

**From Depression to Depression? Seventy-five years of Public Opinion
Toward Welfare**

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(October 25, 2009 draft, comments welcome)

Paper prepared for the panel on "The Politics of TANF Reauthorization" at the 31st Annual Fall Research Conference of the Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management, November 5-7, 2009, Washington, D.C. The author thanks Sara Arrow, Narayani Lasala, Steve Thompson, Luano Russo, and Columbia University's Electronic Data Service for assistance, and especially Greg Shaw for past collaborations. Research support was provided by the Summer Internship Program of Columbia Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP) and the School of Arts and Sciences. Data were obtained from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, the Odum's Institute (Harris Survey archive), and publicly available online sources. All responsibility for the analysis and interpretations is the author's.

Abstract: This paper reviews trends in public opinion toward "welfare" policy in the United States from the 1930s to the present. It focuses on changes in national opinion since the authorization and reauthorization of TANF since 1996 and what has happened during the recent economic downturn in the United States. It considers the extent to which past relationships between economic conditions and public opinion toward welfare still hold, and to what extent racial strife as well as partisan conflict and ideological polarization are closely related to mass opinion toward assistance to the poor, even as welfare reform and policymaking have emphasized employment requirements and problem-solving and have been less embroiled in partisan, ideological, and racial issue controversies. The research updates existing opinion trend data with recent data from The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archive and the news media and other public pollsters. It includes a closer analysis of the NORC General Social Surveys, and the American National Election Studies through 2008 election.

Introduction

As “welfare reform” comes up for renewal in 2010, this paper asks: what does the public think about “welfare” as it now knows it? To what extent has public opinion changed since reforms were enacted in 1996? From the vantage point of public opinion and public debate, did the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants to states, do what President Bill Clinton intended to do when he began his reform efforts: to end “welfare as we know it”?

This paper offers answers to these questions by first reviewing trends in public opinion toward welfare policy in the United States from the depression of the 1930s until the 1996 reforms. It then focuses on changes in national opinion since the 1996 authorization and subsequent reauthorization of TANF, and what has happened during the recent economic downturn in the United States. It considers the extent to which past relationships between economic conditions and public opinion toward welfare still hold, and to what extent racial strife as well as partisan conflict and ideological polarization are closely related to mass opinion toward assistance to the poor, even as welfare reform and policymaking have emphasized employment requirements and problem-solving and have been less embroiled in partisan, ideological, and racial issue controversies. The paper’s research updates existing opinion trend data through its assemblage of recent data from The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archive (its “iPOLL” database), the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, the Odum’s Institute (Harris Survey archive), the news media, and other public pollsters. It also reports on a closer

analysis of the NORC General Social Surveys (GSS), and the American National Election Study (NES) surveys through 2008.

Welfare History and Public Opinion Leading to the 1996 Reforms

To start, Tables 1-3 and Figure 1 summarize how “welfare” has in a significant sense fallen off the political agenda as covered by the news media after it increased prominence from 1994 to 1996. To the extent that debates over welfare—as income assistance—grappled with important problems of poverty, it is politically significant that these problems are rarely described with this phrase, framing, or issue definition (see Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, 1963; Schattschneider, 1960). How did we get here?

The history of contemporary welfare policy in the United States can be divided into four time periods (e.g., Edelman, 2009). There are a number of useful compilations and reports of the available public opinion survey data that, collectively, cover these periods. They are listed (with full citations, alphabetically by authors, in Table 4). The first period began with the Social Security Act of 1935. The New Deal’s Social Security legislation, as is well known, established a two-tiered system for providing assistance to the poor, which consisted, first, of a set of popular programs for old-age insurance and unemployment compensation that were national entitlements attached to being in, and contributing from, the work force; and second, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), which consisted of state-run programs, where the states had significant discretion (Lieberman, 1998). While the American public back then was, arguably, substantially predisposed to provide support for children (see Cook, 1979), the states exercised discretion in deciding what families were “deserving” of such financial support -- that is, of income benefits

not otherwise earned, contributed toward, or justified by individuals' past employment. The way the two-tiers were established and implemented led to later unforeseen conflicts over welfare in its early implementation (Lieberman, 1998; but some civil rights groups saw these conflicts early on; see Hamilton and Hamilton, 1997).

The 1960s marked the start of the second period with President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and the change in the ADC program to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The public assistance or "welfare" rolls (as they came to be called) increased substantially along with other programs, services, and "welfare rights" (Edelman, 2009, p.36). The welfare rolls included increasing numbers of blacks who benefitted from the welfare rights movement and the expansion of programs and benefits that they could no longer legally be denied by the states. Beginning in the late 1960s, a backlash emerged that was driven by economic conservatism and also racism, epitomized by elected leaders from the South later moving from the Democratic party into the Republican party, as the latter party became the home of economic and racial conservatism, especially following the passage of major civil rights legislation during the Johnson presidency (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Edsall and Edsall, 1992). Southern white voters and others slowly followed suit during the years that followed. The backlash had taken full form during this third period with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, who, when he spoke of "welfare queens" driving in Cadillacs, evoked the stereotype of able-bodied blacks on welfare and exploiting the welfare system (e.g., Gilens, 1999; Edelman, 2009). The longer-term effects of this backlash and rhetoric led to Democrat Bill Clinton's presidential campaign promise, and subsequent follow-through, to end "welfare as we know it." This effort was hijacked by the

Republican Congress that came to power after President Clinton's and the Democrats' 1994 midterm election debacle, which resulted from political missteps, including failure on health care reform. The fourth period, extending to the present day, came after the enactment of the 1996 welfare reforms that Clinton relented on, ended his veto threats, and signed into law, as he recovered politically in time to win re-election later that year.

