



20 years after welfare reform, can we do it again?

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August 22, 2016

Monday marks the 20th anniversary of the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law. This landmark event brought to an end the old cash assistance program in favor of the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program which, for the first time, imposed work requirements on some cash welfare recipients. The achievement was only possible through the joint efforts of a Republican Congress led by Newt Gingrich and a Democratic president, Bill Clinton — a legislative history that seems both mythical and little short of miraculous in the hyper-polarized political context we live in today.

The question of welfare reform's success is still hotly debated. Leaving that aside, though, another question weighs heavily: Is there any hope that we could do it again? Can the remaining mishmash of low-performing welfare programs be repaired in the coming years, even in spite of the dysfunctional, hyper-partisan mess that is D.C. politics these days?

Any further reform in this area should draw from the lessons of the 1990s. Welfare reform then wisely transferred decision-making power from the federal government to the states and emphasized work requirements for recipients. Future reform efforts should aim to do this for the 80 federal welfare programs not impacted by the '96 reform. And unlike the '96 reform, future efforts must shift more responsibility from government to civil society, which is better equipped to understand the poor's needs and provide personalized attention to program beneficiaries.

Is any of this possible? If the American public has anything to say about it, then yes.

A recent LA Times / AEI poll provides us evidence: American attitudes towards poverty and welfare haven't changed much since the era of Gingrich and Clinton.

For instance, almost two-thirds of Americans believe that the U.S. government does not bear the greatest responsibility for caring for the poor. Who does, then? Americans cite various forms of civil society: family, churches, and charity each were mentioned at 10-15 percent apiece, and a little less than 20 percent of respondents described the poor as themselves being responsible.

Americans are also deeply skeptical about the efficacy of welfare programs. A whopping 40 percent of poor Americans surveyed describe the government's anti-poverty programs as "making things worse," and 12 percent describe the government's anti-poverty programs as

having "no impact." So to those government administrators who are forever looking to expand existing programs: More than half of the poor don't think your existing programs are helping.

Americans who live above the federal poverty line and have a weaker understanding of the on-the-ground impacts of government anti-poverty programs are more likely to be optimistic about the effects of welfare, with only 32 percent describing such programs as having "made things worse."

Perhaps most telling, skepticism around government's ability to design effective anti-poverty programs remains strong: a full 7 in 10 respondents believe that even if the government was provided with unlimited money to solve poverty they wouldn't be able to do it because "officials do not know enough to accomplish that goal."

So, although welfare advocacy groups would paint a different picture, the American public sees through the hype. If we can find leaders who listen, both to the individuals who are impacted by poverty programs, as well as the American tax-payers who pick up the tab, we are likely to have great success in achieving future federal welfare reform on par with that of '96.

If the 2016 campaign is any indication, it seems that finding that type of leadership will be the real test.

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