

Welfare reform as a failed political strategy: Evidence and explanations for the stability of public opinion

Joe Soss and Sanford F. Schram

Joe Soss is Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an IRP affiliate; Sanford F. Schram is Professor of Social Work and Social Research at Bryn Mawr College.

Public policies are the primary instruments governments use to address social and economic problems. Yet they also serve a second, more political function. Lawmakers are not just problem solvers; they are also political actors who, like good chess players, try to “think two moves ahead” before taking an action that could improve or undermine their strategic position going forward. Thus, as lawmakers try to gauge how a new policy might affect a particular social problem, they also contemplate its potential to mobilize or mollify the opposition, create pressures for further action, appease or outrage the party faithful, redistribute political resources, change the terms of debate, and so on. In the iterative game of politics, it pays to design policies in ways that yield advantages in the next round. As a result, students of poverty policy must analyze the initiatives that governments pursue, not just as efforts to achieve expressed social and economic goals, but also as forms of political action designed to enhance particular actors’ abilities to achieve long-term political goals.

In the decade since federal reform passed in 1996, most research on “the new world of welfare” has focused only on social and economic goals, such as those related to work and self-sufficiency, family and child well-being. Far less attention has been given to the political goals that motivated a significant cadre of reformers. In the 1990s, an influential group of political actors argued that, by reforming welfare and making aid recipients “play by the rules,” the Democratic Party could shed an electoral liability, free poverty politics from the crippling effects of racial resentment, and create a public opinion environment more favorable to antipoverty efforts. In the research summarized here we tested the prediction that policy reform would change the contours of American public opinion.¹ In what follows, we review evidence suggesting that this prediction largely failed and present a general set of theoretical propositions that explain the weak effects.

Welfare reform in the 1990s: The promise of a more generous public

For political liberals in the United States, the 1980s were hard times. The Republican Party controlled the White House and was winning support from traditionally Democratic voters in the white working class and the South. Efforts to cut back social supports instituted in the 1960s and 1970s were gaining steam. “Welfare”—which had once been a benign term applied to all public assistance, social insurance, and employment benefits—now carried a narrower and more pejorative meaning, tied in media coverage and in the public mind to images of lazy and dependent African Americans.² The stigmatized specter of “welfare handouts” seemed to have become a potent symbolic handicap for anti-poverty efforts and Democratic electoral fortunes.

Among liberals, these developments gave rise to intense self-reflection and, eventually, to a reformist impulse that has been labeled “progressive revisionism.” Progressive revisionists argued that Democrats had pursued divisive social policies in the 1960s, favoring the very poor and racial minorities over the white working-class mainstream. These policies, in turn, generated a public backlash against taxes and efforts to help the poor. Policy commitments symbolizing cultural and racial liberalism were now costing the Democrats at the polls and undercutting their more populist (and popular) economic agendas.³

Pronouncements by prominent policy scholars resonated with these political analyses. Some well-known liberal scholars argued that the social policies associated with the War on Poverty had “veered off course,” become mired in “helping conundrums,” and could never build a “bridge over the racial divide.”⁴ Conservative analysts reinforced these assessments with claims that permissive welfare policies had fueled racial stereotypes, bred pathology among the poor, and undercut public support for antipoverty efforts.⁵

To progressive revisionists, these arguments also suggested potential solutions. If the policies of the 1960s had moved public opinion in an unfavorable direction, perhaps Democrats in the 1990s could use policy proposals to signal renewed commitments to personal responsibility

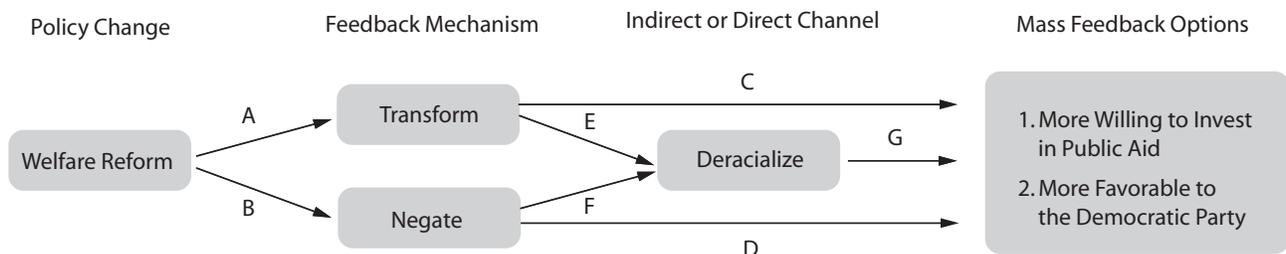


Figure 1. Path diagram of the Progressive Revisionist Thesis.

and the white working class. By ending “permissive” welfare, as conservatives had long sought to do, perhaps liberals could actually shift public opinion in a direction more favorable to liberal goals.

