

Public Opinion Polls and Public Policy: Why Policy Details Matter

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Most conservatives believe the 1996 welfare reform, particularly the creation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant has been a success and is a model for reforming other safety net programs. In particular, Speaker Ryan himself has often pointed to TANF's work requirement as the key to this putative "success":

[The 1996 welfare reform law] is the crown jewel and the centerpiece of some of the most successful social policy legislation we've passed. It lowered child poverty rates, it moved people from welfare to work – because of these work requirements.²

The idea that TANF created a "work requirement" and "fixed" a welfare program is, by any objective analysis, wrong. While the law sent a symbolic message about the importance of work requirements and time limits, in practice, neither of these elements have been implemented in the way Congress intended. In fact, TANF is not "welfare reform" at all, but a flexible funding stream that has failed to provide an adequate safety net or an effective welfare-to-work program. In many states, it has become a slush fund used to supplant state spending and fill budget holes.

TANF's work requirements are one of the most notable examples of misguided conservative policymaking – they are unreasonable, dysfunctional, and are not about work. Their main function has been to impose barriers and cut caseloads through a process known as "bureaucratic disentanglement." Even with sharply reduced caseloads, states have resorted to gimmicks to satisfy federal work rate targets that themselves are unreasonable. Such gimmickry does nothing to help the poor get connected to work opportunities. (For a detailed discussion of how these requirements have failed, see "TANF Work Requirements: An Epic Fail" in *TANF is Broken! It's Time to Reform "Welfare Reform."*³)

Public Opinion and Work Requirements

Conservatives often cite public opinion polls to suggest that their proposals to expand work requirements for welfare programs would enjoy public support. For example, the "Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility" report recently released by Speaker Ryan as part of a series of reports under the rubric of *A Better Way* had the following statement:

According to a November 2015 poll, 89 percent of Americans agree that work-capable adults who receive welfare assistance from the government should be required to work or prepare for work in exchange for receiving benefits.⁴

Unfortunately, the report offered no policy details describing how Congress would expand the scope of welfare work requirements. Yet, the effectiveness of work requirements in achieving policy objectives, like reducing welfare dependency *and* poverty, depends greatly on the details.

When it comes to welfare reform, and work requirements in particular, conservatives have thus far been unable to translate their ideas into effective policies, notwithstanding public opinion.

While *A Better Way* lacks policy details, Representative Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) have introduced legislation with specific details. Rachel Sheffield of The Heritage Foundation suggests that this legislation may “restart welfare reform.”⁵ She too cites public opinion:

The vast majority of Americans (89 percent) hold that able-bodied adults receiving means-tested welfare assistance should work or prepare for work. The support for work requirements is equally strong on both sides of the political aisle: 87 percent of Democrats and 94 percent of Republicans support the idea that able-bodied individuals receiving government aid should work or prepare for work as a condition of receiving that aid.⁶

Like most Americans, I also support work requirements, but the problem with using a simple survey question to judge public policy is that details matter. If the public understood how TANF’s work requirements or those in “Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act” work in practice, they might have a different opinion. For example, the degree of support would undoubtedly fall if the questions were asked as follows:

- Do you support work requirements that require a single mother with an infant to participate 130 hours per month in exchange for a cash benefit of as little as \$140?
- Do you support work requirements that would require a single mother caring for a severely disabled child to participate in work activities for 100 to 130 hours per month – and then take away her entire cash and SNAP benefits if she can’t comply because her child has a medical emergency?
- Do you support work requirements that require a disabled parent to participate in work activities for 130 hours per month so she can receive cash benefits for her children?

These are all possibilities under the “Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act.” Or, a survey might ask questions about the competency and administrative feasibility of work requirements.

- Do you support work requirements that are unattainable, that cause states to fail year after year? (This is the case under TANF in Speaker Ryan’s home state of Wisconsin.)
- Do you support work requirements that have a seemingly stringent work rate requirement, but also have a host of loopholes that allow states to meet them without actually engaging families? (This is TANF’s current work requirement.)
- Do you think it makes sense for the government to impose three sets of work requirements for the same population, with different rules on who is counted, which activities count, how many hours of participation are needed to count, penalties for individuals who do not comply, and penalties for states that fail to meet their work requirements? (This is what the “Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act” would do.)
- Do you think it is fair to impose a penalty on a state that just misses its work participation rate target that is many times greater than what it actually spends on cash welfare? (This is what could easily happen under the “Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act’s”

work requirement for TANF because the penalty is based on the federal block grant amount, rather than the amount spent on cash assistance, and is based on a 100 percent standard rather than the degree of shortfall. For example, when the target rate is 50 percent, if a state achieves a work rate of 49 percent, its penalty would be 51 percent of the TANF block grant.)

Yes, Americans support work requirements, but most would want such requirements to be realistic, reasonable, and about connecting poor families to work. That's not what TANF's requirements are about, and that is most certainly not what the "Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act" is about. Both are the epitome of dysfunctional conservatism.

Conclusion

There is a big difference between finding out what the American public believes, in general, and writing effective legislation to put those ideals into effect. And, polls can be used in a variety of ways. A recent Gallup poll suggests that only 18 percent of adults approve of the way Congress is doing its job.⁷ I too have concerns about the ability of Congress to write effective legislation in this area and that is why "Peter the Citizen" writes papers in the hope that common-sense welfare reform will prevail.

¹ The views in this document reflect my own as a citizen and do not reflect the views of any organization I am now or have ever been affiliated with. By way of background, I consider myself a conservative and have worked on welfare issues for the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the White House under both President Reagan and President George H.W. Bush. This paper assumes the reader has a basic understanding of the TANF program, but for those readers who want more context and background, see Peter Germanis, *TANF is Broken! It's Time to Reform "Welfare Reform" (And Fix the Problems, Not Treat their Symptoms)*, July 25, 2015 draft, available at: <https://petergermanis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TANF-is-Broken.072515.pdf>.

² Cited in Rob Bluey, "Paul Ryan: HHS Welfare Work Waiver Will Undermine 1996 Reforms," *The Daily Signal*, September 13, 2012, available at: <http://dailysignal.com/2012/09/13/paul-ryan-hhs-welfare-work-waiver-will-undermine-1996-reforms/>.

³ Peter Germanis, *TANF is Broken! It's Time to Reform "Welfare Reform" (And Fix the Problems, Not Treat their Symptoms)*, July 25, 2015 draft, available at: <https://petergermanis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TANF-is-Broken.072515.pdf>.

⁴ "Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility," in *A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America*, June 7, 2016, available at: <http://abetterway.speaker.gov/assets/pdf/ABetterWay-Poverty-PolicyPaper.pdf>.

⁵ Rachel Sheffield, "Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act Can Restart Welfare Reform," The Heritage Foundation, October 28, 2016, available at: http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/10/welfare-reform-and-upward-mobility-act-can-restart-welfare-reform#_ftn12.

⁶ Rachel Sheffield, "Welfare Reform and Upward Mobility Act Can Restart Welfare Reform," The Heritage Foundation, October 28, 2016, available at: http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/10/welfare-reform-and-upward-mobility-act-can-restart-welfare-reform#_ftn12.

⁷ Gallup, "Ahead of Elections, U.S. Congress Approval at 18%," October 12, 2016, available at: http://www.gallup.com/poll/196268/ahead-elections-congress-approval.aspx?g_source=Congress&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles.