



Liberals Unlikely to Keep Election-Year Promises on Welfare

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As many may have seen, this week the Cato Institute published their 13th biennial report on fiscal policy of US governors, grading their taxing and spending records on an academic scale. Scoring highest in the report with an A grading was Maine Gov. Paul LePage, making him the most fiscally responsible governor in the country.

LePage was one of just five governors in the nation to receive the highest possible mark in the report.

The report “examines state budget actions since 2014... Governors who have cut taxes and spending the most receive the highest grades, while those who have increased taxes and spending the most receive the lowest grades,” according to the Cato Institute.

While on average state governments have grown 33 percent since 2010, LePage managed to cut state government employment by nine percent.

The Cato report reads: “Governor Paul LePage has been a staunch fiscal conservative. He has held down general fund spending in recent years, and he has cut state government employment 9 percent since he took office. LePage has signed into law cost-cutting reforms to welfare and health programs, and he has decried the negative effects of big government...”

At the forefront of Gov. LePage’s fiscal policy has been welfare reform, battling time and again with Democrats to ensure every last taxpayer dollar is spent responsibly. Over his tenure as governor, LePage has skirmished frequently with liberal lawmakers who have accused him of using the state’s poor as a scapegoat, but his position on commonsense welfare reform is one supported by most Mainers.

So, after realizing they were out of step with voters, Maine Democrats decided to change their tune in March of this year when they unveiled a plan for welfare reform that would help fix a “broken” system.

“We know that Maine’s welfare system is broken. It’s not working for taxpayers and its successes in helping people get out of poverty are too few and far between,” House Speaker Mark Eves (D-North Berwick) said in March.

Or, in other words, exactly what conservatives have been saying for years. Many of the reforms suggested and approved this year by Maine liberals were proposed by LePage and other conservative lawmakers in the past, but never had bipartisan support for passage until 2016.

Tell me that’s not election-year politics.

But unfortunately for liberals, regardless of what happens in November, Maine still has two more years under Gov. LePage’s leadership ahead.

Surely the 2016 reforms aren’t the be-all end-all solution. Building off of the most recent Democrat-endorsed reforms, there are additional steps Maine can take to curb unethical welfare spending. Those actions include implementing existing refinements of Maine’s welfare system and expanding reforms to further eliminate waste and enforce responsible spending.

According to a Maine Department of Health and Human Services official, of the \$30 million a year the state and federal government provides to recipients of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in Maine, only one-third of that total is spent in point-of-sale transactions. The other \$20 million is taken by cash withdrawals, meaning two-thirds of EBT spending in our state is essentially untraceable.

The first step is already underway, which is implementing most recent reforms. Maine started this process last week when a legislative working group met to create a system for retailers that automatically blocks the purchase of prohibited items like alcohol, tobacco, pornography, lottery and other gambling, tattoos, firearms and ammunition with EBT funds.

Roughly \$6.3 million of point-of-sale transactions are done at Hannaford, Walmart or Shaw’s, making it essential the state and retailers establish a system quickly that blocks illegal purchases with EBT funds to collaboratively enforce laws already on the books.

Ideal additional reforms include regulating the number of cash withdrawals available to TANF recipients each year, or the amount of cash that can be withdrawn by recipients annually. Limiting EBT card use to point-of-sale transactions would also ensure every dollar is accounted for, and that existing laws are being followed.

While it is always an uphill battle to cut spending and reduce the size and scope of government, Gov. LePage has proven it can be done. As the Cato report shows, nobody is better than him at limiting general fund and entitlement spending, or cutting taxes.

Now that his traditional political adversaries have admitted to seeing the light, perhaps Gov. LePage and his administration can finish the job they started in 2011 by holding Maine liberals to their election-year promise, further enacting welfare reform at the benefit of all Maine taxpayers.