With poverty politics widely viewed as a frustrating and politically costly quagmire, centrists in the Democratic Party urged welfare reform as a strategy to move the public in a progressive direction and realign the image of the Democratic Party on social issues. Embracing this strategy, Bill Clinton made the pledge to “end welfare as we know it” a centerpiece of his 1992 presidential election campaign. Influenced by the arguments David Ellwood advanced in *Poor Support*, Clinton and his aides originally hoped to bargain for stronger social supports as a condition of imposing stronger work requirements and time limits on welfare receipt. After the Republicans captured Congress (and the reform agenda) in 1994, however, a more sequential political strategy emerged: restrictive behavioral rules passed now would make it easier to gain public support for social benefit expansions in the future. Dick Morris, Bruce Reed, and other centrist Clinton advisors argued that “the welfare restrictions—time limits and work requirements—would do more than revamp one discredited program. [They] would help create a political climate more favorable to the needy. Once taxpayers started viewing the poor as workers, not welfare cheats, a more generous era would ensue. Harmful stereotypes would fade. New benefits would flow. Members of minorities, being disproportionately poor, would disproportionately benefit.”⁶ President Clinton signed welfare reform into federal law in August 1996.

In the ensuing years, as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the signature program of welfare reform, came to be viewed as a policy success and public spending shifted from cash aid to work supports, the predictions of progressive revisionists morphed into claims of actual effects—sometimes cited to justify further “New Democrat” strategies. “The results so far have borne out the central New Democrat insight that inspired Clinton’s promise to end welfare: The way to

make U.S. social policy both more effective and more generous is to make it more morally demanding. . . . [Welfare reform is] visibly restoring public confidence in government’s ability to help the poor lift themselves up.”⁷

An analytic approach to the progressive revisionist thesis

We set out to test whether a decade of public opinion evidence supports such claims. To do so, we first translated the revisionist narrative described above into a model with direct, testable linkages. The path diagram in Figure 1 distinguishes between two variants of the progressive revisionist thesis. The first suggests that new policies would *transform* welfare into a program that would affirm majority values and present Americans with an antipoverty program they could support (Path A). By associating the poor with work, refusing to aid those who did not “play by the rules,” and publicly claiming credit for the policy, Democrats would cast themselves and future antipoverty efforts in a more positive light. By contrast, a second variant of the thesis implied that reform would move mass opinion by *negating* welfare—removing it, with all its pejorative meanings and heavy political baggage, from public discourse (Path B). With the distortions and distractions of “welfare” taken off the table, public attention would shift to more positive considerations regarding low-income families. For each variant in the model, there are direct paths for effects (Paths C and D), but there are also indirect paths of influence tied to deracialization of the poverty issue. In the transformative variant, the image of a “handout to lazy blacks” would be neutralized by a program design that clearly required work and responsible behavior (Path E). In the negative variant, removal of the racialized welfare issue would yield a similar outcome (Path F). With race removed from poverty politics, both the poor and the Democratic Party would benefit (Path G).

It is not possible to adequately test these predictions by comparing mass opinion in the final years of AFDC with

opinion after 1996. The heated campaign to reform welfare (1992 to 1996) had sharp but short-lived effects on mass opinion and, hence, would provide a misleading baseline for comparing post-reform opinion⁸ To obtain a more valid assessment, one must compare opinion at its “steady state” under AFDC, prior to 1992, with opinion at its steady state under TANF, after 1997. To do so, we treated the public opinion record as a simple interrupted time series, examining it for pre-post differences after discounting the years from 1992 to 1996. Our analysis relied on a variety of outcome measures rather than basing conclusions on a single measure, and we examined key relationships both with and without control variables.

Our data were drawn from both the General Social Survey (GSS) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). Both surveys are conducted on a biennial basis and offer nationally representative samples based on interviews with adults.

