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Symbolism Versus Policy Learning

Public Opinion of the 1996 U.S. Welfare Reforms

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The logic of democracy rests on the assumption that policymakers respond to public preferences, which, in turn, respond to policy developments. We address the question of how policy might affect public opinion by analyzing public opinion before and after the 1996 U.S. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. We hypothesized that changes made by the legislation would have improved opinions of welfare recipients. Using U.S. surveys from 1994 and 2001, we find that public opinion was more positive postreform and that the change was because of the enactment of welfare reform itself, not any perceived program success.

Keywords: *public opinion; public policy; welfare policy; welfare reform; symbolic politics; political learning*

The link between public policy and public opinion has long been of interest to students of democracy and government. A core aspect of democracy is that the government respond to the public's preferences and concerns. As a result, significant research has examined whether the government is responsive to public preferences over policies and their performance

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(for a summary of the literature, see Burstein, 2003). Many of these studies have demonstrated that the government does appear to react to public opinion on policy matters—altering policies in response to changes in public opinion or preferences.

Scholars of policy feedback are increasingly examining the question of whether this vital democratic link works in the other direction: Do public attitudes respond to government policy? The answer would seem to be an obvious yes; after all, the logic of democracy calls for this reciprocal effect. If the government is expected to respond to public concerns or preferences over policy, it is necessary that the public have such preferences. One important way the public could develop policy preferences is in reaction to policy, which means that public opinion should change in response to policy change.¹ But research has yet to determine whether and how this occurs.

This article is an attempt to empirically test the mechanism by which policy changes may affect public opinion and add to the current understanding of under which circumstances policy feedback occurs. We test this question by analyzing public opinion before and after an actual policy change, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), enacted in 1996 by the U.S. Congress. PRWORA provides an ideal opportunity for this test. As a well-publicized reform effort seeking to address heightened public concerns over government assistance in general, and welfare in particular, this major change in policy should have had a reciprocal effect on public opinion once enacted.

The 1996 legislation's goal was to reform a system largely viewed as ineffective and corrupt and to get it closer to the American ideal of social welfare. The U.S. public has often expressed somewhat conflicting faith in the "American Dream" and support for a social safety net (Cook & Barrett, 1992). This conflict formed the basis of the development of the social welfare system in the United States. The public accepted social welfare policies as programs to help only those who most deserved help (Civil War veterans and mothers initially), not as programs that would provide a living for the indolent (Skocpol, 1992). But welfare did not live up to the public's ideal vision. In 1994, 59% of Americans felt that most welfare recipients were taking advantage of the system.² PRWORA aimed to address this problem by dramatically shrinking the welfare rolls, leaving in the system only those who truly needed help.

Our research hypothesis is that these changes in the 1996 welfare reform legislation improved public opinion of those on welfare. Previous research into public responses to political events and government performance presents two possible mechanisms for such attitude change. First, the public

may have reacted to the symbolic change represented by the reform effort in and of itself—positively reacting to the fact that the government undertook policy action in an area of major public concern (e.g., Edelman, 1964). Alternatively, the public may have reacted to specifics of the reform effort and its outcomes, basing postreform judgments on how effective they perceived the reforms to have been (e.g., Gusmano, Schlesinger, & Thomas, 2002). Because of the high visibility of the 1996 reforms but the low tangible effect on the lives of most citizens (Soss & Schram, 2007), we predict more of a symbolic effect.

Using surveys jointly sponsored by Harvard University and the Kaiser Family Foundation both before (1994) and after (2001) the 1996 reforms, we examine not only whether public opinion has been affected by the changes but also how. Our results demonstrate that opinion of public assistance and its recipients did indeed improve from 1994 to 2001 but that these more positive attitudes are only among those who were aware that welfare reform was undertaken—indicating that reform itself had an impact on opinions. In addition, we find that attitudes toward the perceived success or failure of the act do not affect these opinion differences. U.S. public opinion response to the 1996 reforms was a reaction to the symbol of government effort rather than to the reforms' specific outcomes.

