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Welfare Reform: A Look into Convenience Politics

Welfare, from its inception, has always been a contentious and controversial landmark of American policy. Starting from the Great Depression, the economic downturn and devastation of the well-being of America's working population led to the establishment of a safety net, welfare, which would decrease the instances of extreme poverty and increase social mobility. However, the persistence of poverty led to lawmakers in the 1960s to expand public assistance to the less fortunate in a series of legislation known as the Great Society. Unfortunately, the idea of redistributing wealth through taxes proved unpopular due to unfair perceptions of laziness among welfare recipients as well as stereotypes of African Americans receiving a disproportionate amount of aid. Although lawmakers were at first passionate about alleviating poverty through the government's helping hand, they soon distanced themselves from the social programs as the payrolls increased and the public's discontent grew. The growing idea of the "prevalent notion that welfare is a largely 'black program'" and that its recipients are "bereft of 'personal responsibility'" led to politicians to advance an unjust crusade to reform welfare by simply cutting out crucial aid to those who truly need it (Schram 196). The negative sweeping generalization of social welfare in America was not only a result of economic instability and lingering racial divides but also a product of successful campaign approaches that ultimately degraded the lives of those who temporarily needed assistance.

During the tumultuous financial decades of the Sixties and Seventies, government initiatives such as Ford's largely unsuccessful Whip Inflation Now program delegitimized many

of U.S government efforts to adjust poverty levels and “anti-inflation proposals, such as the 5 percent surtax and fiscal and monetary restraint” (Mieczkowski 134). The rapid boom and bust financial cycles of the 1970s caused a waver in overall public trust in government capabilities because “inflation and unemployment climbed irregularly to unprecedented heights. Recessions were frequent and deep” (Barbera 5). Owing to all the uncertainty and turmoil of the Sixties and Seventies, the American people were looking for stability and trust in the financial system by looking for elements to purge within the old system, and Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan was able to do just that. Politicians were able to utilize negative stereotypes and generalizations to turn discontent into tangible votes. Welfare was already extremely unpopular and “Americans were suspicious of welfare because they feared that it sapped the able-bodied of their desire to raise themselves up” (Edin and Shaefer 15). In 1992, Bill Clinton’s commitment “to end welfare” stoked the passion of voters who were convinced that welfare only induced a cycle of poverty and the rhetoric ultimately “kept him in the race” (Edin and Shaefer 21). Frustrations with a costly system resonated with voters, and politicians seized the opportunity to promise on reducing the supposed malicious nature of dependency that welfare brought to less fortunate Americans. When the Republicans swept into Congress in 1994, their list of reforms detailed in the Contract with America fundamentally reversed the previous trend of the “expansion of government” into “transformation of the responsibility for government in the United States away from the central government and back to state and local governments or to the private sector, to families and individuals” (Gayner). In short, many of the federally approved programs for establishing a safety net to America’s poor would be diverted to the whim of individual states as block grants, funds which can be more loosely spent by state officials. Because of the sudden gridlock that President Clinton faced in Congress due to partisan divides,

Clinton strived to distance himself from traditional Democrats in order to win reelection and approved of a plan, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which would in actuality “do little to protect children from deep poverty” (Trisi). President Clinton indeed won his reelection, but “there was evidence of higher rates of family homelessness nationally” in the aftermath of TANF (Edin and Shaefer 31). The transformation of the role of social programs regarding poverty from a valid policy concern to a tool for attracting votes epitomizes the obstacle generated by convenience politics. Because welfare is such a controversial policy, lawmakers avoid facing the task of reforming key legislation to actively combat the modern issues of America’s \$2 a day poor in order to keep their elected positions. In this way, the convenience of ignoring the extreme poverty of an often hidden sector of society cripples the ability for the nation to act upon such a serious issue.

It is wishful thinking to believe that welfare will never be taken with intent of unfair advantage, but if “most families used welfare as a temporary hand up during a crisis” the measures that politicians created to restrict relief fail to recognize the benefits of public assistance (Edin and Shaefer 18). The truth for many lower income families is that “it is typically the opportunity to work that is lacking” instead of outright laziness. The main goal for these families is a happy environment for their loved ones, so barely scraping by with TANF or food stamps is not the end game for these people. A mere helping hand through hard times is what the majority of families strive for when utilizing public assistance, but the narrative painted by lawmakers visualizes a life of dependency. Although negative stereotypes of welfare recipients are usually untrue, “the notion of the welfare queen had taken on the status of common knowledge” (Gilliam). By manipulating the emotions of the people, legislators directed antipathy towards an inconvenient but necessary program that would empower countless families to break

cycles of poverty. But the actions of lawmakers in eliminating crucial parts of public assistance, “even [to] those in obvious need”, to the point that welfare is inaccessible and “a waste of time” to obtain is clearly not the answer to extreme poverty (Edin and Shaefer 33,7). Perhaps the removal of “welfare as we know it” was the easiest solution to reforming a highly unpopular program, but it was not the most efficient way to improve American lives. The lack of consideration on the part of lawmakers to the crippling poverty that too many Americans face every day in favor of a convenient soundbite to improve the standing of their own campaigns markedly contrasts the role politicians should play as dedicated public servants.

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