How has the American public viewed this history? While this paper focuses on income assistance to families with children and individuals of working age, excluding the disabled and retirees in the Social Security system, such welfare assistance is part of the country's overall social and economic support and benefits system—the American “welfare state.” There has been an accumulation of research indicating that the welfare policies of developed nations, including the United States (with its lower ranking in welfare state expansiveness), have had substantial support from their publics, though this may not always fully indicate traceable causal effects of public opinion on government actions (see Brooks and Manza, 2007; Shapiro and Young, 1989). This correspondence between mass opinion and policy, through processes of electoral accountability involving responsiveness to the median voter, has been less apparent, however, if existing at all, in regard to efforts to redistribute income and lessen inequality (Kenworthy and McCall, 2008; Bartels, 2008). Drawing on Michael Schiltz's (1970) important early report going back to the 1930s, and writing in 1992 based on the extant data, Page and Shapiro offered this summary of public support for social welfare policy in the United States:

“Since the first surveys of the 1930s, most Americans have said they favor a number of policies that fit together into a substantial, though bounded, welfare state: Social Security; certain kind of help with jobs, education, income support, medical care, and urban problems; recognition of labor unions and a qualified right to strike; macroeconomic policies to counteract high unemployment or inflation; and regulation of business practices, working conditions, and more recently, consumer safety and the

environment. Americans have been no more eager than people elsewhere to pay taxes,, but—contrary to a great deal of fashionable public bashing—they have generally been willing to come up with revenue to pay for the policies they favor” (Page and Shapiro, 1992, p. 118).

What has been the source of these policy preferences? They go on to say:

“This configuration of preferences reflects a fundamental individualism that esteems individual responsibility and individual initiative, and relies primarily upon free enterprise capitalism for economic production and distribution. Yet it also reflects a sense of societal obligation, as strong commitment to government actions in order to smooth capitalism’s rough edges, to regulate its excesses, to protect the helpless, and to provide a substantial degree of equal opportunity for all” (Page and Shapiro, 1992, p.118).

This explains the continued public support for the above configuration of welfare state policies (see Cook and Barrett, 1992, Shaw, 2007, 2020; Shaw and Mysiewicz, 2004; Shaw and Shapiro, 2005; McCall and Lane, 2008) and also the policy responsiveness that Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) find to trends in the public’s overall liberal-conservative “mood” – these aggregate changes in ideology very likely substantially reflect changes in public support for social welfare policies. The above emphasis on the public’s values of individualism, opportunity, and humanitarianism explains Americans’ continued support for government assistance in the areas of Social Security retirement benefits, health care (Medicare, Medicaid, insurance coverage for children, and incremental expansion of medical care provision), education, expanding employment, income assistance for people who are genuinely unable to work and without other support, tax reductions for the poor, and in-kind assistance (cf. Feldman and Steenbergen, 2001; McCloskey and Zaller,1984). Indeed, individuals draw distinctions among the characteristics and kinds of needs people may have—their age (elderly, children, adults), health status, gender, and race, which lead directly to supporting

specific forms of assistance for particular people with particular needs; thus the public is able to make strong and explicable distinctions among issues and policies (Cook, 1979; Cook and Barrett, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992).

For many individuals there has also been another influential value, *egalitarianism*, which has to be added to the mix. Egalitarianism has led them to support an increasingly activist welfare state across the board, including income assistance for all in need, thereby pushing for greater economic as well as social and political equality. This has resulted in clear tensions between egalitarianism and individualism (McCloskey and Zaller, 1984) over income assistance programs that appear likely to decrease incentives for individual self-reliance and initiative. Thus in the case of “welfare”—income assistance to the poor who are able-bodied and should need only brief cash support -- the expansion of AFDC brought with it the perceptions that some of the poor would exploit the system, continuing to collect benefits and avoiding any initiative to (re)enter the labor forces. This stereotype had long been associated with the poor, going back to earlier historical debates about “poor houses,” “work houses,” and other proposed best ways to aid the destitute without fostering dependence and idleness (see Shaw 2007; Cook, 1979). Further, the visibility of racism and racial stereotyping—coinciding with increases in the number of blacks on the AFDC rolls and exaggerated perceptions of this—compounded this already negative perception (Gilens, 1999; Edsall and Edsall, 1992; Gans, 1995).

