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When Does Public Opinion Matter?

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The landmark 1996 reform to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) provides an opportunity to study processes of welfare reform in the United States. A potential factor behind the transformation of AFDC is public opinion, possibly in the form of changes in attitudes among politically relevant groups. This study will evaluate this thesis, focusing on attitudinal changes between partisan identifiers. Most data suggest the American public may have been critical of welfare programs prior to the 1996 reform. However, the extent of these criticisms generally varies depending on who is asked, how questions are worded and the type of program. Using General Social Survey (GSS) data, I analyze trends in public opinion among political identifiers and evaluate the process through which the 1996 reform was enacted.

Keywords: AFDC, partisan politics, policy change, public opinion, welfare reform

One of the most sweeping changes to U.S. welfare policy in recent decades was enacted in 1996; just four years after then president Bill Clinton vowed to “end welfare as we know it.” The changes made to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) are particularly relevant to sociologists; most notably because AFDC is the main form of family services and benefits provided by the government in the United States and had been one of the most important cornerstones in the American welfare state since the 1930s. While much has been written about the consequences of welfare reform, little attention has
been given to the role public opinion and partisan preferences may have played in bringing about these changes.

The passage of the 1996 reform was remarkable because other attempts at legislation to reform the welfare system had previously failed to pass through Congress or win support of the President. The 1993 Health Security Bill exemplifies an attempt at change that stalled in the face of opposition by congressional officials and the public. Yet the 1996 Welfare Reform legislation appeared to garner support from both major political parties (Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995). While each party had different objectives in passing the legislation, they seemed to agree that AFDC needed to change. On one side, the Republicans pushed for changes in the way AFDC was implemented, specifically contending that welfare should be administered at the state level, while also attempting to minimize out-of-wedlock births, which Republicans saw as the cause of individual reliance on AFDC. Many Republicans also wanted to see changes in the “incentive system” that was believed to have been in place within AFDC (Weaver, Shapiro & Jacobs, 1995). Specifically, many Republicans advocated that work requirements and caps be placed on the amount of funds that each family could receive regardless of the number of children. On the other side of the aisle, Democrats argued that more should be done to promote childcare services and to provide jobs to impoverished people. In the end, both Democrats and Republicans agreed to change AFDC in such a way as to decrease overall benefits, add family caps, create limits on the time in which individuals could receive assistance, and to implement a work requirement policy.

It could be argued that the bipartisan efforts to overhaul what previously had been an expanding welfare system, and the drastic cuts that were implemented, should have been met with some degree of public resistance (Pierson, 1996). Indeed, public opinion data at the time suggested most citizens favored the existence of many of the existing social provision programs (Cook & Barrett, 1992; Shapiro & Young, 1989; Kluegel, 1987) and believed the government should help citizens in time of need. Numerous public opinion polls have illustrated that Americans support programs that provide basic services to needy children and the elderly (Gilens, 1999; Page & Shapiro, 1992). Gilens (1999) for example, finds strong support
for programs that target services for the elderly and provide education services to children. Thus, when welfare programs are called into question, elected officials may be required to “pursue unpopular policies that must withstand the scrutiny of both voters and well-entrenched networks of interest groups” (Pierson, 1996, p. 144). This suggests elected officials must balance their desire to implement program cuts against their interest in preserving their jobs. As such, elected officials have no choice but to consider how proposed changes to social provision programs might negatively affect their political careers.

Given bipartisan effort to change welfare and also the seeming lack of political backlash, previous research and new theorizing regarding public opinion may usefully be applied to this instance of policy change. For example, previous scholarship suggests that the public should respond negatively to the notion of cutting social provisions. However, if this is not the case there may be some exceptions to when and how political officials receive signals that indicate the public’s approval or disapproval regarding cutting social provision programs. Here, I consider how partisanship and public opinion may signal which programs are most vulnerable to change.