The Potential Effects of Public Policy on Public Opinion

In her book on whether public opinion influences social policy, Sharp (1999) describes this relationship as a policy circle in which the public's preferences affect policy, subsequent policy then affects preferences, and so on. Previous research, although not directly addressing the question of whether actual policy change affects mass opinion change, does lend support to the idea and demonstrates that opinions on public policies can be influenced by an individual's perceived self-interest in the policy. For example, Chong, Citrin, and Conley (2001) manipulate experimental participants' opinions on issues such as social security and the home interest mortgage deduction by providing them with information that primed their self-interests. This research certainly argues for self-interested opinions by welfare recipients toward the program, meaning more support than the general public. Similarly, studies lend support to the importance of policy proximity and have empirically demonstrated that the opinions of those directly involved with the policy are affected by this experience. Gusmano et al. (2002) argue that citizens can "learn" from their experience with policy outputs

and that this can change their opinions. Their study implies that policy learning occurs in situations in which the public has direct experience with a policy and can form opinions based on those experiences (Gusmano et al., 2002). Using the case of welfare, Soss (1999) concludes that through their direct exposure to the system, welfare recipients develop opinions that affect their broader political actions and participation.

Aggregate time series analyses by Page and Shapiro (1982, 1992) demonstrate some support for policy affecting public opinion and policy preferences in a much broader manner. The authors find that multiple factors influence opinion change, including economic trends and events, foreign policy events (e.g., war), and changes in the population such as education levels and migration. In their model, all of these factors are in turn affected by policy change. As a result, aggregate shifts in public opinion can be influenced by policy changes that effect national social and economic changes (see Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 354, Figure 8.3). It seems a reasonable leap from these studies to the idea that a specific policy change can affect individual policy opinions and preferences as well.

In addition, more recently, a growing circle of scholars interested in this topic have developed and are further exploring this theory of policy feedback, how policies create new political circumstances. Soss and Schram (2007) present a framework, based on the visibility or salience of the policy issue and its proximity to citizens, for analyzing the mechanisms through which policy might have a potential feedback effect on mass politics and opinion. Previous empirical research further supports aspects of this framework. Wlezien's (1995) research shows that individual opinions respond to actual government spending in a general directional sense. People react "thermostatically" to changes in federal spending. They have preferences about general spending levels in major areas such as defense and social programs, and their opinions change as these levels change. If policymakers perceive public dissatisfaction, they adjust spending levels to try to respond to public preferences. An additional twist to the idea of policy changes affecting opinion is provided by studies examining whether and how citizens react to government performance. For example, retrospective voting theory holds that individuals judge political actors and institutions based on their past performance and then either reward or punish them at the polls (Fiorina, 1981).

From these varied studies, it seems reasonable to argue that public policy changes should affect public opinion in some way. Opinion appears to change in response to political change, and awareness and perceptions of

performance may affect these changes. What is missing is an analysis that ties these ideas together and tests them in terms of the mechanisms through which actual governmental policy change can have an impact. PRWORA provides an ideal opportunity to do just that.

Public Opinion of Welfare

The public's attitudes toward the U.S. welfare system before the 1990s were very stable. Descriptive research on poll data has shown that since the 1930s Americans have been generally supportive of welfare programs (Erskine, 1975; MacLeod, Montero, & Speer, 1999; Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995). However, this support has traditionally been much greater for safety net programs—particularly non-cash assistance programs—for the needy and elderly than for cash assistance for “able-bodied” or “work-ready” adults (Cook & Barrett, 1992; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). Although most Americans shared a desire to help the poor, concern that welfare might be abused or produce dependency was also widespread (Shaw & Shapiro, 2002).

Research on the formation of opinions on welfare suggests that a number of factors may influence individuals' beliefs. Kluegel and Smith (1986) conclude that a combination of self-interest and experience, socialization, and social-psychological processes that support the ideology of individualism influence individuals' beliefs and attitudes regarding the poor and inequality. A more comprehensive model tested by Cook and Barrett (1992) indicates that public opinion of welfare policies can be best explained by a combination of four factors: self-interest, political predispositions, beliefs about recipient deservingness, and beliefs about program effectiveness.

Research on racial attitudes indicates that racial stereotypes are powerful forces in American politics, especially in relationship to redistributive policies. Gilens (1999) concludes that the driving force behind antiwelfare attitudes, especially among Whites, is an underlying false assumption that welfare recipients are undeserving Black women with a poor work ethic. Similar research on media messages, campaign advertisements, and public opinion trends concurs with this conclusion (e.g., Mendelberg, 2001; Quadagno, 1994; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). Recent research on welfare reform implementation echoes these sentiments and demonstrates that racial stereotypes have translated into different experiences and outcomes of cash assistance receipt and case work (for a discussion, see Schram, 2005).