The direct channel of influence

Did work-oriented welfare reform improve public perceptions of welfare recipients, the poor, and welfare policy (Path A in Figure 1)? This prediction receives little support from the survey data. Certainly, a majority of the public expressed satisfaction with the policy: in 2001, about 61 percent of those who knew about welfare reform (about half of all respondents) said it was working well, and nearly two-thirds of these people said that the most important reason was that “the law requires people to go to work.” But expressing satisfaction with the general idea of “reform” is not the same thing as holding an improved view of welfare recipients or welfare policies. A closer look at the survey data suggests stability in Americans’ views of welfare. We find no significant change, for example, in the percentage of Americans who ascribe poverty to lack of effort and in the percentage who believe welfare recipients could do without the benefits they receive. Moreover, just as 64 percent of respondents in a 1989 Gallup Poll thought that “welfare benefits make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor,” 71 percent of respondents in a 2001 Pew Research Center poll thought that “poor people have become too dependent upon public assistance.” Attitudes toward the poor as a whole also remained stable.

By contrast, we do find some evidence that policy reform neutralized welfare as a salient object of public concern (Path B in Figure 1). From 1976 to 1986, between 8 and 12 percent of respondents volunteered “welfare” when asked, “What do you think are the most important problems facing this country?” In the political lull between the Family Support Act of 1988 and Clinton’s pledge to end welfare “as we know it,” this proportion declined. The reform campaign produced a large spike—rising to 26.6 percent in 1996. Thereafter, the importance of welfare declined equally abruptly—down to 4.8 percent in 2000, the most recent year the question was asked.

The ANES series also allows us to determine the proportion of respondents each year who volunteered “welfare” when asked, “Is there anything in particular that you [like/dislike] about the [Democratic/Republican] party?” From 1976 to 1986, “welfare” was named a basis of party evaluation by between 7.3 and 17.7 percent of respondents. The proportion naming welfare spiked as the welfare debate heated up in the early 1990s. But after 1996, welfare rapidly became less important, and in 2004, only 4 percent named it as a basis of party evaluation—even fewer than at the lowest point of concern under AFDC, in 1978.

Did other, more pressing issues, most notably terrorism and the Iraq war, contribute to the erasure of welfare from the public agenda after 2000? There is some evidence that they did. Public concern for a range of other domestic spending issues declined during this same period. Social Security, for example, was a major policy issue throughout this period, yet it faded from public attention in similar fashion. Yet the decline in welfare’s salience after the 1996 reforms was far greater than it had ever been before. Thus we consider these results at least consistent with the negative variant of the progressive revisionist thesis.

These and other similar findings from national polls suggest that welfare faded from the public agenda after 1996, but they offer little evidence that the underlying public images of welfare recipients and the poor shifted in any meaningful way.

The indirect channel of influence: Deracialization

Did welfare reform diminish the impact of race on poverty and welfare politics? The GSS, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center since 1972, includes a variety of measures that can be used to assess this issue. We examined, first, whether questions directed toward white preferences for spending on blacks were related to white preferences for spending on welfare and the poor.⁹ Between 1984 and 1991, whites who opposed efforts to “raise the living standards of blacks” were significantly more likely to oppose efforts to “raise the living standards of the poor.” Likewise, whites who opposed “spending to assist blacks” during this era also opposed “spending to assist the poor,” and whites who opposed efforts to raise living standards for blacks were significantly more likely to oppose welfare spending. We found no evidence that these relationships were weakened to any significant degree by the major changes in welfare policy during the 1990s.

There is further evidence of stability in white attitudes. In every GSS from 1985 to 2004, respondents were asked if they agreed that black-white living standard disparities existed because “most blacks just don’t have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty.” A second measure, available only from 1990 to 2004,

asked respondents to rate “most blacks” on a seven-point scale running from “hard-working” to “lazy.” Neither measure showed a significant change in opinion correlated with the passage of welfare reform.

To analyze the sources of white welfare opposition, we constructed multivariate models that took into account respondents’ socioeconomic status, political affiliations, and core values. In these analyses we found little evidence that stereotypes weakened over these decades. Between 1985 and 1991, whites who believed that “blacks lack motivation” were significantly more likely to oppose welfare spending. The passage of TANF brought about no change in the statistical significance of this relationship. “Assistance to the poor” has historically drawn stronger public support than “welfare” and has been less centrally linked with racial views. We find some ambiguous evidence of weakening of this relationship after 1996. But the significant relationship between white preferences for aid to the poor and the belief that “blacks lack motivation” clearly persisted after welfare reform.

