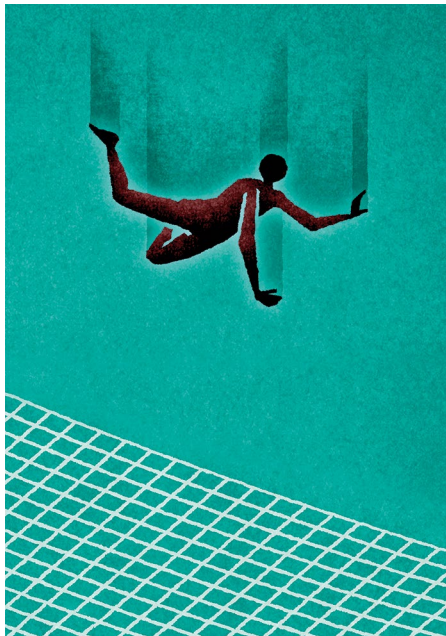


### POLITICAL SCIENCE

## Responsibility and markets

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Credit: MATT KENYON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Recent elections in the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere have brought renewed debate over government welfare systems and the role of individual responsibility in such areas as health, education and retirement.

In a recent paper, Jeff Spinner-Halev of the University of North Carolina suggests that instead of focusing on whether individuals act prudently, we should look to

how institutions can promote responsibility and mitigate effects of unpredictable markets. Liberal theories of distributive justice emphasize individual responsibility, but also assume a regulated market economy. They take different positions on individual and state accountability — depending on whether outcomes are foreseeable, choices are voluntary and luck plays a role — and debate how assistance can create fair opportunity. However, it is difficult to define what constitutes a prudent decision, especially in market economies, where the outcomes of most choices are uncertain. For example, deciding on a field of study depends on effort, ability and means, as well as the future job market. Spinner-Halev argues for social welfare programmes on the basis of their positive effects on innovation and productivity through permitting some risk taking. His analysis extends to the responsibilities associated with unpaid roles, such as childcare, which might entail leaving the job market.

This paper is theoretical, but suggests a way of thinking about state support that moves away from discussions of laziness and imprudence to ask instead how we can help individuals fulfil various roles in a context of economic uncertainty.

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