Historically, the tension between individualism and egalitarianism held back the initiation and expansion of the American welfare state, though there were other factors involved that distinguished the United States from Europe on this score (cf. Brooks and

Manza, 2007; McCloskey and Zaller, 1984; Skocpol, 2000; Shapiro and Young, 1989). But once enacted and expanded, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other policies that were consistent with individualism, humanitarianism, and opportunity became areas of public *consensus*. In contrast, the American public was at best *conflicted* or *ambivalent* about welfare that could benefit the undeserving in addition to the deserving poor: some families and individuals with genuine needs could be helped back on to their feet after an economic setback; for others, welfare support would lessen the need and incentive to provide fully for themselves. Members of the public could, quite sensibly and legitimately go back and forth in their own minds about this—and there is evidence that they have and continue to do (see Hochschild, 1981; Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Zaller, 1992)—with the net result that public support for “welfare” would be less than for other welfare state policies. Consistent with this is the well know finding that survey questions phrased in terms of support for “welfare” are interpreted differently by the public than support for “assistance to the poor,” which is more likely to be construed as the poor who would benefit from income assistance and not exploit it; or it suggests assistance other than welfare payments (e.g., food, housing, health care). Such differences in question wording can change the meaning or “framing” of the question (see Smith, 1987, 2004; Zaller, 1992; Iyengar, 1991).

Since this paper speaks to the reauthorization of TANF, the main data of interest are those that bear directly on “welfare” itself or that provide useful frames of reference or comparisons. What can we say specifically--and historically--about public support for welfare from the available survey data.

At the very beginning (literally) of modern-day opinion polling, in September 1935, the first question in the very first Gallup Poll (“Gallup Poll number 1, Question 1”; Gallup, 1971), asked: "Do think expenditures by the Government for relief and recovery are too little, too great, or just about right?" The results are reported in Table 5. The term “relief” back then had a connotation similar to “welfare,” so that the responses to this question are relevant for making rough historical comparisons with the later NORC GSS questions (Table 5), though not more precise ones since the question wordings are not identical. In addition, besides the use of “relief” instead of “welfare,” the 1935 survey item asked also about expenditures on “recovery,” which may expand the reach of the government spending that is cited and further affect responses to the question. Last, the Gallup surveys involved “quota controlled sampling” at the final stage, in contrast to the full probability procedure in later surveys. One result of this was that the early Gallup surveys had very small numbers of black respondents, and the analysis of these surveys requires a weighting procedure that was not developed until a few years ago (Berinsky, 2006).

Still, it is striking that during the Great Depression year of 1935 fully 60 percent of the Gallup sample responded that expenditures on relief and recovery were too great and only 9 percent said too little. Fast forwarding sixty years later to 1994 and 1996 during the time of the welfare reform debate, the average for the NORC-GSS surveys for those years was an identical 60 percent who said we were spending too much, and a mere 13 percent who responded too little. For other years see Table 15 and Figure 2. In contrast, when in July 1938 Gallup surveys asked “Do you think it is the government’s responsibility to pay the living expenses of needy people who are out of work?” 67

percent of respondents said “yes” (Erskine, 1975, p.260); sixty year later, in response to the 1998 GSS spending question on “assistance to the poor” 60 percent said too little (for more data see Table 16). This suggests something about American values—and liberalism—when comparing “relief” and “welfare” to more consensual areas of support for the American welfare state: Figure 2 also show the higher levels of support for spending on health care, Social Security, and assistance to the poor, compared to “welfare.” Based on responses to differently worded questions, Roper and Gallup polls in the late 1930s reviewed by Schiltz (1970) found very large majorities, often more than 80 percent, supporting old age pensions and the “Social Security laws which provide old-age pensions and unemployment insurance” (Page and Shapiro, 1992, p. 118).

What is also striking in Table 5 is the enormous, 53 percentage point partisan difference in 1935 among those saying government expenditures are too great: fully 89 percent of Republicans versus 36 percent of Democrats. This difference is half as large in the cases of support for welfare spending both 60 and 70 years later as is also shown in the table. As we will discuss further below, present-day partisan and ideological differences in opinions are actually increases from the 1970s, due to the heightening of partisan and ideological polarization in American politics. But this should be evaluated from a longer historical perspective. Indeed, each of the four periods in the history of welfare should be looked at in the long-term, so that short-term changes and patterns are not interpreted too quickly as broader transformations (see Soss and Schram, 2007).

While there is little trend data based on repeated survey questions for the years 1935 to 1960 and 1961 to 1968, these periods defined the above areas of consensus and conflict in the American welfare state. The available survey data fill out the picture