We turn to what is arguably the main prediction of the progressive revisionist thesis. Did the quieting of welfare disputes reduce public resistance to helping the poor?

Public generosity to the poor

The GSS has two items that measure willingness to help the poor: a five-point scale indicating support for the idea that government “should do everything possible to improve the living standard of all poor Americans” and a seven-point scale indicating support for the idea that government should “reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor.” We find that after 1996, opposition to improving the standard of living for poor Americans actually *increased* significantly, as did public opposition to reducing income differences between the rich and the poor. Moreover, when we used multiple regression analyses to test whether these policy preferences became less beholden to people’s views of “welfare” after 1996, we found no reduction in the relationship. To the contrary, regardless of the measure used, Americans who opposed welfare spending were significantly more likely to oppose helping the poor in 1984–1991, and this relationship became slightly *stronger* in the 1998–2004 period. These results proved robust for white respondents alone and for white respondents making below the median income.

In the wake of work-oriented welfare reform, then, the tendency to attribute poverty to lack of effort held steady, feelings toward the poor grew slightly cooler, and welfare retained negative connotations for large segments of the American public. Today, “welfare” remains deeply entwined with the idea of aiding the poor, with images of dependence and laziness, and with images of targeted aid to blacks. Thus, we find no evidence for the major out-

comes sought by progressive revisionists. The “end of welfare as we knew it” did not make Americans more willing to spend on the poor, on blacks, or on welfare, and it was actually followed by a decline in the public’s desire to reduce inequality and raise living standards for the poor. Although “the welfare issue” has become less salient, the basic configuration of public perceptions that existed under AFDC remains in place under TANF.

For space reasons, we will not review here in any detail our findings regarding the question of whether welfare reform drew new identifiers to the Democratic Party. Suffice it to say that welfare opponents remained just as numerous after 1996 as in the AFDC era, and that these individuals became no more likely to identify with the Democratic Party or vote for Democratic candidates. We find no evidence that the Democratic Party benefitted from welfare reform.

Why did welfare reform have such limited effects on mass opinion?

Progressive revisionists were right about many things. In the wake of political and policy changes in the 1960s, a racialized view of welfare emerged as a major contributor to negative views of the Democratic Party. Pre-1996 majorities did indeed want to reform welfare, and post-1996 majorities took a positive view of work-oriented welfare reform. Nonetheless, few of the opinion effects that revisionists predicted actually materialized.

Social welfare policies have, in the past, instigated major changes in mass opinion. New Deal policies, for example, encouraged new public beliefs about government’s responsibility for citizens’ economic well-being and new categories for perceiving and evaluating public policy—a “big bang” of opinion change.¹⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, civil rights policies set in motion major changes in racial attitudes and political values. In light of those changes, the weak opinion effects associated with contemporary welfare reform pose a genuine puzzle for students of American politics and poverty policy. These weak effects invite an effort to explain the conditions under which policy changes should have stronger or weaker effects on public opinion. Is it possible to provide a general explanation for why the progressive revisionist thesis went wrong?

The primary problem, we argue, is that progressive revisionists focused on the *visibility* of welfare for Americans without attending to the fact that this policy had little *proximity* to the lives of most Americans. Regardless of this visibility in public discourse, policies may be distant from citizens’ everyday lives as a result of geography (as with some foreign policies), the patterning of social relations (as with an income-targeted policy in a class-segregated city), or time (as with policy effects that will be felt

personally but only at some remote date). When highly visible policies have proximate, tangible effects on peoples' lives, mass publics will experience them more directly and, hence, will gain greater ability to evaluate them through "individual observation rather than mass response to others' cues."¹¹ By contrast, when highly visible policies exist primarily as distant objects of perception for mass publics, they may elicit rapt attention and powerful emotion, but they will lack concrete presence in most people's lives. In such instances, claims and beliefs about policies cannot easily be tested against experience. As a result, public perceptions will depend more heavily on elite rhetoric, media frames, and widely held cultural beliefs.

Welfare reform, in our view, offers a paradigmatic example of the politics that surround distant-visible policies of this sort. As Jacob Hacker points out, AFDC was "a fiscally tiny program with ... a clientele that never exceeded 6 percent of the population," yet it became "liberalism's symbolic beachhead and conservatives' poster child for everything wrong with American social policy." Details of the AFDC policy design mattered greatly for recipients but very little in most Americans' lives.¹² "Welfare," on the other hand, symbolized to large numbers of Americans a deeply felt sense that government was giving special favors to a group of undeserving others. It evoked an image of easy living on government largesse, in contrast to the experiences of "normal, hard-working Americans."