Other studies expand the set of explanatory variables from personal attitudes, ideologies, and experiences to include individual demographic factors such as race (Gilens, 1999), gender (Schlesinger & Heldman, 2001), and class (Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003). In general, however, one of the most stable influences over the public's attitudes toward welfare recipients (common to most models) is recipient deservingness—whether or not the recipients are deemed “worthy” or truly needy, the key component in the ideology of American social welfare.³

Public concern over welfare policy increased in the first half of the 1990s as welfare reform became a national topic of debate—specifically during the 1994 elections and the Republicans' emphasis of welfare reform as part of their Contract With America. According to the American National Election Studies, the proportion of people who felt the government was spending too much money on welfare rose 11 points from 1992 to 1994 (41% to 52%) and another 4 points between the 1994 and 1996 surveys.

The 1996 welfare reforms addressed the public's traditional concerns about recipient deservingness in many ways. PRWORA replaced the entitlement program, Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), with a state-managed program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). At its core, TANF has a number of requirements that are aimed at helping or even forcing able-bodied adults to work. Given Americans' focus on deservingness, it should come as little surprise that research on public reactions to elements of the legislation shows fairly strong support for it.

In their analysis of a number of national surveys, Shaw and Shapiro (2002) show that during the height of the welfare reform debate, a majority of the public approved of time limits on benefits and family caps (a policy denying additional benefits for women who have more children while receiving cash assistance). Using a 1994 survey of New York residents, Pereira and Van Ryzin (1998) report that at that time more than 70% of respondents supported imposing a family cap and requiring recipients to work or perform public service to receive assistance. Moreover, they conclude that the determinants of public opinion regarding these proposed aspects of welfare reform conformed with basic elements of previous research on public opinion and the poor but that the results also “suggest a more complex picture than before and one that calls for more research.”

Examining the sharp drop in public support for welfare spending during the mid-1990s, Schneider and Jacoby (2005) conclude that the media and elite rhetoric drove mass opinion on this issue. They do not, however, analyze the postreform period because of data limitations and therefore cannot speak to the effects of reform, only opinion leading up to it.

Research conducted since the passage of PRWORA shows an abrupt shift in public opinion on welfare after 1996. Shaw and Shapiro (2002) find that public hostility toward welfare and welfare recipients dropped dramatically after welfare reform was passed, a sharp break with past patterns. Still, the authors concede that “the jury is still out on whether welfare reform” was responsible for these changes. Soss and Schram (2007) explicitly examined this possibility and concluded that welfare reform had little impact on public opinion based on data that excluded the dip in support in the mid-1990s and focused on comparisons between early periods and postreform. Given the real drop in support prereform, however, the question of how and why opinion rebounded to previous levels is a vital one for understanding the link between policy and opinion.

Our analysis is an attempt both to fill this important gap in the understanding of public opinion and policy and to empirically build on the theoretical framework developed by Soss and Schram (2007), which attributes the potential of policy feedback to two aspects of the policy, the visibility of the policy and its proximity to individuals. If in fact the 1996 change in welfare policy was a very visible policy change but not a very proximate one for the general public, any change in public opinion should be based on the symbolic effect of governmental change and not on the details of the legislation itself. As stated above, our central hypothesis is that passage of PRWORA should have improved public perceptions of welfare recipients. To test this idea and the possibilities it poses, we ask three questions and investigate one related alternative. First, did the passage of PRWORA make a general difference in public opinion toward welfare program recipients? Second, what role does political information or awareness of policies play in opinion formation? And third, did more positive attitudes come from the perceived effectiveness of the policy (Gusmano et al., 2002), or are these positive differences more because of the simple fact that reform was enacted—a symbol of government action—regardless of the legislation’s details or outcomes (Edelman, 1964)? Last, to test an important alternative hypothesis, we construct a model to investigate the possibility that elite messages about the policy, and not individual awareness or perceptions, led to opinion changes.

Method

To answer these questions, we examine the results of two public opinion surveys on attitudes toward welfare, welfare reform, and welfare recipients—one conducted in 1994, before the passage of PRWORA, the other conducted

in 2001, well after reform. Both surveys were jointly conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University, specifically the Harvard School of Public Health in 1994 and the Kennedy School of Government in 2001.⁴

These two surveys provide a unique opportunity to examine aggregate opinion change because they are consistent in sampling, fielding method, and, most important, key attitude questions. As such, the surveys can be considered opinion trend, well suited for direct comparison. In addition, unlike larger and more well-known trend studies—notably the General Social Surveys or the American National Election Studies—these surveys were specifically designed to analyze opinion on welfare and contain a much broader range of questions on the topic than the larger, multiple issue surveys do.

