

GLOBAL DIVERSITY IN OPINIONS ON FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY: RESULTS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis and ongoing fiscal difficulties in the United States and Europe, the discussion of governmental fiscal sustainability and the role of government in society is intense and ongoing. In late spring 2011, a group of students and faculty members from Coastal Carolina University conducted a multi-national survey of public opinion related to fiscal sustainability was conducted. This paper reports the results and methodology of the study.

INTRODUCTION

In mid-May of 2011, a group of students and faculty members from Coastal Carolina University embarked on a three week study abroad program with the theme of fiscal sustainability. The program traveled through five European countries spending time at various European partner schools. As part of the program, students and faculty developed a survey instrument to gather public opinion of various topics related to the overall question of government's role in society and the fiscal sustainability of government policies in the United States and Europe. Students, staff, and faculty from the U.S. school and the European partner schools were involved in the survey project to various degrees.

While the research question itself is important, the primary motivation for the study was to provide the student participants with a real world exercise in managing a multicultural research project. With guidance, the students would encounter and manage issues arising from differences in language, cultural norms in subject-researcher interaction, and societal structures.

The survey instrument was developed in English and then translated and calibrated for use in France, German, Belgium, Holland, and the Czech Republic. The original English version of the survey is presented as Appendix One. Survey data was then collected in various public settings both before departure from the United States and as the group traveled. The resultant data provides an interesting glimpse of differences between the various countries.

This paper details the process of constructing and administering a survey instrument in a multinational setting. This includes outright translation and calibration of survey categories and data ranges to account for differences in currencies, government structure, and societal norms. In addition, the problems of on the street administration of surveys in the different settings are discussed. Then, the collected data is analyzed and contrasts are drawn between various national and demographic subgroups.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The survey is structured around seven major questions relating to the respondents attitudes toward public expenditures and their funding. The main questions are presented in Table One. Problems 2, 4, 5 and 9 contain additional subparts relating to specific categories of governmental expenditures. These subpart categories are presented in Table Two. In addition, problem 9 requires responses indicating which of the six survey countries spends the largest amount (per capita) in each category. Problem 8 responses were limited to three types of tax.

Table One: Major Questions of the Survey

1.	In general, I am familiar with how my government spends on important functions.
2.*	I am familiar with how my government spends on the following functions:
3.	In general, I am satisfied with how my government spends public funds on important functions:
4.*	I am satisfied with how my government spends on the following functions:
5.*	It is important that my government spends substantially on the following functions:
6.	I am satisfied with the overall level of taxes in my country.
7.	I am satisfied with the overall tax rates in my country when compared to other industrialized
8.	For each of the following, please indicate whether you feel the level of this type of tax should be increased, unchanged, or decreased in your country.
9.*	For each of the following societal functions, indicate your perception of which of the six countries listed spends the LARGEST amount of public funds per capita.

Table Two: Government Expenditure Subpart Categories

a.	Family Assistance
b.	Road, Mobility, and Public Transport
c.	Retirement
d.	Healthcare
e.	Education
f.	National Security
g.	Foreign Assistance
h.	Assistance to Poor and/or Unemployed

In addition to the perception questions above, the respondents were also asked for demographic information. These questions concerned age, nationality, education, marital status, and the like. As the project progressed, it became apparent that it would be necessary to modify the demographic questions to account for variation in national norms. For example, the system of education varies significantly among the countries in the survey. For comparison, the educational level questions from the English and German language version of the surveys are presented in Table 3. The German system places heavy emphasis on apprenticeships and alternate forms of practical training which do not have direct corollaries in the U.S.

system. It was therefore necessary to provide a different, larger set of educational level response options for the German language version. This in turn necessitated a combining of various categories in the one version to allow quantitative comparisons. The combinations are subject to cultural biases of the researchers. Note throughout, the English language versions were developed for the U.S. setting.

Table Three: Comparison of English and German Educational Level Categories

English	What is your highest level of education/training? <input type="checkbox"/> High school <input type="checkbox"/> Associates/Apprenticeship <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/> Master's <input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify) _____
German	Berufsausbildung: <input type="checkbox"/> Kein Abschluss <input type="checkbox"/> Hauptschule <input type="checkbox"/> Realschule <input type="checkbox"/> Fachhochschulreife <input type="checkbox"/> Abiture <input type="checkbox"/> Abgeschlossene Lehre <input type="checkbox"/> Universitätsabschluß (Bitte Grad angeben): <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's <input type="checkbox"/> Master's <input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral <input type="checkbox"/> Andere (angeben) _____

A second example is the general perception of income distributions evidenced in the variations of household income response categories. While those preparing and testing the English language version accepted several higher income categories, both the French and German colleagues involved in the respective translations felt that the higher income categories were inappropriate and might be perceived as oddly or offensively unrealistic by the respondents.

In addition, the French and German translation consulting colleagues selected distinctly different upper categories. These, along with the English language versions are presented in Table Four. Note that the French and German categories are stated in euros while the U.S. version is stated in U.S. dollars. In each case, the U.S. based researchers deferred to the European colleagues with respect to the selection of the categories. At the time of the survey, the exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the euro was 1.42 in U.S. direct terms. Thus, the top categories for the English, French, and German survey versions are greater than \$250,000, \$213,000, and \$85,200.