Based on this "distant-visible" status, we outline four general propositions that explain why welfare reform had limited effects on public opinion.

1. When a policy exists as a potent but distant symbol for mass publics, the details of its material design will seldom anchor public understandings of the policy. Unaffected publics will rarely pay close attention to changing policy realities, and new facts on the ground will rarely force the abandonment of old myths. Before 1996, researchers repeatedly found that public perceptions of welfare had only the loosest relation to the AFDC program's actual features. A 1994 poll, for example, found that most Americans thought that AFDC—which, at its peak, cost less than 5 percent of Social Security—was one of the two largest items in the federal budget.¹³ In the TANF era, evidence suggests that 40 to 50 percent of Americans have never had a clear understanding of *how* welfare provision changed. For example, when asked in 2001 whether welfare had been reformed in any significant way over the past five years, 50 percent of respondents answered either "No" or "Don't Know."¹⁴ Thus, one part of our explanation is that, no matter how visible a policy may be in symbolic terms, changes to its material design will tend to go unnoticed if the policy affects few citizens' lives directly.

2. When policies are highly visible but have few concrete effects on most citizens' lives, they will often be valued less for what they achieve (in fewer people's lives) than for what they affirm (about society as a whole).¹⁵ Policy actions, in such cases, are valued primarily for what they say about who we are, what we stand for, and what we expect of one another. The fact that such actions express majority opinion does not mean that they will change majority opinion. In particular, when a policy action affirms dominant, widely held values by rewarding individuals who live up to them or by punishing individuals who do not comply with them, we should expect the policy to reinforce rather than disrupt existing patterns of mass opinion.

Here, we encounter a major problem in the progressive revisionist argument that a "work attachment" would make welfare recipients appear more deserving. The language of "work attachment" elided a crucial distinction between policies that reward work and policies that compel work as a condition of aid. In the politics that led to welfare reform, "work" was not identified as a prior status indicating the deservingness of recipients; it was cast as a behavioral standard that had been violated. For most Americans, welfare reform was about holding violators of the work ethic *accountable*. This observation helps to explain how revisionists could be right about the popularity of welfare reform but wrong to predict that reform would improve the image of aid recipients. Majorities may like it when legislators pass tough sentencing laws that hold criminals accountable, for example, but such policies rarely lead publics to view criminals in a positive light. Work requirements followed an analogous logic. "Legislation requiring welfare recipients to work engenders the belief that laziness is at the heart of the welfare problem and that jobs are plentiful."¹⁶

3. When a policy is not directly experienced by many in the public, it exists primarily as a symbol. So it is essential to recognize that symbols only *evoke* underlying beliefs; they do not account for their existence. The power of a symbol lies not in itself but rather in what it stands for. (Thus, a shrug of the shoulders may symbolize and convey the idea that "I don't know," but the absence of a shrug does not prevent this idea from being conveyed in other ways.) As long as there is a shared public understanding that two objects signify the same thing, they will suffice as substitutes.¹⁷ Drawing on this insight, we can see that the withdrawal of a distant-visible policy will only yield changes in mass perception if no alternative symbol is deployed as a substitute. Progressive revisionists were wrong to assume that beliefs about welfare could be banished simply by "ending welfare as we know it." Images of the poor as idle and immoral flourished long before the AFDC program, as did the idea that public aid perversely encourages dysfunctional behavior.¹⁸ Negative images of the poor can be, and at times have

been, successfully contested with alternative images and discourses. But they cannot be negated simply by removing any single symbol—even one as potent as “welfare.”

4. The material features of distant-visible policies do have consequences for mass opinion, even if these effects are mediated by the ways policies are portrayed in elite rhetoric, mass media, social conversation, and so on. The crucial point is that mass perceptions of public policies depend upon both a policy’s internal characteristics and its positioning within the larger structure of a policy regime. When policies are directly experienced, people will tend to judge them according to both their internal design characteristics (which they experience) and the contrast between this policy and others (which they observe). As the distance between policy and public grows, however, internal design characteristics fade from view, leaving perception more dependent on the contrast of one policy with another.