Ideally, a panel survey would be used to test individual opinion change. Although these surveys (or any others of which we are aware) do not provide this benefit, they do allow us to analyze arguably the second best option: aggregate opinion comparison at the individual level. Opinions in the 1994 survey, pre-welfare reform, provide a baseline for comparison with post-welfare reform attitudes. By using these trend surveys, we are able to test whether the factors that contribute to individual opinions on welfare differ over time, a time that includes the occurrence of welfare reform.

The two surveys provide an additional comparative benefit. Not only can we compare opinions between 1994 and 2001, but also we can compare opinions within 2001. The 2001 survey includes two key sets of respondents—those who know that welfare reform occurred and those who do not. Those unaware of the passage and implementation of welfare reform provide an appropriate, additional baseline group for the effects of welfare reform on opinion.

Attitudes toward welfare recipients, our dependent variable, are measured with a combination of two dichotomous questions—one asking whether welfare recipients really want to work or not and the other asking whether welfare recipients really need assistance or not. These questions capture traditional public concerns about recipients: whether they really need and deserve assistance. The resulting scale ranges from 1 (*negative views of recipients*) to 3 (*positive views*).⁵ Because the variable is a three-way ordinal measure, we employ ordered logistic regression for multivariate analysis.

To answer the first of the three questions posed above, we look at a simple cross-tabular analysis of our dependent variable in 1994 relative to 2001 to determine whether attitudes about welfare differ over the time welfare reform was enacted. The second question—whether awareness of welfare

reform is related to this attitude difference—we analyze using an ordered logit model to test the differences between attitudes in the 2 years and the effect of whether respondents in 2001 were aware that welfare reform had been passed. The former comparison provides evidence of aggregate opinion differences including reasonable individual controls, and the latter comparison allows for solid conclusions regarding opinion differences and their likely cause.

The 2001 data set asks respondents whether they know if there was a major change to the welfare system during the preceding 6 years. Half of respondents (50%) did not know reform had occurred; half did know. This substantive division among respondents in 2001 provides us with the ability to compare our hypothesis group—those who know reform occurred—with two separate baseline groups—prereform respondents from 1994 and 2001 respondents who have no knowledge of the reform's occurrence. This method is key to our ability to provide support for our hypothesis that welfare policy reform affected opinions by controlling for the possibility that potential extraneous factors and influences occurring during the 7-year time span between the surveys affected opinions on welfare.

Two key comparisons test whether welfare reform affected opinions: (a) differences between the opinions of postreform respondents who are aware reform occurred and those of prereform respondents and (b) differences in opinions between postreform respondents who are unaware reform occurred and prereform respondents. If our hypothesis is correct, we should find significant differences in opinions between prereform respondents and the postreform respondents aware of welfare reform's passage; postreform respondents should view welfare recipients more positively. At the same time, we should find few, if any, differences in opinion between prereform respondents and postreform respondents unaware that reform occurred. If welfare reform is the key to opinion differences, then these two groups should not differ in their opinions. On the other hand, if other factors—in addition to or instead of welfare reform—are at play, then both postreform groups should significantly differ from the prereform group, as both would have been subject to factors other than welfare reform occurring during the 7-year time span between the surveys. Our ability to isolate the effect of welfare reform, through respondents' awareness of whether or not it occurred, controls for this alternative hypothesis.

To answer our third question on whether perceived outcomes of PRWORA affected opinions, we use a survey question, asked only of those aware of reform's passage, about whether respondents felt welfare reform had been effective or not. If attitude differences are partially influenced by

programmatic outcomes, rather than merely the symbolism of reform itself, then perceived reform effectiveness should explain opinions postreform, relative to attitudes prereform. And those who perceive the reform as not effective should evidence negative opinions or no difference in opinions relative to respondents in 1994.

Finally, we address an additional hypothesis. Although we believe that the enactment of PROWRA led to a change in public opinion, it is possible that neither awareness nor perceptions of the policy were responsible. Perhaps elite messages associated with the policy were the driving force. To test this possibility, we construct a model based on Zaller's (1992) research on this question. Given the general elite (bipartisan) consensus surrounding the 1996 legislation and its effects, we judge the potential elite impact based on the Zaller model of mainstream, or consensus, messages. According to the model, an elite consensus produces a shift in public opinion toward the elite message, especially among the most politically aware. However, because our data set does not have variables that measure attention to politics or message awareness, we use education levels combined with knowledge of the occurrence of the 1996 reforms as a proxy. If the mainstream elite messages model is correct, we expect to find that as education levels increase, so too do positive attitudes toward recipients regardless of ideological orientation. To test this possibility, we examine change between 1994 and 2001 in positive respondent views by respondent education and ideological orientation.