If reforms are proposed by political officials that would likely result in Americans losing benefits, it would seem that they must be presented at a time when the public is most likely to be amenable to change. Accordingly, it is important to consider the temporal context in which policy reforms are presented. In the case of the 1996 reform to AFDC, two historical markers likely paved the way for legislative change. (See Weaver (2000) for a comprehensive analysis of the political climate surrounding welfare legislation.) First, the passage of the Family Support Act of 1988, which unlike the failed efforts of the Nixon and Carter administrations, resulted in new legislation that focused on moving welfare recipients into the workforce. Second was the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, which provided the Congressional votes needed to enact change. Buttressed alongside these historical markers were changes in the political mood of Americans regarding welfare. In other words, the President and Congress may have finally decided to make significant changes to AFDC because of the notable shifts in preferences among “median voters” (Downs, 1957). Moreover, the public’s dissatisfaction with the status
quo may have grown to such a level that elected officials felt compelled to respond or at least be given the nod of approval from the public to proceed.¹

By taking a more nuanced approach and incorporating theories about partisan preferences, we can more thoroughly analyze the relationship between public opinion and social policy. While overall shifts in public opinion tell us something about democratic theory and government response, they alone do not provide the depth of detail that an investigation of partisan shifts would. It may be that growing animosity toward welfare resulted in Democrats and Republicans converging in favor of welfare reform. Yet it is also possible the Democratic Party attempted to reach out to Republican voters by cutting welfare. This would suggest that even amidst a growing divergence in partisan support for welfare reform, the desire to garner support from swing voters outweighed the potential consequences of slashing welfare provisions. In this paper, through analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) data on Americans' attitudes toward social service provisions from 1973 to 2002, I evaluate different theories and hypotheses of social policy change.

Theoretical Background

Generally speaking, Americans favor the idea of a welfare state. However, it is commonly understood that most Americans do not like the term “welfare.” Previous research has found that Americans' attitudes toward social services vary depending upon which specific program is in question (Katz & Thomas, 1998; Gilens, 1996; Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Schram, 1992; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Americans are often willing to be supportive of programs that provide assistance to the poor or that help the elderly, but at the same time object to funding programs such as food stamps or other forms of “welfare” (Gilens, 1999; Cook & Barrett, 1992). These seeming inconsistencies in Americans' views regarding different aspects of the welfare state have caused some scholars to question the relevance of opinion data and the extent to which public opinion matters in influencing social policy (Burstein, 2006; Unnever & Cullen, 2005; Manza & Cook, 2002; Burstein, 1998; Page & Shapiro, 1983). Accordingly, any
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analysis of attitudes toward AFDC policy should not only evaluate the public’s attitude toward AFDC, but also include an evaluation of other policies that comprise the American welfare state. In doing so we are better able to evaluate theories of public opinion and policy linkages, especially if the compared policies are also on the Presidential agenda.

In addition to looking across different social provision domains, it is necessary to consider the partisan aspects of public opinion. Some scholars have argued that attitudes are rooted in pre-existing political cleavages and individual value systems (Feldman & Zaller, 1992). For example, some scholars link specific policies with more general political ideologies (Brooks, 2006; Bartels, 2000 [1996]), while Hochschild (1981) argues that attitudes concerning welfare and welfare reform are related specifically to Americans’ beliefs about distributive justice. Yet, how public opinion trends and attitudes towards specific welfare state policies differ among individuals with different political party affiliations over time has received little attention. How partisan attitudes toward welfare changed during the period leading up to and after the enactment of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 merits further attention because it can tell us how much support or opposition Republicans and Democrats in Congress faced from their constituents regarding welfare reform at different points in time.

In this paper I examine differences in Americans’ attitudes concerning social provision programs and changing partisan identifiers. Because the primary focus is on the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, particular attention is given to specific points in time when shifts in public opinion on welfare favored the enactment of reform. More specifically, this research addresses the following two questions: (1) Did public opinion trends among Americans facilitate pressure to reform AFDC?; and (2) Did attitudes among Republicans and Democrats converge or diverge in favor of cutting welfare, as compared to other social provision programs, in the years leading up to the Welfare Reform Act of 1996?

