

The View from New York

By Douglas Muzzio and Richard Behn

Newt Gingrich versus nobody. There is a consensus in America that the current welfare system doesn't work and needs to be changed. Everybody wants to end welfare as they know it.

Welfare will likely be at the very top of President Clinton's and the 104th Congress' policy and political agendas. The President announced his welfare reform package—the "Work and Responsibility Act"—in Kansas City in June 1994 to redeem his campaign pledge on welfare. The new congressional Republican majority, claiming an electoral mandate to radically alter welfare, has its own ideas on work and responsibility.

Each side will claim that its program is in the public's interest. Public opinion will be engaged in the debate and will inform the outcome, providing both opportunities and constraints.¹ What, then, are the public opinion contexts in which the opening of the welfare debate is being addressed? What do Americans think about poverty, welfare recipients, the role of government, and the efficacy of government programs? Which way does the public seem to be pointing—irrespective of what party elites may have in mind?

To get answers to these questions, we have examined survey findings on the New York state experience. Though it's only one of 50 states, New York is still a big one, and it has had an unusually long and challenging history with welfare problems.

"Tough Love" in the Empire State

The June 1994 Empire State Survey of 1,221 New York state residents provides a detailed portrait of values, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions regarding welfare.² New York is "liberal" both in its monthly welfare payments and the

size of its welfare rolls. One of 11 state residents—1.6 million people—receives Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or Home Relief. The state spends 13% of its budget on welfare—\$4.07 billion annually—and the load is growing; between 1989 and 1993, the AFDC caseload increased by 32% and welfare spending by 48%.

New Yorkers, regardless of geography, demography, socio-economic status, political party affiliation—or

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whether they or family members have ever received welfare, believe in a form of "tough love." New Yorkers don't like the welfare system and don't fully trust those who are on it, but they don't want to shut it down just to punish those who abuse it.

These beliefs are part of a "welfare creed," whose central tenets include:

- recipients and fathers of welfare children should work;*
- welfare is often necessary;*
- recipients should get the help they need to get off welfare and to work;*
- government has a responsibility to nurture work and self-sufficiency;*
- welfare can be counterproductive; it can facilitate anti-social behavior and demoralize recipients;*
- benefits should be limited in duration, lest they induce dependency and other pathologies; and*
- families are important—it is wrong*

for parents to avoid their obligation to support their child(ren).

In these beliefs New Yorkers don't differ much from other Americans. The survey found that the Hudson River is not quite the great social and cultural divide that the famous *New Yorker* cartoon cover proclaims. Despite some differences between Empire State residents and the rest of the country, national polling suggests that New Yorkers are part of a national welfare consensus—Americans will extend a helping hand to those in need, and in return, expect recipients to seek economic independence and society to enforce the bargain.

Go to Work

New Yorkers, most of all, agree on the value of work; it is a core social belief. Work is not only essential if society is to function, but also is a prerequisite to individual self-respect. Although work is a social and personal good, New Yorkers believe it is sometimes avoided as much as pursued. Consequently, New Yorkers want to increase the pressure to work on current and potential welfare recipients (mainly through time limits) and increase the rewards of working, including a higher minimum wage. They oppose welfare recipients getting more government assistance than the working poor or unemployed workers.

New Yorkers' commitment to work is seen in the virtual unanimity on proposals which would:

"require job training for those on welfare, and after two years require them to work" (93% support, 85% strongly);

"require unemployed fathers of children on welfare to work" (94% support, 78% strongly);

“make able-bodied welfare recipients work off their grants by performing community service” (94% support, 78% strongly).

Work, in different forms, lies at the heart of both President Clinton’s and the House Republicans’ “work requirements to promote individual responsibility.”

Welfare—A Necessity

Welfare is a necessity—a temporary safety net, a transition during financial emergencies—say 85% of New Yorkers. Virtually all (97%) agree with former New York City Mayor Edward Koch that “[w]elfare should be treated as a response to a temporary emergency, not as a permanent way of life.”³

But New Yorkers believe that welfare recipients need help to move from welfare to work. There is a near-consensus among New Yorkers to:

“have government help pay for child care and transportation for welfare recipients who work or are in job training or education courses” (82% support, 58% strongly); and

“provide guaranteed health insurance so poor people without health coverage don’t quit their jobs or stay on welfare to get Medicaid” (83% support, 64% strongly).