The regression models contain independent variables meant to act as controls for other possible effects on attitudes toward welfare recipients. We control for respondent party identification and ideology using separate dummy variables for Republicans and Democrats and for conservatives and liberals. The models also include controls for basic respondent demographics that could be relevant to welfare opinions—race (White), ethnicity (Latino), income, gender, and residency in the South.⁶ Perhaps most important, we include a dummy variable control for whether the respondent himself or herself, or a member of his or her family, is or has been a recipient of welfare assistance. Marginal results demonstrate that welfare recipients have much more favorable attitudes toward welfare than do nonrecipients. Also because of this, we eliminate welfare recipients from the bivariate comparisons.⁷

Economic sentiments and racial attitudes could also be key influences. We control for sentiments on the economy with independent variables on job availability and the quality (in terms of a living wage) of available jobs. The model includes two dummy variables representing whether or not jobs

are available for those who want to leave welfare (coded 1) and whether available jobs pay enough for families to subsist. Presumably those who do not think jobs are available for recipients or who feel those jobs that may be available do not pay enough are less likely to hold punitive views toward welfare recipients. Last, in an attempt to capture and control for racial attitudes and stereotypes, we include a dummy variable measuring whether the respondent believes a majority of welfare recipients are Black or not (in 1994 the question asks about “minorities” rather than Blacks). If negative racial attitudes or stereotypes are at work, those who believe incorrectly that most recipients are minorities should have lower opinions of recipients. The control variable for White respondents may also capture some racial effects.

Results

Did Public Opinion of Welfare Improve Postreform?

Overall attitudes toward welfare recipients show a significant positive shift between 1994 and 2001. In 1994, 52% of Americans expressed positive or at least mixed views toward recipients, compared to 61% who did so in 2001—a positive difference, as expected.⁸ The trend is only suggestive, however, of a policy effect. To test the effect that reform itself had on attitudes, we must test whether awareness of reform affects opinions of welfare recipients.

Does Reform Awareness Affect Welfare Attitudes?

As previous research demonstrates, opinion change in response to political events is most likely to occur, in any predictable or sensible way, among the most knowledgeable citizens (Bartels, 1994) because they are the most likely to both know about the event and form an opinion in response to it. This means that awareness of a political event is a necessary condition for opinion change in response to that event—after all, those who are not aware of policy change cannot respond to it. Similarly, if those aware of the policy change have different opinions than those who are unaware, after policy change occurs, we can be relatively confident that the policy itself is at least partially responsible for the differences found in attitudes.

To test this aspect of attitude change, we conduct a multivariate test measuring the effect that awareness of the existence of welfare reform has on postreform opinions. In this model, we combine the 1994 and 2001 respondents

into one data set and test the conditioning effect of awareness using dummy variables to separate respondents by year and situation.⁹

The key independent measurement is whether respondents in 2001 were aware of the existence of welfare reform (50% reported they knew there were major changes to welfare, 19% believed there had been none, and 31% answered that they did not know). If awareness of welfare reform is responsible for more positive attitudes in 2001 versus 1994, the effect of the reform awareness variable should be positive and significant. Another test variable measures respondents in 2001 who did not know that there had been welfare reform in the preceding decade (respondents either answering “do not know” or believing there had not been changes). If respondents who are unaware of the reforms demonstrate no different attitudes relative to 1994, as predicted, then this variable should show no effects. Respondents in 1994 are the comparison group and are captured by the constant.

Table 1 presents the results of this test. The first column contains the ordered regression coefficients for the attitudes toward welfare recipients. As expected, the variable capturing respondents in 2001 who were aware of reform is positive and significant, indicating more positive views among that group relative to respondents in 1994. Also as expected, not knowing that welfare reform occurred has no real effect (the estimate is statistically unreliable), demonstrating that postreform respondents who were not aware of the reforms had the same attitudes toward recipients as prereform (1994) respondents. In other words, awareness that reform occurred is responsible for at least part of the increase in positive attitudes toward recipients from pre- to postreform.

