



Cooler Passions

Welfare reform five years later

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When Congress passed welfare reform in 1996, many either cheered or anguished over what they thought it would mean for the role of government in the marketplace and for the more than 12 million poor people then receiving cash assistance.

Instituted during a time of heightened tension between Congress and the president, federal welfare reform galvanized advocates on all sides of the debate. Their arguments evoked images of welfare dependency, punitive coercion of the poor, states' rights, child and medical care, and illegitimacy, among others. The nation's newspapers reported heavily both on the provisions of the reform and the rhetorical barbs traded from one end of Pennsylvania Avenue to the other.

The media coverage was extensive. During 1995 and 1996, the Lexis-Nexis general news archives collected over 4,000 articles on the subject. Talk



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of reform was difficult to avoid during those months, and compromise seemed elusive, as President Clinton twice vetoed legislation before striking what he admitted was an uneasy bargain with his Republican foes on Capitol Hill.

Among the most important features of the 1996 welfare law are mandatory work requirements, limits on increased benefits for additional children born on welfare, limits on benefits for minor mothers, and time-limited cash benefits. These provisions have tended to enjoy majority support by the public, at least through the time during which polling has asked about these measures.

A pair of *Los Angeles Times* polls in September 1994 and April 1995 found between 65 and 68% of the public in favor of mandatory work, including work by mothers of preschool children. This support for work was accompanied by overwhelming approval for child care subsidies. In May 1994, Yankelovich/*Time*/CNN found 90% in favor of additional governmental

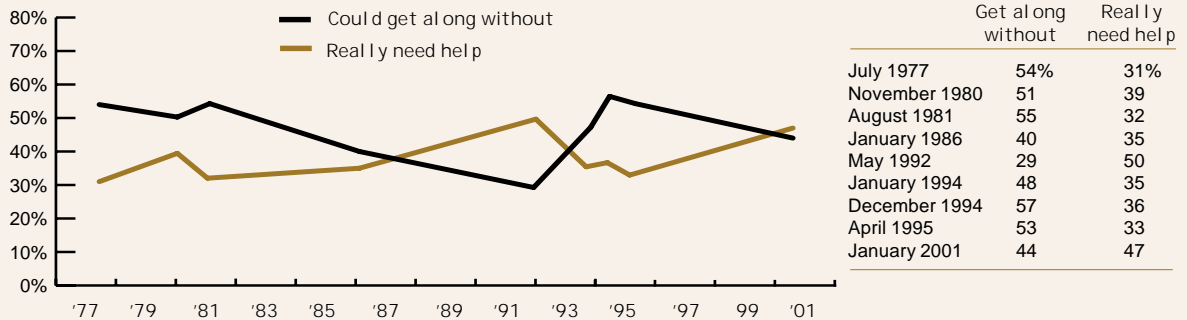


Figure 1

How Real is the Need?

Question:

In your opinion, do you think that most people who receive money from welfare could get along without it if they tried, or do you think they really need this help?



Source: Surveys by CBS/*New York Times*, 1977, 1980, 1994; NBC/Associated Press, 1981; *New York Times*, 1992; NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, 1995; National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2001.

expenditures to provide free daycare to children of poor mothers. Similar polls from 1992 by other organizations found nearly identical results.

Time-limited welfare, frequently

asked about in polls conducted between 1994 and 1996 but only infrequently after that, typically enjoyed 60 to 70% support among the public, whether it was expressed as a five-year or a two-year limit. More recently, a poll of registered voters conducted by the *Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University in September 2000 found 57% in favor of a five-year limit. This nearly matches results from the *Post*/Kaiser/Harvard July 1998 poll on this question.

The restriction of benefits to minor mothers provides one example of a 1996 welfare provision that faced majority opposition, albeit slight, between 1994 and 1996. Of the five instances we found of polling on this question between December 1994 and May 1996, none indicated more than 44% in favor of cutting off benefits to minor mothers.

“Polls tracking public opinion on welfare over the past few years find a decline in frustration with poor people.”

Five years have passed since the passage of this legislation. Much has changed. Welfare rolls nationwide have declined by more than half. The big questions about welfare—Will it be time-limited? Will it be an entitlement or a block grant program? Will ineligibility for cash welfare spell the end of a family’s Medicaid?—seem fairly well settled. Even the issue of food stamps for immigrants—the reinstatement of which eliminated most of the fiscal savings envisioned in the 1996 legislation—was resolved by the end of 1997.