Prior to departing on the trip, the American students were given short cultural familiarization sessions at their home U.S. university. These sessions were conducted by French and German nationals on faculty at the home university. In addition to basic greetings and interaction phrases, the students were taught what to expect in terms of street level interactions. This was done in anticipation of the student researchers conducting surveys in urban settings in the various European countries visited. Table Five reports the key phrases presented to the students in the French and German language training sessions. While individual biases must always be considered, it is noteworthy that the French language session instructor felt that the inclusion of the adjective "American" in describing one's student status, the German language session instructor felt it would be better not to include one's nationality.

Table Four: Income Categories

English	What is your combined total annual household income (\$)? <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 25,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 25,000 to 50,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 50,001 to 75,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 75,001 to 100,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 100,001 to 125,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 125,001 to 150,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 150,001 to 175,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 175,001-250,000 <input type="checkbox"/> greater than 250,000
French	Quel est les revenue annuel de votre ménage (€)? <input type="checkbox"/> Moins de 25,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 25,000 to 50,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 50,001 to 75,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 75,001 to 100,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 100,001 to 125,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 125,001 to 150,000 <input type="checkbox"/> Plus de 150,000
German	Wieviel Jahreseinkommen steht ihrem Haushalt zur Vefügung(€)? <input type="checkbox"/> Weniger als 10,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 10,001 - 15,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 15,001 - 25,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 25,001 - 45,000 <input type="checkbox"/> 45,001 - 60,000 <input type="checkbox"/> mehr als 60,000

Table Five: Key French and German Phrases Taught to U.S. Student Researchers.

French	Bonjour Excusez-moi Parlez-vous anglais? Je suis un étudiant américain /une étudiante américaine Je m'appelle ... Merci beaucoup
German	Guten Tag Entschuldigen Sie Sprechen Sie Englisch? Ich bin ein Student Mein Name ist ... Dankeschoen

RESULTS

The student researchers were originally tasked with collecting at least two surveys in each of the countries visited. With six countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Netherlands, and the United States) and eighteen student researchers, this should have yielded at least 108 surveys. Some researchers delivered more than their required number, and the final data set contained 132 surveys. In this paper, only the largest three of the respondent nationalities are presented.

The respondents were asked to rate the agreement with the statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These responses were coded 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest level of agreement. The means of the ratings are reported in the following tables. For the most part, there are no significant differences between the national groups.

Table 6: Means for U.S. (n=21), Germany (n=46), and France (n=29)

	U.S.A	France	Germany
I am familiar with how my government spends on the following functions:			
Family Assistance	3.48	3.66	3.17
Roads, Mobility, and Public Transport	3.67	3.76	3.33
Retirement	3.62	3.48	3.20
Healthcare	3.52	3.72	3.24
Education	3.57	3.66	3.42
National Security	3.62	3.00	2.78
Foreign Assistance	3.24	3.17	2.93
Assistance to Poor and/or Unemployed	3.70	3.59	3.42
I am satisfied with how my government spends on the following functions:			
Family Assistance	2.67	3.46	2.93
Roads, Mobility, and Public Transport	3.00	4.00	2.80
Retirement	2.76	3.59	2.93
Healthcare	2.85	3.76	3.09
Education	2.62	3.10	3.09
National Security	3.24	2.90	3.07
Foreign Assistance	2.71	3.28	2.23
Assistance to Poor and/or Unemployed	2.71	3.14	2.91
It is important that my government spends substantially on the following functions:			
Family Assistance	3.24	3.66	3.71
Roads, Mobility, and Public Transport	3.95	4.00	3.33
Retirement	3.71	4.07	3.59
Healthcare	3.95	4.38	3.70
Education	3.95	4.48	3.87
National Security	3.70	3.97	3.20
Foreign Assistance	2.95	3.62	2.44
Assistance to Poor and/or Unemployed	2.90	3.83	3.29

For each of the following, please indicate whether you feel the level of this type of tax should be increased, unchanged, or decreased in your country.			
Personal Income Tax	2.38	2.34	2.57
Value Added Tax (VAT)	2.00	2.41	2.35
Corporate Income Tax	1.71	2.28	2.07

Table 7: Difference in Means: Germany vs. France

	t	p
In general, I am familiar with how my government spends on the following functions.	-.96	Not significant
In general, I am satisfied with how my government spends on the following functions.	.62	Not significant
I am satisfied with the overall level of taxes in my country.	1.77	Not significant
I am satisfied with the overall tax rates in my country compared to other industrialized countries.	.67	Not significant

Table 8: Difference in Means: Germany vs. U.S.

	t	p
In general, I am familiar with how my government spends on the following functions.	1.11	Not significant
In general, I am satisfied with how my government spends on the following functions.	2.70	P<.01
I am satisfied with the overall level of taxes in my country.	-.18	Not significant
I am satisfied with the overall tax rates in my country compared to other industrialized countries.	-.74	Not significant

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented the results of a multinational public opinion survey conducted by student participants in a 2011 travel study program. While the empirical results generally do not show significant differences between the nationality groups, the overall process was a challenging exercise for the student researchers. Despite potential biases arising from the heavy representation of student aged respondents, there are a few noteworthy contrasts.

The process of developing, translating, and administering the survey instrument provided an opportunity for the students to encounter and explore cultural differences which many had not examined before. Thus, the survey project served as an enriching component of the travel study program.