further, though there they can only be summarized briefly here. Conflict had surrounded “welfare” beginning with “relief” in the 1930s and state programs that existed prior to the Social Security Act of 1935 (e.g., see Shaw, 2007; Skocpol, 2000). Beyond high levels of support for Social Security retirement benefits, the issues of medical care for the elderly and the poor also evoked support, if that consensus were not fully in place at the outset for Medicare and Medicaid (e.g., Page and Shapiro, 129-132). After assembling her poll data and noting “how controversial public welfare programs have been,” Hazel Erskine came to the conclusion that, “...the basic fact remains that the federal government as the last resort has long been accepted and expected by most Americans” (Erskine, 1975, p.257). With respect to welfare, the linchpin has been support for government efforts to make employment available. Just as survey data in the 1930s showed the public’s preferences for cash assistance that had work attached to it, the 1950s and 1960s data and responses to similar questions through the present reveal that majorities of the public have wanted the government to “see to it that everyone who wants work can find a job” (Erskine, 1975, p. 262-266), with the wording somewhat ambiguous regarding *where* the job would come from. Opinions were split when the question wordings juxtaposed government assistance in finding a job opposite letting “each person get ahead on his own” (Erskine, 1975, p. 268). That said, it was also apparent that support for government action to help with employment increased as the unemployment rate rose indicating the importance the public has attached to government in the area of jobs (Page and Shapiro 1992, p.121-123), in contrast to welfare assistance in the form it emerged in the 1960s. And proposals for a “guaranteed income” without a strong employment requirement had comparatively little support; even during the heyday

of the Great Society in the 1960s, the public showed little enthusiasm for a guaranteed income program (Shapiro, et al., 1987a, p.127-128; Page and Shapiro, 1992, p.124).

The transformation of the welfare system in the 1960s and the public's response to it--taken in the context of advances in civil rights, the decade's urban riots, the increasing crime rate, among other issues of this tumultuous period--can be summarized by responses to the question: "In your opinion, which is more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on his part or circumstances beyond his control?" This general issue (though based on responses to different question wordings) has continued to divide the American public, as it did in the years before the 1960s, but from 1964 to 1967 the "lack of effort" response increased from the low 30 percent range to 40-42 percent, and the "circumstances beyond his control" dropped from an average of 28 percent during 1964-65 to 19 percent in 1967 (Bowman, 2003, p.4). This represented the anti-welfare backlash that emerged as the AFDC rolls and the percentage of black welfare recipients began to increase, though both were exaggerated in the public's mind (Gilens,1999).

During the years that followed through 1996, public opinion toward welfare showed particular trends and patterns, some of which were also exhibited by other policy issues. The welfare backlash continued. It was not, however, that such anti-welfare sentiment was new, but it was qualitatively different politically. The Democratic party was the pro-welfare party and it also became unequivocally the pro-civil rights party starting in the 1960s, with the Johnson administration's successful push of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (see Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Edsall and Edsall, 1992, Hetherington, 2001). This was a major change that evolved over time, from the 1930s when the Democratic party was the pro relief and recovery party

and also the anti-civil rights party, when the racially conservative South was a central part of the New Deal coalition. The South during that time had resisted extending public assistance benefits to blacks (Lieberman, 1998). With the ascendance of the Nixon Administration in the late 1960s, public opinion overall moved in a conservative direction leading to (not resulting from!) the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 (see Stimson, 1999, 2004; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Different issues had their own dynamics. Not surprisingly, polls asked about and found that the public overwhelmingly preferred work to welfare--“making people on welfare go to work” and “workfare” (Page and Shapiro, 1992, p. 125; Shapiro, et al., 1987b, 279-280); and this overarching preference continued to have strong resonance going forward (Bowman, 2003, p.17-21).

The balance of public opinion that had preferred cutting welfare spending favored such cutting even more so from 1974 to 1976 according to the NORC-GSS surveys: the proportion of responses of spending “too much” rose 19 percentage points to 63 percent. After President Reagan cut welfare spending upon taking office, the public shifted gears, though responses of spending “too much” on welfare continued to dominate spending “too little.” However, as Shapiro and Page (1992, p. 127) reported:

“In six CRI [Cambridge Reports, Inc.] surveys, majorities agreed that President Reagan’s Budget Reductions were ‘cutting too deeply into social programs that help poor and disadvantaged people’: the 53% agreement of early and middle 1981 grew to 60% at the end of that year and stayed at 60% or 61% in 1982, 1983, and 1984. Thus the right turn was followed quickly by a liberal rebound, a pattern found in other countries as well (Shapiro and Young, 1989).”

Picking up this public opinion history from the mid-1980s into 1995, Weaver et al. (1995) confirmed that, “One of the most stable elements of American public opinion in the United States is the unpopularity of ‘welfare’, as the general label for AFDC” (p.606).

While there was more support for “food stamps for low income families” and other forms of targeted assistance to sympathetic recipients, by 1995 the survey data confirmed that the public increasingly thought the welfare system overall did not work well and it discouraged work, with both of these opinions increasing nearly 20 percentage points from 1980 to 1995, to 72 and 73 percent, respectively (ABC News/*Washington Post* poll results reported in Weaver et al., 1995, p. 611).