Theories of Opinion-Policy Linkages

The relationship between public opinion and social policy has been at the forefront of several debates in the fields of
sociology and political science. Some researchers have argued that public policy shapes public opinion (McGraw, Best, & Timpone, 1995). Others suggest that elites are capable of shaping aggregate public opinion (Zaller, 1992), or capable of manipulating preferences through their influence and media attention (Domhoff, 1990). Still others have argued that public opinion shapes the outcomes of government policies (Burstein, 1998; Brooks, 2003). Research suggests that there is a temporal order to the relationship between U.S. government policies and American public opinion (Page, 1994; Monroe, 1998; Burstein, 1998), thus providing the foundation for new and fruitful research on the linkages between public opinion and social policy. Page (1994), for example, utilizes survey data to identify aspects of public opinion that are particularly influential in shaping social policy. Like others, Page concludes that public opinion does matter under certain circumstances, but only with respect to some policies. For example, policies that affect domestic issues are generally more susceptible to public opinion than those relating to foreign affairs. Moreover, public opinion may be more influential to policy formation when the public is clear and vocal (Manza & Cook, 2003). This research specifically speaks to the example of welfare policy, since it is both a domestic issue and an issue and a policy arena on which most Americans have a clear and vocal position.

Burstein (1998) suggests that public opinion affects policy outcomes; however, the mechanism and conditions under which public opinion directly influences policy may be constrained by several other factors. Specifically, Burstein reviewed three different studies of public opinion and welfare policy and determined that each found a significant relationship between public opinion and the resulting government policy. Burstein contends that the public, and specifically public opinion, should be brought back into sociological research due to the potential impact on governmental policies. Consequently, if scholars are to understand why some social welfare programs are adopted and others not, including why the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 became law, an analysis of public opinion is essential.

Variation in Social Welfare Programs

The welfare state is generally described as consisting of different social provision programs, ranging from benefits for
the sick and the elderly to family services and assistance to the poor. Sometimes, these programs are referred to in general as welfare expenditures. For example, welfare expenditures include programs like Social Security, food stamps, unemployment insurance, and other cash or benefit allocation programs. Each of these arenas of social provision tends to benefit different groups of people. It is not surprising to find variations in public opinion based upon whether a question is directed toward a specific program or toward an individual’s belief about welfare as a whole. Consequently, scholars have debated how much or little support individuals have for welfare when conceptualized as AFDC, as compared to other social provision programs. As an example, Cook and Barrett (1992) find that in the early 1990s Americans supported the idea of the welfare state, especially when the recipients are thought to be deserving of the help. According to this line of research, we should expect to see variation in support among all Americans with respect to different kinds of social provision programs and the targeted recipients.

Focusing specifically on AFDC, Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs (1995) argue that Americans appear to be growing more frustrated with the welfare system, and generally think of it as ineffective. Citing, for example, a 1995 ABC–Washington Post poll, 69 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, “[t]he welfare system does more harm than good, because it encourages the break up of the family and discourages the work ethic” (Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995, p. 611). In addition to causing more harm than good, many Americans thought the existing welfare system fostered dependency (Frazer & Gordon, 1994), was replete with fraudulent cases, and that recipients were discouraged from participating in the workforce (Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995).

In contrast to these perceptions of AFDC, Americans have a distinctly different perspective of Social Security. An overwhelming majority of Americans in the 1990s supported the Social Security system and believe it is one of the most important government programs (Baggette, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995). Levels of support for Social Security have remained relatively constant since the program’s inception. Indeed, when Social Security was presented as a policy in need of change, the public appeared to react with outrage (Baggette, Shapiro, &
In sum, the literature on public opinion suggests several noteworthy challenges. While previous research suggests elected officials are likely to consider mass opinion when advocating for welfare policy reform (Burstein, 1998; Manza, Cook & Page, 2002), we know little about those to whom the elected officials listen. For example, is strong support among only one party more likely to facilitate the adoption of a particular policy or is bipartisan effort the key to policy change? We know little about how public opinion among Democratic and Republican identifiers has changed over time with respect to attitudes toward social provision programs, and particularly with respect to welfare. Attitudes toward welfare are amply important because the Clinton Administration may have recognized an opportunity to reach out to partisan groups and voters that Clinton himself, and the Democrat Party wished to attract, especially amidst a Republican takeover of Congress. This scenario appears particularly relevant to the political context of the early to mid 1990s, an era of strong partisan divide and intense competition between the Democrat and the Republican parties.

One of the distinguishing features of the Clinton Administration was the degree that Democrats and Republicans held very different views on the role of the government and social policy (Weaver, 2000). While Reagan was able to attract some self-identified Democrats during his presidency, Clinton's time in office was plagued by hostility, scandal, and congressional shutdowns. Yet, it seems possible that welfare was one issue that Clinton may have been able to use to bridge the divide among partisan identifiers in order to move forward with his overall policy agenda. This issue can only be addressed through analyses of partisan identifiers and their preferences toward various social provision programs.