In this regard, state institutions and the structures of policy regimes may be quite important. The establishment of “separate departments of government to deal with ... supposedly distinct problems” presents the public with an organizing schema that helps to fix the meanings of particular social problems, social groups, and government activities.¹⁹ The bifurcated structure of the U.S. welfare state, for example, provides an institutional contrast—“Social Security versus Welfare”—that is frequently cited as a basis for public distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving. Public perceptions depend heavily on the symbolic oppositions conveyed by this contrast (contract versus charity, independence versus dependence, white versus black, masculine versus feminine, universal versus particular).²⁰

Thus, it is significant that welfare reform changed the conditions of public aid for the poor but did not displace or reconfigure this basic contrast in American social politics. As a result, welfare reform did not alter the way Americans distinguish the deserving from the undeserving or think about policies for the disadvantaged. Changes to welfare were far less salient to most Americans than the enduring distinction between this *type of program* and the policies that “deserving” Americans receive benefits from. Today, the positive image of Social Security is held in place, not just by its own policy design, but also by the idea that it is “not welfare.” Conversely, although the TANF program has restricted aid to those who “play by the rules,” its meaning remains tied to its contrast with programs that offer “earned, contributory” benefits.

Thus, the case of welfare reform, we believe, does not cast doubt on the idea that policy changes can move public opinion. Rather, it helps to clarify the circumstances under which such changes are likely to occur. It underscores that the categories of a policy regime can

structure public understanding in powerful ways, and that stable institutional contrasts can matter more than changes in the design of even a highly visible policy. When a policy change directly touches only a few citizens’ lives, when it is valued primarily as a symbolic affirmation, when it eliminates one symbolic distraction only to replace it with others, when it leaves salient categories of the regime intact, and when its introduction is framed in ways that reinforce prevailing discourse, we should not be surprised if it fails to shift entrenched public opinion. ■

¹The research summarized in this article is discussed in detail in J. Soss and S. Schram, “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no.1 (March 2007): forthcoming. For a broader introduction to how policies may shape the beliefs and behaviors of citizens, see S. Mettler and J. Soss, “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (March 2004): 55–73.

²M. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); M. Katz and L. Thomas, “The Invention of ‘Welfare’ in America,” *Journal of Policy History* 10 (December 1998): 399–418.

³H. Meyerson, “Wither the Democrats,” *American Prospect Online*, March 1, 1996, accessed May 25, 2006, at <http://www.prospect.org/web/page.wv?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4945>; T. Edsall with M. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

⁴Respectively, T. Skocpol, *The Missing Middle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); D. Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); W. Wilson, *Bridge over the Racial Divide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵L. Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁶J. DeParle and S. Holmes, “A War on Poverty Subtly Linked to Race,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2000, p. A1.

⁷W. Marshall, “After Dependence,” *Blueprint Magazine*, January 22, 2002, accessed April 14, 2006, at http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=250080&kaid=114&subid=143.

⁸S. Schneider and W. Jacoby, “Elite Discourse and American Public Opinion: The Case of Welfare Spending,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 367–79.

⁹In these analyses we controlled for demographic differences over time in age, sex, education, marital status, and family income.

¹⁰F. Piven and R. Cloward, “The American Road to Democratic Socialism,” *Democracy* 3, no. 3 (1982): 58–69; T. Skocpol, “Bury It: Welfare: Where Do We Go From Here?” *The New Republic* 215 no. 7 (1995): 20–21.

¹¹M. Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971): 51–52. The two-way relationship between public policy and mass opinion will proceed according to different logics depending on a policy’s location along these two continua for a particular sector of the public (see, e.g., V. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* [New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964]). Policies are not encountered by “the public,” they are encountered in different ways by different publics, and a policy that is visible and proximate to one may be invisible and distant to another. For clarity, our discussion focuses on how public majorities encounter a given policy.

¹²J. Hacker “After Welfare,” *The New Republic*, October 11, 2004; see also J. Soss, *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹³Hacker, “After Welfare.”

¹⁴National Public Radio, Kaiser, and Harvard poll, 2001; see also R. Weaver, *Ending Welfare as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 338.

¹⁵J. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

¹⁶M. Edelman, *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), p. 149.

¹⁷M. Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

¹⁸See, e.g., L. Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: Free Press, 1994); M. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1989).

¹⁹Edelman, *Political Language*, p. 26

²⁰Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*; A. Schneider and H. Ingram, *Policy Design for Democracy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997); S. Schram, *Words of Welfare: The Poverty of Social Science and the Social Science of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).