President Bill Clinton had come into office as the public had changed course after the Reagan years, moving in a liberal direction on social welfare issues, particularly during the recession that occurred well into President George H. Bush’s first (and only) term. Weaver et al. (1995) report on how, by the end of Clinton’s first term in office, the public then reversed course again: Negative “thermometer ratings” of “people on welfare” increased; the public’s “complete agreement” that poor people “have become too dependent on government assistance programs” increased 11 points to 46 percent from 1992 to 1994; over the same period nearly 20 percent more (48 percent) felt that people who received welfare money “could get along without it”; and over this period the public went from a clear plurality saying that the poor were victims of circumstances beyond their control to a plurality who felt the poor had been lacking in their own effort (Weaver et al., 1995, p.614). More people wanted to decrease spending on food stamps. At the same time the public was receptive to ongoing reform proposals for welfare recipients: job training, subsidies for child care, and requiring employment even for women with young children; providing public sector jobs for welfare recipients; paying transportation costs; and experimenting with reforms at the state level. And support rose somewhat for ending increases in payments to women who have additional children

while on welfare. Thus when the 1996 welfare reforms were passed and President Clinton finally signed them into law, the public was well prepared to accept them with some satisfaction. But this was, and still is, considered a major defeat by liberal Democrats and others on the left (Edelman, 2009; Mead, 2009).

Welfare and Public Opinion after TANF

What happened to public opinion after the 1996 reforms were enacted and implemented? Or more broadly, what happened to public opinion and welfare politics and policy? Shaw and Shapiro' (2002) analysis of the available public opinion data at the 5 year mark, suggested that a noticeable change had occurred. The data bearing on the fundamental thrust of public opinion—preferences for work over welfare and for giving assistance to those genuinely in need—and other aspects of public attitudes showed more stability than change. They would have been quite familiar to Erskine writing more than 25 years earlier. Shaw and Shapiro suggested as of 2002 that Bill Clinton had succeeded at changing, at least somewhat, welfare in the public's mind and in politics. They observed that the short-term opinion changes that occurred,

“...suggest that ‘welfare’ as an issue has been losing some of its political edge or rancor. From a purely political standpoint, the issue became less a liability for Democrats. From a purely social science and policy-making perspective, we offer two observations. The historical experience during much of the twentieth century was that public support for welfare spending increased in times of economic hardship—during periods of increasing employment and declining economic growth (see Gilens,1999; Page and Shapiro, 1992). In contrast to this, during the prosperity of the late 1990s, after welfare reform in late 1996, public opposition to such spending declined as did other negative attitudes toward public assistance and those receiving it. Further, with the economy in decline in 2001, deepening with the September 11, 2001, attacks and continued threat of terrorism at home, and with the end of welfare as we knew it, the public may view problems of poverty differently than before” (Shaw and Shapiro, 2002, p. 109).

The available data after 1996 revealed, for example, the following: a decrease of 20 points from 1995 to 1997, to 37 percent, in those who thought the public was “losing ground” in dealing with poverty; a drop from 60 to 37 percent from 1994 to 2000 among those responding that we are spending too much on welfare, along with other differently worded questions showing a similar softening regarding “welfare,” spending on “assistance to the poor” (see Tables 15 and 16 and Figure 2), and federal spending on food stamps; majorities supported the welfare reform bill and the kinds of restrictions that the states could implement; from 1995 to 2001 what had been a plurality of the public responding that welfare recipients could get along without welfare shifted to a plurality saying that the recipients really need this help; the proportion completely agreeing that the poor lacked effort declined from 46 to 35 percent from 1994 to 1997; and the “anti ratings” of “people on welfare” declined from 1994 to 2000 by 16 points, from 46 percent to 30 percent (35 percent by the end of 1996 after the enactment of the reforms).

These statistically significant and substantively noteworthy opinion changes provided evidence for Shaw and Shapiro’s (1992) conclusion that welfare reform took the rancor out of the welfare issue and it became less of a political liability for the Democratic party. But the changes were not enormous, hardly transformational, and on other aspects of this issue, there were no significant changes in opinion. The public’s preferences for work over welfare, and the values underlying these attitudes, appeared to remain quite stable and were very likely reinforced. What, has happened since? Have the short term changes increased over the longer term? How do they compare to the longer public opinion record?

The data new data we have assembled and report in Tables 6 to 37 provide some answers. In addition, Soss and Schram (2007) provided a useful critique of Shaw and Shapiro (2002) and others whom they called “progressive revisionists” (Jencks, 2005; Mead, 2004) who suggested that welfare reform might benefit the Democrats and make providing anti-poverty assistance easier in the future. Most important, Soss and Schram argued that any changes in public opinion since 1996 need to be compared to past public opinion during the AFDC era, as the 1994-1996 welfare reform debate (citing Schneider and Jacoby, 2005) was highly salient, politically charged, and thus unusual in that respect. Comparing the earlier data along with later data after 2002, they found that to the extent that public opinion changed after 1996, it had returned to past levels and therefore did not represent a major change that could alter the anti-poverty debate. Based on closer analysis of the National Election Study data through 2004, there was no evidence that Democrats gained any electoral or other political advantage. Further and quite aptly, they found through persuasive multivariate analysis that welfare reform had not changed the relationship of racism or the issue of race with public attitudes toward welfare. Thus as “welfare” became less politically salient after 1996, the public’s underlying attitudes and values opposing it had not changed, and, therefore, they could be activated again by political leaders and visible debates in response to any new proposals to expand the kinds of assistance that the public had long opposed.