Taken together, scholarship on public opinion and partisanship offers a perspective that may help us better understand how and why the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 emerged and took the specific form it did. Public opinion theories suggest that changes over time in public support for social services may affect the likelihood of welfare reform. Research on political behavior and partisanship can be applied to the question of why welfare reform was
passed during the Clinton administration as compared to the Reagan administration. Furthermore, because of the expansive time period of GSS data (1973-2002), whether there was an overall downward trend in support for welfare spending prior to the welfare reform of 1996 can be investigated. In addition, an analysis of a convergence or divergence among Democratic and Republican attitudes toward welfare over time can help in understanding when constituents, the President, and Congressional Democrats and Republicans were attuned to enacting the reforms.

Data and Methods

The data come from the General Social Surveys 1973-2002 cumulative file collected by the National Opinion Research Center. The sample was drawn from all non-institutionalized English-speaking individuals over the age of 18 who resided in the United States. Data was restricted to include only individuals with valid responses on the dependent and independent variables of interest. Depending on the dependent variable, the original sample of 43,698 was cut roughly in half as a result of the restrictions; however, there do not appear to be significant differences between the original sample and the restricted sample used in this analysis. The dependent variable for welfare spending has a total sample of 25,348; spending on race has a sample of 24,341; educational spending has a total sample of 25,694; and spending on Social Security has 35,340 respondents.

The data allows examination of trends in public opinion regarding welfare, race policy, education, and Social Security. I hypothesize that attitudes towards welfare became increasingly negative prior to the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. Also, I expect that during the 1990s, overall support for welfare effort, relative to all other policy domains, declined.

Dependent Variables

Four dependent variables are analyzed; welfare support is respondent's attitudes towards welfare spending (too much, about right, too little); support for blacks is the second measure which is used as a comparison to welfare support allowing a test of whether changes in support for welfare paralleled
support for race policy, thereby suggesting a tightly connected relationship between welfare support and attitudes toward assistance to blacks; support for education is a measure of a respondent's support for government spending on education; finally, Social Security as measured by support for government spending is included. Support for education and Social Security are used to inform the analysis of overall shifts in public support for government spending on social provision programs.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean (Std. Dev.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Respondents Age</td>
<td>46 (17.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Education</td>
<td>Number of Years of Schooling Completed</td>
<td>12.96 (3.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Geographical Region of Residence</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0=South; 1=Non-south</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Dummy for Race: 0= White; 1=Black</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Dummy for Gender: 0=Male; 1=Female; 0=Male</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status</td>
<td>Dummy for Employment: 0= Not in the Labor Force; 1= In the Labor Force</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>First Survey year –Current Survey Year</td>
<td>12.33 (9.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>Dummy for Democrat: 1=Democrat; 0=Republican; 0=Independent</td>
<td>0.40 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Dummy for Independent: 1=Independent; 0=Republican; 0=Democrat</td>
<td>0.35 (0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat x Survey Year</td>
<td>Interaction for Dummy for Democrat and Survey Year</td>
<td>4.58 (7.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent x Survey Year</td>
<td>Interaction for Dummy for Independent and Survey Year</td>
<td>4.35 (8.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=23,577 (Entire Sample); N= 9,338 (Democrats); N= 8,193 (Independents); N=6,046 (Republicans).

*Republican x year is the reference category for both comparisons of Democrats and Independents.

**Independent Variables**

The independent variables are shown in Table 1, along with a description of the measure and how each is coded. Consistent with previous research, controls for age, education, gender,
race, region, and work status were included. Political party is measured as Democrat, Independent, or Republican. These categories were created by merging strong and weak identifiers among both Democrats and Republicans into a single Democrat or Republican category. To assess change in public opinion over time, dummy variables for each year were created along with a continuous measure of time. Interaction terms of Democrat × year and Independent × year are included to allow for comparison between partisan identifiers (Democrats and Independents) compared to Republicans.

Method

Multinomial logistic regression is used to analyze changing attitudes among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans across each policy domain. The more common ordinary least squares estimation was not used because it is inappropriate for models with nominal outcomes (Long, 1997).