The new debates are much more likely to turn on narrower questions: faith-based initiatives, how to handle the chronically welfare-dependent, and other, arguably second-order, issues. If, indeed, the 2002 debate over reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program proves less conflictual than was its creation in 1996, it will likely be due in part to a less polarized public.

Welfare as an issue has declined in importance in the public’s mind over the past few years. The Gallup Organization’s periodic question about the most important problem facing the nation reveals a modest but notice-

able decline in the percentage of the public that names welfare. On most of the occasions that question was asked between early 1994 and mid-1998, between 6 and 8% named welfare as the most important problem. From the fall of 1998 to the end of 2001, no more than 3% did. (Both times Gallup asked the question during 2001—in January and May—only 1% named welfare as the most important problem.)

Media coverage of welfare has trailed off even more dramatically. The Lexis-Nexis general news archives lists just under 350 articles on welfare for 2001, compared to 2,193 in 1995 and 1,861 in 1996. The public is receiving far fewer messages on welfare now than it was four years ago and reports thinking about it less.

Coupled with this drop in salience, polls tracking public opinion on welfare over the past few years find a decline in frustration with poor people. Fewer Americans now than in 1995 believe that “poor people have it easy because they can get government benefits.” According to *Times Mirror*, during 1994 and 1995 just over half (53 to 54%) thought the poor had it easy. Comparable figures from the Pew Research Center in 1997 and 1999 and National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Kennedy School

of Government at Harvard University in 2001 found only 45 to 46% taking this position.

This change is not enormous, but it is significant. Further, it corresponds with a similar decline in the percentage of those who believe welfare recipients “could get along without it if they tried” (as opposed to “really need[ing] this help”). Surveys by CBS/*New York Times* and by NBC/*Wall Street Journal* conducted in December 1994 and April 1995 found that over half (57% and 53%, respectively) of Americans thought welfare recipients could get along without the help. By January 2001 that figure had dropped to 44% in the NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School poll.

Surely, large percentages of Americans still believe that most people on welfare don’t need the government assistance, but over the past few years that has become a minority position. Figure 1 shows responses to this question from 1977 to 2001. While the series omits many potentially interesting moments in time, it reveals that as difficult economic times overtake the nation, the percentage of the public that sees welfare as essentially wasteful declines, sometimes markedly. Note that by the end of the recession of 1991-1992, less than one-third of those surveyed thought welfare recipients could get by without public aid.

Accompanying this decline in negativity toward welfare and those who receive it was a mild increase in support for greater welfare spending during the latter part of the 1990s. Presumably having learned that projected cuts would, indeed, be made, the public now more strongly supported keeping spending at its prevailing level or, to a lesser extent, increasing it (see Figure 2). Similarly, the National Election Studies indicate that between 1996 and 2000, the percentage of Americans supporting

cuts in food stamp spending fell from 45% to 30%.

Public support for “spending on poor people” remained essentially stable during this time. Of course, when the question was phrased in this way, rather than mentioning “people on welfare,” per se, public support was much higher. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of respondents to the National Opinion Research Center’s 2000 General Social Survey said they thought we were spending too little on “assistance to the poor,” as opposed to only 11% who thought spending was too much and 24% who thought it was about right.

Helping to explain the sharp distinction drawn by the public between funding for programs that aid “poor people” and funding to pay for “welfare” is the difference in degrees of warmth the public says it feels toward each group. The National Election Studies from 1994 to 2000 reveal that tiny minorities—no more than 4%—using a “feeling thermometer” scaled from 0 to 100 degrees, assigned negative ratings to “poor people.” (We consider negative ratings as those between 0 and 40.)

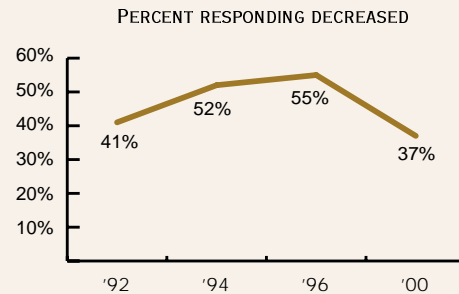
However, the public much more readily gave cooler ratings to “people on welfare” over this period. Between 1994 and 2000 no less than 30% of respondents assigned negative ratings to “people on welfare.”