While Soss and Schram (2007) are largely on target that no major transformation has occurred in public opinion, they do not fully appreciate the changes, including contextual ones, that have occurred. First, while the Democrats have not scored points with voters with welfare as we knew it off the agenda (and Shaw and Shapiro had not

suggested this), they have no longer been visibly hurt by this issue, much in the same way that their backing off their past strong positions on capital punishment and gun control has disarmed (no pun intended) their Republican and conservative opponents in recent presidential elections. As noted earlier, Tables 1 to 3 and Figure 1 show how the salience of the welfare issue in the press has fallen off to all time low levels, and, correspondingly, how the overall salience of this issue compares to all others that survey respondents might volunteer (see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, on the press and “agenda-setting” and “priming”). The relevant comparison is in fact with 1994-1996, not with the earlier AFDC period since it was the more recent period when welfare as a racial issue had become fully entrenched and potentially most politically damaging to the Democrats as Clinton took on fully welfare reform. As shown in Tables 6 to 11, when the public has been asked in recent year about dealing with poverty, it has acknowledged the importance of the problem, but this is trumped by the change shown in responses to the open-ended “most important problem” as well as in the volume of news media coverage. Moreover, what is also indicative of change since 1994-1996, is the fall-off in the number of questions asked in public opinion surveys about these welfare issues, which is a limitation in later analyses of public opinion, including this one.

After 1996 welfare was transformed greatly as intended. The combined effect of the end of AFDC and the increase in economic growth during the Clinton years led to an enormous decline in the newly defined welfare rolls. Table 12 shows the very sharp decline that occurred in AFDC/TANF recipients. At the same time other forms of assistance to the poor expanded—either under the public’s radar screen or in forms--- food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)-- that would garner far less public

opposition than welfare if not enthusiastic support. Food stamps, as in-kind aid, are different from cash and deal directly with problems of hunger (see Cook, 1979, for relevant experimental evidence regarding targeted assistance), and the name of the program was recently changed to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) as part of new outreach efforts that appear to have tried to avoid any pejorative connotation associated with “food stamps”. This increase, especially since 2000 due to the worsening economy (see Table 12), has not been widely discussed and debated; it may have become less controversial than it would have been in the past, perhaps owing to the end of the AFDC cash assistance program. Table 37 suggests more support than opposition for food stamps.

What do the most recently available public opinion data reveal? Did the changes that occurred after 1996 continue? Did these opinions differ significantly from those prior to the 1996 reforms? While polling on welfare has fallen off since the reform period, there are enough data to track the contours of any changes in public opinion. Interestingly, for example, the results from a 2007 Pew Center survey showed a surge in support for the social safety net in which public opinion returned to its 1980s levels or better regarding support for: government taking “care of people who can’t care for themselves,” guaranteeing food and shelter for all, and helping “more needy people” at the risk of increased national debt. However, this did not last: even with the declining economy in 2009, all of these opinions fell off 6-7 points; in addition, 69 percent and 72 percent in 2007 and 2009, respectively, agreed that “poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs (Tables 21, 30, 31, 32; Pew Research Center, 2009, p.35-36).

For responses to other survey questions touching on these and other aspects of welfare, there was no overall stunning and consistent liberal shift in opinion and perceptions. But the overall tenor of public opinion has remained different from what it was during 1994-1996. On the one hand, as economic conditions started worsening, the public acknowledged that the country has lost ground in dealing with in dealing with poverty and has been increasingly dissatisfied regarding progress on this (Tables 13 and 14). The decline in the percentage who thought that the country has been spending too much on welfare that had occurred by 2000, has not continued, and the percentage saying too little has increase no more than a couple percentage points into 2008 (Table 15). However, the percentage responding that too little has been spent on “assistance to the poor” continued to increase (Tables 16-18 and Figure 2), and from 1995 to 2003 the percent of the public acknowledging that “poor people have hard lives because government benefits don’t go far enough” increased from 36 percent in 1995 to the 52-55 percent level in 2003, where it remained into 2008, not increasing further (Table 19-20). With respect to perception of the behavior of the poor, opinion has remained split with no decline in perception of their laziness or lack of effort (Tables 22, 23, 24). There was some increase in acknowledgment that the homeless are “victims of circumstances” (Table 25). From 1994 to 2008 there was a 10 point decline in perceptions (in the 6-7 categories in Table 26) that blacks tend to be poor, and a 7 point decline in perceptions that they are lazy (Table 27).

Further, there was a sustained increase from 1994 to 2008, as measured on the 7-point scale in Table 28, that government should reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, from 23 percent to 32 percent in the first two categories; and an increase from 26 percent in 2004 to 33 in 2008 in the percentage who thought the “government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans (first two categories, Table 29). There was a similar modest change in reference to the unemployed from 1996 to 2006, which returned opinion to its 1990 level (Table 33). Public support continued to remain high for the government creating jobs (Table 34), though there was no clear change in opinion that it was the government’s responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one” (Table 36). And from 2008 to 2009 there was an increase from 56 percent to 62 percent in those thinking that “Putting more money in the hands of the poor” “would help fix the country’s economic problems” (Table 35). Note that this question is framed in terms of dealing with the stagnant economy generally, not aiding the poor, reflecting how the standards and rhetoric used in evaluating anti-poverty policies may have had to change in order to generate support (cf. Mark A. Smith, 2007, regarding issue framing and rhetoric on economic-related issues).