Results

Trends in Attitudes toward Government Spending

Attitudes towards spending differ depending on the program. Figure 1 summarizes the percent of Americans who believe the government is spending too much on each of the four policy domains investigated. Attitudes toward welfare have dramatically changed over time. There is a net decline in the belief that the government is spending “too much,” but also a sharp 20% upswing during the early 1990s in such perceptions. In contrast, there has been far less variation in the percentage of Americans who believe the government is spending too much on assistance to blacks, education, and Social Security. In each case, public support remains rather steady over time.

A similar analysis was done for the “too little” category, which reveals that Americans are least likely to say that the government is spending too little on welfare. While the percentage of Americans reporting these views changes over time, welfare is always the least favorable expenditure out of all social provision programs investigated. Second, Americans are more likely to say that the government is spending too little on education as compared to all other social provision programs. In the 1970s, roughly 50 percent of Americans believed the
government was spending too little on education. Today, that number has grown to nearly 75 percent. Spending on Social Security has also garnered significant levels of support. In 1984, 53 percent of Americans believed the government was spending too little on Social Security. While there was a slight dip in support in the early 1990s, Americans’ support rebounded to over 60 percent in 2002.

Attitudes toward spending on welfare and blacks stand in stark contrast to other forms of social service spending, having never reached the same level of support of either education or Social Security, even at points in time when support levels for the latter two dipped. There are, however, some notable differences between Americans’ attitudes toward spending on welfare and race policy. Spending on blacks garners more support than spending on welfare and has changed only slightly over time. For example, in 1973 support for increasing assistance to blacks was roughly 35 percent, where it remains today. Support for an increase in assistance to blacks did drop to 25 percent in the early 1980s, but then steadily increased as the 1980s progressed, and peaked at 45 percent in 1988. In contrast, less than 30 percent of Americans believe the government is spending too little on welfare. Like attitudes toward assistance to blacks, support for welfare was the highest in the
1980s; however, in both the late 1970s and 1990s support for welfare spending dropped by nearly 10 percent.

Additional analyses show changes in the belief that the government is spending about the "right amount" on social provision programs. While variation can be found between the different programs, overall support for the status quo has remained mostly stable with respect to welfare, assistance to blacks, and Social Security. With respect to welfare spending, there has been a slight reduction in the percentage of Americans who support keeping welfare spending at its current level. In 1991, 37 percent of Americans felt the government was spending about the right amount. However, by 1994 this had dropped to 25 percent and this trend appears to have shifted again since the passage and implementation of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, as evidenced by the 18 percent jump in public opinion supporting an increase in spending between 1996 and 2000. When looking at spending on blacks, the data indicates roughly 45 percent of Americans say the government is spending about the right amount. This level of support is similar to that for spending on social welfare, where 40 to 45 percent of Americans favor the current level of spending. Supporting the status quo on education, however, has decreased from 40 percent at its peak in 1973, to roughly 20 percent in 2002.

In sum, the data on the percentage of Americans' spending preferences illustrate several trends in American public opinion over the past 30 years. Levels of support for each social provision program differ across the four policy domains. Unlike any other policy domain, support for welfare spending fluctuates significantly over time and is the least supported of all of the social provision programs. Accordingly, welfare appears to be the one social provision program that Americans are most willing to support changing. Spending on assistance to blacks is also less favorable than education and Social Security for which most Americans indicate they would prefer for the government to increase spending. Support for spending on blacks and welfare not only lack support from most Americans, but in the case of welfare, support levels are quite volatile. To get a more nuanced understanding of what factors are likely to explain these trends and how they differ among partisan groups, I now turn to the multivariate analyses.
Explaining Support for Welfare Spending

Table 2 presents the coefficients for the statistical models applied to each policy domain. The first column presents the model for attitudes toward welfare spending, the second for spending on blacks, the third spending on education, and the last reports the coefficients for spending on Social Security. Each of the spending variables has three response categories: spending "too little"; "about right"; and "too much." There are two sets of coefficients presented for each model, along with standard errors in parentheses.

