey Doberstein, PhD

Assistant Professor of Political Science
UBC, Okanagan campus
carey.doberstein@ubc.ca

Alison Smith, PhD candidate

Université de Montréal
alison.smith@umontreal.ca

EUROPEAN RESEARCH CONFERENCE
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Research Question

- What explains the cross-party (and ideological) alignment on the shift towards the Housing First policy paradigm in Canada?
- Specifically, does the ambiguous agreement theory of the welfare state offer part of the explanation?

Research context

- Chronic homelessness began to rise around the world in the 1990s and 2000s, governments were slow to respond.
 - Housing cut federally in 1980s and in most provinces in the 1990s/2000s. Further cuts to social security often followed. Homelessness was declared an “unnatural disaster” and emergency in the late 1990s by big city mayors.
 - Today, an estimated 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness every year, with an estimated 35,000 who are homeless on any given night (Gaetz et al 2015)

Research context

- This began to change in 2005-2015, when governments at all levels and stripes rapidly adopted the Housing First policy intervention.
- This is puzzling in light of the fact that, in many other respects, the Canadian welfare state was retrenching and not expanding.

Research context

- What is ‘Housing First’?
- Old model: You must “earn” subsidized housing by demonstrating stability, progress, effort, etc.
- Housing First: Puts housing at the beginning rather than the end of a person’s transition out of chronic homelessness, w/ harm reduction philosophy, with the aim of helping the individual to stabilize, maintain housing, and ultimately re-integrate into the community.

Research context

- Some progressives like HF b/c it is premised on the notion of a “right” to housing and espouses harm reduction philosophy
- Some conservatives like HF b/c it has in some instances been demonstrated to cost taxpayers less (in the long run) than status quo (CMHC Chez-Soi study)
 - Also a current advocacy strategy of many researchers and professional homelessness activists

Ambiguous agreement on HF?

- Palier (2005) suggests that a key mechanism in social policy change or expansion is an “ambiguous agreement” (103), which occurs when a broad coalition of actors support the same policy change but for significantly different reasons.
- This paper tests this claim in the context of Canadian homelessness policy development.

Study Design

- A randomized controlled experiment, specifically with a vignette survey of N= 1,508 adult Canadians
- Retrieving basic demographics of our subjects—including age, gender, income, education, location—we also gauge their **views on the role of government**
- Respondents were then exposed to randomly generated pairs of vignettes of hypothetical experiences of homelessness, with eight varying features: age, gender, ethnicity, years they have been homeless, daily activities, shelter status, **history of victimization**, and **estimated cost of their homelessness to the system**

Study Design

- Task: Use a sliding bar representing the amount of investment that they believe the two individuals ought to receive, but could not exceed a total investment of \$3,000/month between the two hypothetical homeless individuals (\$0 for both is starting point)
- AA-informed hypothesis:
 - respondents with a high role of government index score will **increase investment** for those with a history of trauma or victimization
 - respondents with a low role of government index will **increase investment** as the estimated costs to taxpayers gets higher

Summary of findings

Independent variable measures	B coefficient (\$ change)
Role of Govt Index	+34.73***
RG top 10%	+76.80***
RG low 10%	-298.56***



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Summary of findings

- Survey respondents were also granted space to further explain their investment allocation decisions
- Of the 1,508 who completed study, over 400 wrote comments
- Many classic and expected divisions between conservatives and progressives on issues raised re: homelessness and welfare state
- Yet some hints of potential ambiguous agreement in this data that is not apparent in the experimental data that focused on hard \$\$\$

Summary of findings

- Both progressives and conservatives tend to think that those with mental health issues warrant special attention and investment, given the involuntary nature of that experience
- Yet the ultimate purpose for investment in services for those homeless with mental health challenges remains divided: it is a moral obligation according to progressives, and is a path to reintegration and productivity to conservatives
- Same policy, but for different reasons: a hint at an ambiguous agreement that political elites are responding to with Housing First policies (though not exactly as we hypothesized)

Implications

- Conventional wisdom among many homelessness researchers and advocates, who have attempted to sell homelessness policy interventions to Canadians on the basis of long-term cost savings, appears to be misguided and destined to be ineffectual
- “It’s not their fault” narrative seems powerful (in the clear cut case of mental health), but brackets out the majority of homeless
- Progressives end up championing a hyper-targeted policy paradigm that limits role of govt

Questions

- How does the Canadian case compare with European cases of Housing First adoption?
 - Is Canada an outlier? Part of a general trend?

Thank you

carey.doberstein@ubc.ca