Government has an obligation to help the poor. When asked directly who has “the greatest responsibility for helping the poor,” 40% of New Yorkers chose government, 27% cited the poor themselves, 13% churches and other charities, and 11% named families and relatives of the poor. Their position is best captured by Isabel Sawhill, an economist at the Urban Institute: “Definitely government needs to play a role but [within] a new social contract that helps those who help themselves”—i.e., those who are deemed *able* to help themselves.

Fostering Pathologies

Empire State residents find the current public assistance system to be counterproductive: it “changes things for the worse by making able-bodied people too dependent on government aid” (58%), rather than “changes things for the better by helping people to support themselves” (28%).

New Yorkers see a link between welfare and social pathology. Welfare is seen to nurture irresponsibility. Six in ten (59%) blame the welfare system for encouraging teenagers to have babies.

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And they overwhelmingly agree (88%) with then-Governor Mario Cuomo that “the best thing we can do to avoid the disastrous cycle of poverty for many of our families is to stop children from having children.”⁴

The welfare system actually increases the number of poor in the state, according to fully half of New Yorkers, more than four times the number (11%) who see welfare reducing the number of poor. Six in ten see welfare fostering dependency. And they overwhelmingly (78%) agree with former New York Governor and US President Franklin Roosevelt that “continued dependence on relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration.”⁵

Family and family responsibility is a firm tenet of New Yorkers’ social beliefs. Three of four New Yorkers agreed with President Clinton that “this country would be a lot better off if children were born to married couples.” Given their emphasis on jobs, New Yorkers are more divided on former Vice President Dan Quayle’s comment that

“marriage is probably the best anti-poverty program of all,” with a narrow 51-45% majority agreeing.⁶ It remains to be seen if the answer to welfare really is work—or marriage. But what is clear is that any politician who preaches both virtues will be giving a sermon to the choir.

Welfare Limits

Three-quarters of New Yorkers believe there ought to be limits imposed on receiving welfare. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed favored applying time limits to single parents with children under one year of age, a more drastic restriction than the Clinton plan. New Yorkers by a three-to-two margin (57-39%) want to limit welfare benefits to two years and not let recipients be eligible again for benefits for five years.

Seven-in-ten do not want to “increase welfare benefits when children on welfare have additional children.” Nearly all (93%) agreed with New Jersey State Assemblyman Wayne Bryant, an architect of New Jersey’s welfare reform: “If a person wants to enlarge their family while on welfare, they should go to work to support the children like any other working family.”⁷

Although New Yorkers want to limit the extent of change in the social welfare system, they reject Speaker Gingrich’s and other House Republicans’ calls to scrap the welfare system. Only 6% support the total abolition of welfare and—by four-to-one (78-19%)—reject *never* letting people back on welfare once they have reached a two-year limit.

New Yorkers also reject leaving current adult welfare clients to private charities and their children to adoption. Half reject social critic Charles Murray’s proposal to force “a single woman to find a way of supporting a child” which “will lead many who should not be mothers to place their babies for adoption.”⁸ Nonetheless, a sizable minority (41%) support Murray’s approach.

Dissensus

New Yorkers are divided on the ambition and motivation of welfare recipients, over whether most people who receive public assistance don't really want to work (48%) or really do (42%). They are ambivalent about whether need or greed is the main reason for going on welfare. Four-in-ten (41%) believe that most people who receive money from welfare could get along without it if they tried, while 37% believe that recipients truly need help.

As far as the root causes of poverty—41% attribute poverty to circumstances beyond the poor's control while 35% say people are poor because of lack of effort. Thus, in an open-ended item asking the "most important factor why people are on welfare," the top responses of New Yorkers are lack of jobs or good paying jobs (21%) and laziness on the part of the recipient (20%).