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors In Parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>(1) Welfare&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>(2) Race&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>(3) Education&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>(4) Social Security&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too Little</td>
<td>About Right</td>
<td>Too Little</td>
<td>About Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.10&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.51&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.73&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociodemographic Variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (in years) *100</td>
<td>-.129&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.128&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (in years)</td>
<td>-.04&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.10&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.06&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.50&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.61&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.87&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.70&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.19&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.09&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.35&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.36&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>-.12&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.33&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
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<td>-.37&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.23&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Political Party</td>
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<td>Democrat</td>
<td>.60&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.13&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.48&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>.35&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.35&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction Effects</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Year*Democrat</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.03&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year*Independent</td>
<td>.02&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: General Social Survey

*p < .05, <sup>a</sup>N = 25,348; <sup>b</sup>N = 24,341; <sup>c</sup>N = 25,694; <sup>d</sup>N = 25,340
Effects of Sociodemographic Characteristics on Social Spending

The effects of sociodemographic characteristics on policy attitudes are reported first. The effect of age on attitudes towards government spending differs significantly across policy domain. Older people are more likely than younger people to say the government is spending too much on welfare, blacks, and education. As might be expected, older people are also less likely to say the government is spending too much on Social Security as compared to too little or about the right amount.

The effect of gender on attitudes toward social spending is consistent with previous research (Howell & Day, 2000). Women have more liberal attitudes than men toward spending on all policy domains. Overall, women are also more likely to claim the government is spending too little or about the right amount on all of the policy domains.

Blacks are considerably more favorable than non-blacks toward spending on all policy domains. Additionally, there is evidence of regional variation in support for social spending. People living in the south are consistently more likely to agree the government is spending too much as compared to too little or about the right amount on welfare, blacks, and education, but do not differ from residents of other regions in their support for spending on Social Security.

Employed people, as compared to people who are unemployed, retired, or in school, are more likely to agree the government is spending too much on welfare, blacks, education, and Social Security and to say the government is spending too much as compared to about the right amount of money on all policies except Social Security.

While years of schooling are generally thought to have a liberalizing effect, the results suggest this is not always the case. Education level has a liberalizing effect with respect to supporting spending on blacks, but in contrast, there is a conservative trend for spending on Social Security. Well-educated people are less likely to agree the government is spending too little or about the right amount as compared to too much. Education increases the likelihood a respondent will agree the government is spending too much on welfare as compared to too little. Furthermore, well-educated respondents are also more likely to say the government is spending about the right
amount as compared to too much on welfare policy. When asked about spending on education, well-educated individuals are more likely to say the government is spending too little as compared to too much. They are also less likely to say the government is spending too much as compared to about the right amount on education.

Effects of Political Party Affiliation on Social Spending Attitudes

Turning to the measures of partisanship, we see that Democrats have consistently more liberal attitudes toward government spending on welfare policy, assistance to blacks, and education in comparison to Republicans. The greatest difference between partisan identifiers is on the issue of welfare spending. The odds of choosing the too little option as compared to selecting the too much option for welfare spending is 1.82 times greater for Democrats than for Republicans, holding all other variables constant. In other words, Democrats are nearly twice as likely to believe the government is spending too little on welfare. Regarding assistance to blacks, the odds of selecting the too little spending option as compared to the “too much” option is 1.62 greater for Democrats as compared to Republicans, holding all other variables constant. Again, Democrats are more likely to report that they believe the government is spending too little on assistance to blacks. Regarding spending on education, the odds of selecting the too little option, as compared to too much is 1.43 times greater for Democrats as compared to Republicans, holding all other variables constant. However, there is no significant difference in attitudes between Republican and Democratic identifiers regarding spending preferences toward Social Security.

Independents differ from Republicans with respect to welfare and race policy, but only when comparing attitudes toward spending too little as compared to too much. There is no significant difference between Independents and Republicans when spending preferences for the about right option is compared to the too much option. In general, the differences in policy attitudes between Independents' views and Republicans' views are smaller in magnitude in comparison to the earlier differences found between Democrats and Republicans.
Changing Preferences among Partisan Identifiers

To assess changing attitudes among political party identifiers, the statistical model includes an interaction term for Democrat x year, Republican x year, and also Independent x year. The results show a statistically significant difference between Democratic and Republican attitudes toward spending on welfare policy, race policy and education policy over time. To elaborate on this finding, not only are there partisan differences in social policy preferences, but also those differences have themselves changed over time.