Control variables also perform largely as expected. Republican and conservative citizens are less supportive of all aspects of welfare, whereas liberals are more supportive. Welfare recipients have more positive views. In addition, people's perceptions of available jobs has a significant impact—both those who think jobs are available and those who think available jobs pay enough for recipients to survive have more negative views toward welfare recipients than do those who do not. The variables capturing the potential effects of race—White respondents and beliefs about the racial makeup of recipients—are both significant and in the expected, negative direction. These results clearly indicate some negative racial sentiment at work. Both Whites in general and those respondents who believe recipients are largely minorities have more negative views of recipients relative to other respondents.

The substantive effects of reform awareness are presented in Table 2 through probability transformations of the test coefficients.¹⁰ The data represent the effects of reform awareness on the probability that a citizen will have a positive attitude toward welfare recipients. Awareness of welfare

Table 1
The Effect of Reform Awareness on Attitudes
Toward Recipients, 1994 and 2001

	Positive Attitudes	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
2001 not aware of reform	0.04	0.19
2001 aware of reform	0.47*	0.18
Age	-0.01	0.09
Male	0.05	0.10
White	-0.14*	0.03
Latino	-0.14	0.08
Income	0.03	0.10
Democrat	0.05	0.13
Republican	-0.34*	0.02
Liberal	0.24*	0.09
Conservative	-0.21*	0.10
Jobs pay adequately	-0.96*	0.10
Jobs are available	-1.14*	0.09
Welfare recipient	0.31*	0.10
South	-0.27*	0.09
Majority Black recipients	-0.27*	0.08
Threshold Y = 1	-1.67*	0.19
Threshold Y = 2	0.19	0.18
<i>N</i>	2,768	
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	.22	

Note: Table entries are multinomial logistic estimates.

**p* < .05 or better, one-tailed.

Table 2
Predicted Probabilities of Holding Completely Positive
Attitudes by Welfare Reform

Year and Awareness	Toward Recipients
1994	0.20
2001 don't know reform	0.21
2001 know reform	0.29
Effect of knowing (vs. 1994)	+0.09*

**p* < .05 or better, one-tailed test.

reform increases the likelihood that a respondent will have a completely positive attitude toward recipients by 9 points—from a .20 probability to a .29 probability for an average respondent—relative to respondents in 1994.

Attitude Differences as Symbolism Versus Policy Learning

Our next test is whether the significant differences in attitudes toward welfare recipients from 1994 to 2001 was the product of the symbolism of welfare reform or of perceptions of policy outcomes. On one hand, it is possible that the public's reaction to welfare during this period was a product of the fact that welfare reform took place rather than of the outcomes of the reform efforts—a symbolic reform effect (Edelman, 1964). On the other hand, it is also possible that these differences are largely the result of individuals judging the performance of PRWORA and reacting to its perceived success or failure—a policy learning effect (Gusmano et al., 2002). To test whether opinion shifts were symbolic or responsive to perceived program outcomes, we add two additional dummy variables to the model measuring whether 2001 respondents perceived the policy reforms as effective or not.

The effectiveness question was asked only of those respondents in 2001 who were aware that welfare reform had occurred (given that those unaware of reform are highly unlikely to have any type of opinion about how it is working). As a result, the effectiveness measure represents those respondents in 2001 who both are aware of the existence of reform and perceive it as having been effective. The resulting variable is dichotomous, taking a value of 1 for respondents in 2001 who perceived reform had been effective and a value of 0 for all other respondents. Similarly, the “not effective” variable is a dichotomous measure that takes a value of 1 for the 2001 respondents who were aware of reform's occurrence but who did not feel the changes had been effective. Given these two new measures, the awareness of reform variable becomes duplicative and is removed from the equation. The “don't know” respondents are those who were unaware of the existence of welfare reform in 2001 (as in the previous model).

Table 3 presents the results of the model with the perceived effectiveness variables added. The effectiveness variable has a significant and positive effect, which would seem to indicate that perceived effectiveness is responsible for increased positive attitudes. The contrasting variable of not effective, however, is also significant and positive and statistically no different in magnitude from the effective variable. This demonstrates that even those 2001 respondents who did not find the reforms effective still have significantly more positive attitudes toward program recipients than do those who are unaware of reform or than do prereform respondents (1994).