The Economy, Race, and Partisan Polarization

How welfare reform might have changed public opinion does not only hinge on aggregate public opinion trends and the visibility of welfare as a political issue that affects the political fortunes of parties and candidates. It also has to do with what has influenced these opinions and what might catalyze these opinions in the future and make

them more politically important. Two prominent influences, or likely influences, on welfare opinions in the past have been the economy and race. These were examined prominently by Gilens (1999). Racism and race-related issues, emphasized by the way the media cover, frame, and portray welfare issues and welfare recipients were central in his analysis of *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. In addition, aggregate support for welfare and antipoverty spending was related to changes in the economy, with the public more predisposed to support welfare spending when the economic conditions worsened. Shaw and Shapiro's (2002), as noted above, observed that after 1996 opinions toward welfare became less hostile during a period of economic growth and a noticeable increase in prosperity, which suggested that welfare reform may have changed this particular opinion dynamic. This was clearly something that needed to be examined more fully as time passed, to see if this was part of a break from the past. In the additional time that has elapsed, with more data available, when the NORC-GSS welfare spending responses are correlated with changes in GDP from 1973 to 2008, the general expected relationship seems to hold for the entire time period and for before and after 1996, though the number of time points analyzed becomes small and the results less reliable. Changes in GDP are correlated at close to .4 with the percentage responding "too little" and just over .3 for percentage "too much." So there is no evidence that the connection between opinion toward welfare and the state of the economy has changed.

With respect to racial resentment that welfare evokes, as the argument goes, Soss and Schram (2007), had found no change in the statistical connection between racial attitudes and opinion toward welfare. A preliminary analysis of the extent to which the correlations between responses to the NORC-GSS and NES questions on racial attitudes

and opinions and opinions toward welfare related issues have changed over time, including data for 2006 and 2008 that were not available to Soss and Schram, suggests that these simple correlations have not changed much, if at all, and not in any systematic way that stands out. Thus, along its underlying racial attitudes' dimension, welfare opinions have not become more inflamed—thus any further movement in that direction has stopped. On the other hand, it has not been reversed and remains a potentially live aspect of underling public attitudes concerning these policy areas.

There is evidence, however, for one ongoing dynamic at work that Soss and Schram did not examine and that is consistent with a continuing race-welfare connection involves a different phenomenon. Schneider and Jacoby (2005) picked up on this somewhat in their analysis of elite debate and public opinion toward welfare spending in the 1990s. The connection between racial and welfare attitudes may be less important causally but, rather, it may be part of a process of partisan polarization that has been occurring since the 1970s and remains quite apparent in the GSS, NES, and a wide range of other public opinion trend data. The basic story is that the parties at the elite level and increasingly and strikingly at the mass level have become more ideologically coherent and homogeneous than they were prior to the 1970s. The driving issue, of course, was race and civil rights as described above (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). The United States a now a country of “new partisan voters” (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009) consisting of Democrats who more consistently than in the past take liberal positions on economic, socio-cultural values, racial issue, and most recently foreign policy issues. The Democratic party no longer has a conservative and anti-civil rights Southern wing; and moderate, let alone liberal, Republicans have become fewer and fewer in number. There

is a growing research literature that has examined and tracked this dynamic that has penetrated into the mass public from its greater centrality and visibility at the leadership levels (see Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998, 2005; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Carsey and Layman, 2006; Fiorina and Abrams, 2009; Fiorina et al., 2006; Heatherington, 2001, 2009; Heatherington and Weiler, 2009; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Jacobson, 2008; Layman and Carsey, 2002a 2002b; Layman et al., 2006; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Snyder et al., 2009).

Figures 3 to 10, taken from Bafumi and Shapiro (2009), show how this has played out for attitudes toward economic welfare, abortion, gay rights, and racial issues. Partisan differences among the public, as well as differences between self-identifies liberals versus conservatives (not shown) on all these issues have remained substantial and in many cases have increases over the long term. Table 38, taken from Snyder, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, reports estimates of the short-term dynamics from 2000-2004 at the individual level based on panel data: for the issues shown covering many policy areas, there was more support for the hypothesis that partisanship led to changes in individuals' opinion than the reverse effect.

Thus in looking at ongoing politics, public opinion, and policy making, the big story in American politics is partisan and ideological conflict across the full spectrum of policy issues. Any softening of public opinion toward welfare has been overshadowed by broader political and ideological debates. The issue of welfare, given its low level salience compared to other policy areas that are more pressing, has at most been a sideshow – one that has not (of yet) become prominent in politics and in the public mind.



Discussion

Current signs are that welfare as we knew it is gone, both in the actual form of policy in which AFDC/TANF caseloads dropped enormously after 1996 and in the way states have experimented and struggled to augment, if at all, what is provided by the federal block grants. The number of food stamp/SNAP recipients has grown in a way that has not led to new visible political disagreements and conflicts over welfare as we now know it. Further, the implementation of the welfare reforms and ongoing policymaking have emphasized employment requirements and problem-solving, and have ostensibly been less embroiled in partisan, ideological, and racial issue controversies (Mead, 2009).