Reform: Neither Quick nor Cheap

New Yorkers don't expect welfare reform to be quick. The problems of welfare won't be solved during the Clinton Administration or any time soon. Senator Daniel Moynihan has said—and a majority (53%) of New Yorkers agree—that welfare will not be reformed in less than a generation.⁹

Nor do they expect welfare reform to come cheap; fully two-thirds of New Yorkers believe that, at least in the short term, reform will cost more than maintaining the status quo. After all, sending checks is much easier and cheaper for government to do than finding jobs and changing lifestyles. They say that budgetary concerns are not paramount, that removing people from dependence is (10% vs. 79%). But they are sharply divided over their willingness to pay more in taxes to provide job training and public service jobs so recipients can get off welfare, with a narrow 44-40% plurality against paying more taxes to get recipients off welfare.

Americans appear to share New Yorkers "tough love" stance on welfare. Americans don't like the welfare system and believe that fundamental reform is needed but don't want to shut it down. They, like New Yorkers, want to make work a real option for welfare recipients. A May 1994 survey done by Yankelovich Partners for *Time/CNN* found Americans overwhelmingly (92%) in favor of requiring all able bodied people on welfare to work or learn a job or skill, and nearly three-quarters would "replace welfare with a system of guaranteed public jobs." Eighty-seven percent of Americans in a December 1994 CBS/*New York Times* poll believe that the government should "create work programs for people on welfare and require those people to participate in the

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programs." And nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) in that poll believe that it is the "responsibility of government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves."

In its May 1994 survey, Yankelovich found that welfare is seen by a substantial proportion of Americans to discourage work (84%) and 85% completely (46%) or mostly (39%) agree that "poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs." Similarly to New Yorkers, almost half of Americans think welfare recipients could get along without welfare if they tried (vs. 41% of New Yorkers) while 35% thought welfare recipients really needed the help (vs. 37% of New Yorkers).¹⁰

Americans, like New Yorkers, believe that welfare recipients need help to move from welfare to work; nine-in-ten favored spending money to allow poor

mothers to work or take classes.¹¹ Three-quarters of Americans believe that guaranteed health insurance would help prevent people from quitting their jobs or staying on welfare to get Medicaid, while 66% favored help with commuting costs.¹²

Americans say they favor reforms that help people leave welfare, even if these changes actually cost more money in the short run than the present welfare system. They are willing to pay for welfare reform: 84% favored "spending additional tax money in the hope of reducing the number of people on welfare."¹³ But by a 3-to-2 margin (56 to 38%), Americans disagreed that "the government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper into debt."¹⁴ And more than half (53%) think the government is spending too much money on welfare; 19% say too little, and 18% the right amount.¹⁵

Similar to New Yorkers, the May 1994 Yankelovich survey showed Americans almost unanimously reject eliminating welfare entirely (91%) and nearly two-thirds oppose "cut[ting] the amount of money given to all people on welfare." Americans reject orphanages as an answer to welfare's problems. Fully eight-in-ten oppose requiring "women to find a job and get off welfare within two years and if they can't take care of their children at that time, give them to an orphanage;" only 17% adopt House Speaker Gingrich's "Boys' Town" approach. In the December 1994 CBS/*New York Times* survey 72% believed it was better for the children of unmarried mothers under 21 who have no income to remain with their mothers on welfare than to be placed in foster care or an orphanage.

There are some differences between New Yorkers and other Americans. Nationally, Americans are more widely convinced that welfare changes things for the worse than are New Yorkers (75% nationally vs. 55% in New York).¹⁶ Americans believe that lack of effort by the poor is more to blame for their poverty than circumstances beyond

their control (44% nationally vs. 34% in New York); New Yorkers tend to blame circumstances more than the individual (41% to 35%).¹⁷ New Yorkers more widely than national opinion believe that welfare reform will be costly (67% in New York vs. 56% nationally) and say they are less willing to pay more in taxes (40% in New York vs. 61% nationally).¹⁸

One of the sources of New Yorkers' and Americans' orientations toward the welfare system and welfare recipients may be their misperceptions regarding the costs and extensiveness of welfare. In New York state, the average length of stay on AFDC is 2.5 years. When asked "How long do you think the average New York state welfare recipient stays on welfare?"; nearly half (47%) chose "more than five years"; another 18% said two to four years. Nationally, in May 1994, Yankelovich asked Americans "about what percentage of the total federal budget do you think is spent on the main welfare program—Aid to Families with Dependent Children?" One-third said 1 to 10%; a quarter said from 11 to 30%; 13% said between 31 and 50%. Six percent thought the federal government spent more than half the budget on AFDC. In fact, federal AFDC costs were 1% of the federal budget in fiscal year 1993-94.