These results demonstrate a clear symbolic effect of welfare reform. Awareness that policy reform occurred generates more positive attitudes among Americans than existed either prereform in 1994 or among those respondents in 2001 who were unaware of the existence of reform. The idea

Table 3
The Effect of Perceived Program Effectiveness on Opinion Differences Between 1994 and 2001

	Positive Attitudes	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
2001 not aware of reform	0.03	0.09
2001 aware and effective	0.54*	0.11
2001 aware and not effective	0.48*	0.15
Age	-0.01	0.03
Male	0.05	0.08
White	-0.14	0.10
Latino	-0.16	0.13
Income	0.04	0.02
Democrat	0.05	0.09
Republican	-0.35*	0.10
Liberal	0.25*	0.10
Conservative	-0.20*	0.09
Jobs pay adequately	-0.96*	0.10
Jobs are available	-1.16*	0.09
Welfare recipient	0.30*	0.08
South	-0.27*	0.08
Majority Black recipients	-0.29*	0.08
Threshold Y = 1 (column 1)	-1.69*	0.19
Threshold Y = 2 (column 1)	0.21	0.18
<i>N</i>	2,768	
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	.22	

Note: Table entries are multinomial logistic estimates.

**p* < .05 or better, one-tailed.

Table 4
Predicted Probabilities of Holding Completely Positive Attitudes by Welfare Reform and Perceived Effectiveness

Year and Awareness	Toward Recipients
1994	0.18
2001 don't know reform	0.19
2001 reforms effective	0.28
2001 reforms ineffective	0.27

that perceptions of the performance of the reforms would affect postreform opinions, however, does not hold true.

The predicted probabilities in Table 4 quantify the lack of significant differences between one's probability of holding positive attitudes regardless

of how one perceives the effectiveness of the reforms. Awareness of reform encourages positive responses regardless of perceptions of program performance—virtually identical positive probability shifts of .28 and .27 for 2001 attitudes of effectiveness and ineffectiveness, respectively—a symbolic rather than policy learning effect.

An Additional Hypothesis—Elite Messages

Although we argue that welfare reform and its outcomes are responsible for opinion change toward welfare recipients, there is an additional possibility we need to address. According to an experimental study by McGraw, Best, and Timpone (1995) examining the effects of policy on public opinion, there are two possible factors contributing to opinion change in response to policy change—perceptions of the policy outcomes, as we test above, and elite messages associated with the policy. In our case, even though we demonstrate the power of public perceptions, it remains possible that elite messages are contributing to opinion shifts on welfare and perceptions.

Popular theory regarding elite messages and their effects puts some limits on the potential breadth of these effects among the general public. Both McGuire (1969) and, much later, Zaller (1992) argue for, and demonstrate, that the potential for elite messages to effect public opinion change is somewhat limited because of receptivity and acceptance limits on the public's part. As Zaller demonstrated, the nature of opinion change (if any) depends in part on the ideological direction (and source) of the elite presenting the message, combined with the ideological preferences of the receiver. For welfare reform success, the overwhelming message was largely unanimous that reform had succeeded. For example, in the 2000 presidential election between Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush, the two candidates both spoke of the success of welfare reform. For example, in the second presidential debate, Al Gore argued, "Our country has cut the welfare rolls in half. I've fought hard from my days in the Senate and as vice president to cut the welfare rolls and we've moved millions of people in America into good jobs" ("The 2000 Campaign; Transcript," 2000). George W. Bush also campaigned on welfare reform, touting his own success with it in the state of Texas ("The 2000 Campaign; Exchanges," 2000).

If we judge the potential elite effects based on the Zaller (1992) model of mainstream (i.e., consensus) messages, we would expect to find in the case of welfare reform that political awareness and support for the mainstream policy—acceptance of the mainstream message—should be positively correlated, regardless of respondent ideological orientation. Because

the most aware citizens are the most likely to come into contact with elite messages, and because, in this case, the message is nonideological, or mainstream, the most aware should be the most influenced.

To test the elite effects model in the case of welfare reform, we test this mainstream model with our data. We do not, however, have a direct measure of attention to politics or message awareness, so we use education levels combined with knowledge of the occurrence of the 1996 reforms as a surrogate. We break education levels into three categories—those respondents with a high school degree or less, those with some college education but no degree, and those with a college degree or more. Again, if the mainstream elite messages model is correct, we expect to find that as education levels increase, so too do positive attitudes toward recipients because the dominant message was that welfare reform had worked and left the more deserving on the rolls. Table 5 contains cross-tabulations of the most positive respondent views by respondent education and year. In addition, to enhance the awareness effect and test, in 2001 we include only those respondents who knew reforms had occurred. This is a relatively generous test of the elite messages hypothesis because it includes only those respondents who are most likely to exhibit more positive attitudes at all, according to our original tests (Tables 1 and 3).