Independents are consistently situated between Democrats and Republicans in their attitudes toward spending preferences. As compared to Republicans, Independents are more likely over time to favor increasing spending on welfare, race policy, and Social Security, yet the same pattern does not hold true for education. Over time, Independents favoring the too little spending category has shifted in a conservative direction.

As for Democrats, the significant 0.01 coefficients for the two response categories for the welfare item show a trend relative to Republicans. This suggests that over time Democrats have become more supportive of both the too little and the about right option as compared to the too much option. For Independents, the 0.02 coefficient for the too little category and the 0.01 coefficient for the about right category further suggests increasing levels of support for welfare policy as compared to Republicans.

Turning to assistance to blacks, the 0.03 interaction coefficient shows Democrats have moved (relative to Republicans) in a more liberal direction. The 0.01 coefficient for the status quo category also shows a smaller, yet statistically significant trend involving a preference for the about the right option as compared to the too much option. Similarly, this pattern holds true for Independents.

Regarding education, Democrats have again become noticeably more favorable toward spending than Republicans and Independents over time. As indicated by the 0.04 coefficient, there is a growing divergence between Democratic and Republican beliefs that the government is spending too little on education. Attitudes toward education spending are perplexing when we turn to the differences between Independents
and Republicans. More specifically, over time, the -0.03 coefficient for the too little category suggests Independents have become less supportive than Republicans are toward education spending, and that they have also become more likely to favor the status quo as indicated by the 0.02 coefficient for the about right category than are Republicans.

Democrats and Independents have become more favorable toward Social Security spending over time. The 0.04 coefficient for the too little category and the 0.03 coefficient for the about right category indicate a growing difference in support levels between Democrats and Republicans. Likewise, the corresponding coefficients for Independents, 0.03 for the too little category and the 0.01 coefficient for the about right category also indicate a persisting trend.

**Trends in Policy Attitudes among Partisan Identifiers**

An analysis of the predicted logits for partisan identifiers was completed for each of the policy domains and compares the estimated responses across the three levels of spending preferences.\(^7\) The novel extension of these analyses reveals a rise in partisan divergence over time when comparing preferences for the “too little” option to the “too much” option toward spending on assistance to blacks. From the 1970s through the 1980s support levels were on a downward trend, but in the early 1980s support levels increased significantly. These differences continued to rise through the early 1990s at which point support for assistance to blacks dropped and partisan divergence increased.\(^8\)

The results for education differ in two respects. First, the data suggest a generally higher level of support for education spending among all groups, but also reveal the largest partisan divergence, so that larger partisan differences have become amplified over time. Whereas initially, Independents and Republicans were fairly similar in their education spending preferences, a growing divergence between these two partisan groups was clearly visible by the 1990s and has consistently become magnified since that time.

The final part of the analyses describes partisan attitudes toward Social Security spending. The analyses suggest there are relatively small differences among partisan identifiers; however, it should again be emphasized that overall support
Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has sought to address two key questions with respect to the nature of the relationship between public opinion and social policy. First, did support for welfare spending sharply decline during the period leading up to the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which may have indicated the public was willing to support reform? Second, to further the literature in this area, analyses have been included to test whether attitudes among Republicans and Democrats in favor of cutting welfare expenditures converged or diverged prior to the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. The results presented here advance our understanding of how changing support for social provision programs may signal to public officials which policies are “fair game” for retrenchment.

Beginning with the first question of whether there was a net decline in support for welfare as compared to other social provision programs, I find a conservative shift in spending preferences over time, and that the American public, across partisan identifiers, was less supportive of welfare spending in comparison to other aspects of the U.S. welfare state. Moreover, I find that welfare was the policy domain most vulnerable to retrenchment efforts due to the overall lack of support among most Americans regardless of party identification. The timing in which these conservative trends became most evident is crucial. The most notable shift in public opinion toward welfare spending occurred during the early years of the Clinton administration, and more specifically from 1991 to 1996. Thus, these trends may have signaled to government representatives that AFDC was the least supported social provision program and the policy domain with falling levels of support. These findings are not at odds with other scholarship suggesting that shifts in public opinion may have coincided with Clinton’s anti-welfare campaign or even been somewhat influenced by it (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005). Instead, this suggests a more nuanced explanation for why more drastic cuts to welfare were enacted under the Clinton administration as compared to the Reagan administration. Absent from the equa-
tion under the Reagan administration was an overarching negativity toward welfare spending among partisan identifiers. Specifically, the data demonstrate that among all of the social provision programs that were on the table for reform—education, Social Security, assistance to blacks and welfare—the one that eventually resulted in changing legislation, welfare, required the Clinton administration to be very attuned to centrist and Republican voters, and therefore, be more strategic in listening to only certain dimensions of public opinion and only on a specific issue.