The "W" Word

"Welfare" appears to be a dirty word among Americans and its use in polling may distort Americans' willingness to provide assistance to the poor.¹⁹ In May when Yankelovich asked "Right now, do you think the government is spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount of money on welfare?," more than half of Americans (53%) said too much, nearly three times the 19% who said too little.

In the same survey, respondents were asked the same question, with "welfare" replaced by "assistance to the poor." 47% now said the government was spending *too little*, double the 23% who responded "too much." The December 1994 CBS/*New York Times* poll found similar reactions to "welfare." By nearly four-to-one (48 to 13%), Americans want government spending on "welfare" *decreased*; by more than five-to-one (47 to 9%), they want government spending on "programs for poor children" *increased*.

Welfare Politics

Welfare reform may be one arena of cooperation between President Clinton and a Republican House leadership committed to fulfilling its Contract with America. Significant change in federal and state welfare programs is likely. At the beginning of the welfare debate, New Yorkers and other Americans largely agree on welfare matters; they appear to hold a set of values, orientations, and attitudes which provide a context for change. New Yorkers, and Americans generally, seem to recognize "both the complexities of welfare reform and the difficulties of moving many Americans out of poverty."²⁰

But often what appears to be consensus on abstract principles has a way of breaking down when translated into nuts-and-bolts policy—particularly when price tags are attached.

Endnotes:

¹ On the intersection of public policy and public opinion, see Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77, 1983, pp. 175-190; and Humphrey Taylor, "When and How Public Opinion Shapes American Public Policy," *The Public Perspective*, January/February 1990, pp. 19-20.

² The Empire State Survey polled 1,221 adult New York state residents from May 19-June 9, 1994.

³ Edward Koch, "Welfare Isn't a Way of Life," *New York Times*, March 4, 1988. Respondents were read unattributed quotations from public comments by New York state and national leaders and asked if they agreed or disagreed.

⁴ Mario Cuomo, from his State of the State address, January 5, 1994.

⁵ From Roosevelt's second annual message to Congress, January 4, 1935.

⁶ Clinton was quoted in the *Washington Times*, February 8, 1993; Quayle's comment is from an address before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, May 19, 1992.

⁷ Quoted in the *Washington Times*, April 6, 1994.

⁸ Quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 1993.

⁹ Moynihan quoted in Eric Eckholm, "Solutions on Welfare: They All Cost Money," *New York Times*, July 26, 1992.

¹⁰ Survey by CBS/*New York Times*, January 15-17, 1994.

¹¹ Survey by Yankelovich Partners for *Time/CNN*, May 18-19, 1994.

¹² Survey question on health insurance by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, March 16-21, 1994; and survey question on commuting costs by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, April 16-18, 1994.

¹³ Survey by Yankelovich, May 18-19, 1994.

¹⁴ Survey by PSRA for Times Mirror, July 13-27, 1994.

¹⁵ Survey by Yankelovich, May 18-19, 1994.

¹⁶ Survey by PSRA for Times Mirror, March 16-21, 1994.

¹⁷ Survey by CBS/*NYT*, December 6-9, 1994.

¹⁸ Data on US attitudes on the cost of welfare reform, *US News and World Report*, November 30, 1993. Survey question on American attitudes regarding paying more taxes for welfare reform, CBS/*NYT*, January 15-17, 1994.

¹⁹ Tom W. Smith, "That Which We Call Welfare by Any Other Name Would Smell Sweeter: An Analysis of the Impact of Question Wording on Response Patterns," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 51, 1987, pp. 75-83.

²⁰ Geoffrey Garin, Guy Molyneux, and Linda DiVall, *Public Attitudes toward Welfare Reform: A Summary of Key Research Findings*, (Peter D. Hart Associates: New York, 1993), p. 3.

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