Welfare as an issue and label is far from gone or forgotten. It has appeared visibly in a few news headlines: The front page of the June 22, 2009, *Wall Street Journal* read, “Numbers of Welfare See Sharp Increase.” A front page story of the May 10, 2009, *New York Times* that discussed the “expanded welfare rolls” had the continuation headline (on page 20) of, “For Victims of Recession, Patchwork State Aid With Uneven Benefits.” Because of the recession and dramatic decline in *jobs*, in conjunction with the long-term drop in AFDC/TANF rolls (which are only now rising), it is difficult to find in the press much coverage of “welfare” as we knew it, let alone the kind of hostile criticisms of the welfare system and of people on welfare that occurred in the past. There are, of course plenty of other rancorous partisan and ideological debates -- but on other major national issues.

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When “welfare” has been mentioned in a pejorative way, it has seemed to fall flat, with little response, and not reflecting well on those who raised the issue. When “Tea Party” leader Mark Williams appeared on *Anderson Cooper 360 on* September 14, 2009, Cooper asked Williams if he really believed what he said on his blog when he called President Obama “an Indonesian Muslim turned welfare thug and racist in chief.” Many months earlier, presidential candidate John McCain arguably made a racial appeal, triggering no further apparent outcry, when he said in October 2008:

“Senator Obama claims that he wants to give a tax break to the middle class, but not only did he vote for higher taxes for the middle class in the Senate, his plan gives away your tax dollars to those who don’t pay taxes. That’s not a tax cut; that’s welfare.”

Might such anti-welfare claims start receiving old resonance? There are two issue areas where this has had, and will very likely continue to have, some relevance. One suggests a consequence of welfare reform that has not been considered, and it harkens back to one of the Clinton administration’s policy strategies. Bill Clinton had to decide whether to tackle his promise of welfare reform *before* or *after* health care. His administration thought it needed to take care of health care first, to firm up that part of the safety net which would in turn affect other social welfare assistance needs. After health care reform failed and its political repercussions occurred, one (of many) criticisms was that Clinton should have dealt with welfare reform *first* (cf. Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). In 2009, with welfare reform long out of the way, the Obama administration did not have that issue to deal with. Moreover, the administration was in a position to propose a new subsidy program to enable people buy health insurance which could not be framed by

opponents as an add-on to the kinds of tainted welfare payments of the past. This was one less potentially damaging criticism for Obama to deal with.

In contrast, where images of welfare, so to speak, can have great relevance is immigration policy. Immigration has become a highly charged issue, mitigated only by conflicts on this issue *within* each of the two major parties, so that this issue has not distinguished the parties as fully as other issues, like those shown in Figures 3 to 10. Public opinion has move with starts and stop in an anti-immigrant direction (see Lapinsky et al. 1997). Immigration came up visibly in the health care form debate, regarding whether immigrants themselves (whether legal or illegal) would be eligible for any new national health care benefits. This has been and could be still a divisive welfare issue. According to past Gallup and Princeton Survey Research Associate/*Times Mirror* polls, the American public has long preferred that new arrivals to states and localities be excluded from welfare payments: (based on different question workings) 68 percent said this in 1939, 82 percent in 1961, 73 percent in 1965, and 69 percent in 1994 (Page and Shapiro, 1992, p. 125; Bowman, 2003, p.4). Given the conflict over immigration and debate over whether immigrants should be eligible for government assistance, it is possible that public attitude toward immigration and welfare spending might be increasingly related. What do the data show? The correlations between immigration-related and welfare opinion measures in the GSS and NES surveys that have been asked in 2008 and earlier years, have been weak ,and they have not changed noticeably over time—at least yet. These relationships should be examined and tracked further.



The plight of the poor during a deep recession should be of major national concern (at this writing in October 2009). It was fortuitous that the availability of jobs during good economic times coincided with the 1996 welfare reforms. This enabled TANF recipients to fulfill work requirements and to allow people to leave and stay off the welfare rolls. In 2009 the public's attention has focused on the overall loss of jobs nationally and the state of the economy affecting everyone—beyond the poor, in particular, whose ongoing problems are compounded. While there are no polling data to speak to this yet, it is not likely that any proposals to return to a more generous national welfare policy in the upcoming TANF reauthorization would receive enormous support. They might at best be less punitive, taking into account the difficulty in finding any required employment. Any seemingly liberal proposals might well raise the decibel level of the debate over jobs, in which there is disagreement on the means to create them, while not the ends. Democrats leaders, implicitly if not explicitly, have seen the political advantages of the end of welfare; they are left with dealing with issues of poverty and inequality in other ways—through the parts of the American welfare state that still have substantial support (see McCall and Kenworthy, 2009; Page and Jacobs 2009). Even these are difficult enough to expand and to obtain public support for -- as the 1993 and current 2009 attempts at health care reform have shown.



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