While these findings suggest that public opinion matters, the analyses also show how partisanship in conjunction with public opinion may have contributed to what appeared to be bipartisan support for welfare reform. A partisan divide on welfare spending during the Clinton administration may have created further impetus for welfare reform. In general, Democrats, Independents, and Republicans have had quite different attitudes toward government spending on all kinds of social provision programs over the three decades from 1973 to 2002. The partisan divide is greatest with respect to welfare and education spending and is not nearly as large with respect to spending on assistance to blacks or Social Security. Simply put, some policies are more politically divisive than others, and in turn, some issues appear to have experienced strong partisan divergence over time.

The focus on AFDC rather than education, Social Security, or assistance to blacks, may have been a response to declining Republican support for welfare spending rather than shifts in Democrats' attitudes toward this issue. Rather than cut all social programs, Democratic politicians may have focused on AFDC in order to appeal to Republican voters. The fact that the Clinton Administration focused on a program that was as politically divisive as AFDC suggests the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 was likely an attempt to reach out and garner support from Republican and swing voters rather than members of the core Democrat constituency.

As a final note, this analysis allowed an investigation of how partisan identifiers reacted after the welfare legislation was passed and implemented and results on its effectiveness were released to the general public. Interestingly, in the years just after the implementation of AFDC reforms, there was a
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A dramatic shift in public support. In 2000, levels of support for welfare had almost returned to the levels present during both the Reagan era and early Clinton era when they were at their 30-year peak. Possibly, the reforms passed were enough to pacify most AFDC opponents. Or, alternatively, Americans faced with inconclusive evidence of the effectiveness and implications of the reforms were again indicating to political officials the need for more change, but in the opposite direction of the 1996 reforms. Regardless, these trends may prove to be fruitful grounds for future research.

In conclusion, public opinion likely provided the electoral background for Clinton to enact major reforms to welfare policy without fearing political reprisal. Possibly because of growing animosity toward welfare spending and AFDC in particular, it is likely that Clinton knew he would not be faced with much of a political backlash from either his constituents or Republicans. Unlike any other social provision program during the 1990s, this domain of the American welfare state was the most vulnerable to substantial reforms and retrenchment effort.

References


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(Endnotes)

1) While scholarship on elite theories (Zaller, 1992) posit that elites, such as the President, are capable of manipulating or influencing public opinion, in the case of welfare, a highly salient issue in American politics, there is a history of scholarship supporting the argument that the main causal effects go in the other direction and that public opinion is likely a driving force for welfare reform (Page & Shapiro 1983; Lowery; Gray & Hager, 1989; Burstein, 1991 [1998]; Manza, Cook & Page, 2002; Wlezien & Soroka in press).

2) While the focus of this study is on variation in public opinion among partisan identifiers leading up to the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, current GSS data allow for additional descriptive analyses regarding changes in support for welfare policy after the implementation of the new AFDC regulations.

3) Ultimately, the 2002 data had to be excluded from the analyses due to complications in coding the race variable. During this year...
the National Research Opinion Center allowed for respondents to pick several different racial/ethnic identities, as such it would be difficult to make comparisons between White and Black respondents in a consistent manner.

4) The specific wording of these variables can be found at the searchable GSS codebook at the ICPSR located at http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/

5) For the sake of brevity, not all figures related to these analyses are presented. However, they are available by request from the author.

6) The full model reported here also included a variable for year in order to allow for the interpretation of the interaction effect for partisan year.

7) These analyses are available graphically by contacting the author.

8) A similar analysis was done comparing the about right option to the too much option, and suggests that Independents and Republicans are nearly indistinguishable from one another, while Democrats are much more favorable of the status quo with respect to assistance to blacks.