Figure 2

Loosen the Purse Strings

Question:

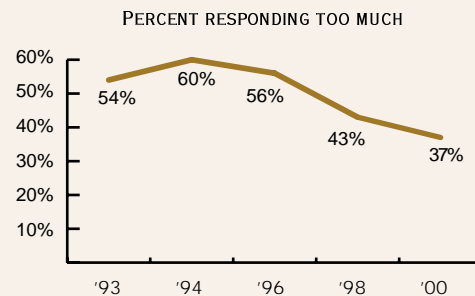
If you had a say in making up the federal budget this year, for which programs would you like to see spending increased and for which would you like to see spending decreased?... Should federal spending on welfare programs be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?



Source: Surveys by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, latest that of November 2000.

Question:

We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I’m going to name some of these problems and for each one I’d like you to tell me whether you think we’re spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. First, welfare... are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on welfare?



Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, latest that of February 1-June 25, 2000.

Paralleling the shift toward greater support for welfare spending indicated above, this feeling thermometer captured a moderation of public opinion toward welfare recipients. In 1994 fully 46% assigned a negative rating to this group, compared to 30% in 2000. The moderating trend suggests a bit more tolerance in recent years of those who rely on public assistance.

It is important to note, though, that these ratings might well be based on only vague impressions of the lives of the poor. How much the

how much income a family of four needed to earn in a year in order to make ends meet, 69% said at least \$35,000. Another 23% said at least \$25,000.

Certainly, a large portion of the population would think the official federal poverty guidelines far too low if asked directly.

As of this writing, it is difficult to know how divisive the reauthorization of TANF will be. Certainly, state governments have much at stake if Congress holds firm to

spending increased during times of economic hardship and fell during times of economic boom. The late 1990s provided a contrary example, however. Despite the prosperity of this period, opposition to welfare spending declined, as did some other negative attitudes toward public assistance and those receiving it.

This easing of opposition seems due to the adoption of stricter eligibility guidelines and the imposition of reciprocal obligations on welfare recipients. The public may have been more willing to spend in the knowledge, or at least the belief, that the money was being spent wisely.

With the economic decline of 2001 and with the end of welfare as we knew it, the public may view problems of poverty and welfare differently than before. As of the beginning of 2001, for example, it could be said by poverty scholar Isabel Sawhill in the summer *Brookings Review* that the reform was more successful than expected: caseloads dropped, employment among single mothers rose, and poverty rates fell. In the absence of a major recession, it was unlikely that the major parts of the 1996 law would change.

Nonetheless, the occasion of the reauthorization of the law might still be expected to evoke broad debate about welfare policy. Prior to September 11, we might have expected the main issues, among others, to be the need to support low-wage work, to reduce child-bearing outside of marriage, and to deliver successful starts in life for more children.

After September 11 and the concurrent broad economic downturn, welfare reform may indeed play out as an issue of wider concern, as the ranks of the unemployed swell to include many who will appear to have fallen into poverty through no fault of their own. ●

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public knows about welfare reform and poverty more generally is uncertain. A CBS/*New York Times* poll from August 1996, the month TANF was signed into law, showed that fully 44% of those surveyed were not sufficiently aware of the new legislation to say whether or not they approved of it.

More recently, a battery of questions asked as part of the January 2001 NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School poll found that many, if not most, Americans significantly overestimate federal poverty thresholds. Forty-two percent of respondents would consider as poor a family of four that makes \$25,000 per year—a figure that actually lies about \$7,350 above the federal poverty level. Exactly half thought a family of four could “get by” on \$20,000 a year. The other half said either that a family at this level could not get by, or that they did not know.

Along similar lines, when, in April 2000, Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates asked

the five-year lifetime limit on federal funding of cash assistance. States will be forced either to continue cutting off recipients who run out their clocks, or to tap their own treasuries to fund all of those benefits.

This official concern may or may not translate into a preoccupation of the mass public. Despite the furor over welfare reform in 1996 and the extensive media attention it garnered, in retrospect, very few Americans see reform as the chief success or failure of the Clinton administration. (A CBS/*New York Times* survey in May 2000 found no more than 2% naming welfare reform as Clinton’s “biggest failure” or “biggest success.”) President Bush can certainly hope for so little turmoil, not only in the long term but during reauthorization as well.

As we have seen, the experience through much of the last quarter of the twentieth century was that public support for welfare