The results demonstrate inconclusive evidence for the elite messages hypothesis. Although the least educated respondents are indeed the least likely to have more positive attitudes in 2001 than did their counterparts in 1994, the most highly educated are only the most positive relative to 1994 among liberal respondents. In contrast, among conservatives who are highly educated and aware reform occurred, there are no differences between 1994 and 2001. Both conservatives and moderates evidence more positive opinions relative to 1994 among the middle education group alone. Although it should be noted that among highly educated moderates there is a 14-point difference, it is not statistically significant as the full cross-tabs do not demonstrate a significant positive correlation. In other words, among liberals there is a positive relationship between political awareness (as represented by education and awareness of reform) and more positive views of recipients postreform—a potential mainstream message effect. Among moderates and conservatives, however, the evidence is more consistent with a polarized message flow, according to the Zaller (1992) model, a flow that does not fit the welfare reform case.

Because of these mixed results, we can neither completely confirm nor completely deny an effect from elite messages. The evidence, however, weighs on the side of minimal, if any, effects. We must mention one caveat,

Table 5
Elite Messages Test—Distribution of Most Positive Views of Welfare Recipients by Year and Respondent Awareness, Ideology, and Education

Most Positive View of Recipients	Year of Survey		Difference in Positive View
	1994 All (%)	2001 Aware of Reform (%)	
Liberal (<i>n</i>)	179	208	
High school or less	28	32	+04
Some college	39	50	+11
College degree or more	35	70	+35*
Moderate (<i>n</i>)	588	572	
High school or less	28	27	-04
Some college	25	37	+12*
College degree or more	39	53	+14
Conservative (<i>n</i>)	419	214	
High school or less	21	23	+02
Some college	18	27	+09*
College degree or more	23	25	+02

Note: Gamma (for full cross-tab of education by view of recipients, within year and respondent ideology).

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.

however: Our inability to appropriately measure political awareness may not allow for an ideal test of this additional hypothesis. As a result, a more definitive conclusion must be left to future research.

Discussion

In sum, these findings strongly support the hypothesis that welfare reform had a positive effect on American attitudes toward welfare recipients. Our results demonstrate that Americans' opinions of public assistance recipients improved from 1994 to 2001 and that these differences in opinion existed only among those who were aware that welfare reform was undertaken. Respondents in 2001 who were unaware that welfare reform occurred had attitudes statistically indistinguishable from 1994 attitudes. Attitude disparities were not a temporal or external effect but rather an effect of reform itself.

Perceptions of the reforms' effectiveness do not explain the variation in opinions toward welfare recipients, indicating a symbolic effect of reform, as hypothesized. Although respondents have opinions of the effectiveness of PRWORA, these opinions do not affect their attitudes toward welfare recipients. Instead, it is merely the knowledge that reform occurred that helps explain attitude differences, supporting the symbolic over the policy learning explanation of opinion change in this case.

In some ways, this research complements the current body of literature on policymaking and public opinion, and in other ways, our findings point to a possible new direction for scholars interested in this topic. These empirical findings add credence to the theories discussed by other authors regarding the circular relationship between public opinion and policy formation. These findings also support previous studies that show that knowledge affects attitude change. We demonstrate that, not surprising, only those who know policy change has taken place have opinions that appear responsive to that change. In addition, opinions among those who are not aware of the change are no different from those prechange, regardless of the passage of time.

Our research not only ties together previous findings in attitudes toward government and policy but also adds to the emerging body of policy feedback theory and presents findings that indicate a potential new direction in policy and opinion research. We demonstrate that the public reacts, at least in this case, to the fact that the government has initiated a change and not to any opinion of the effectiveness of that change as predicted using the new policy visibility and proximity framework (Soss & Schram, 2007). Those who do not think that welfare reform is effective are just as likely to have improved opinions of recipients as those who perceive the reforms as effective. We conclude from this finding that the public is more concerned with governmental action in and of itself rather than with perceived results. The public reacts strongly to the symbolism of change, whether or not they agree with the specifics of the policy. Further research into this distinction between symbolic reactions and preferences based on policy learning is needed to explore whether this phenomenon is unique to opinions on welfare or whether it is more widely applicable. Perhaps policy learning (as explored by Gusmano et al., 2002; Soss, 1999) cannot extend to circumstances in which the public does not have direct experience with the policy.

On the policy front, this article adds to our knowledge and understanding of the policymaking process and how the public may or may not react in response to policy changes. In addition, with its focus on welfare reform, it has important implications for decisions relating to redistributive

programs that often receive mixed support from the public. The length of time needed to reauthorize PRWORA in 2006 and the comparatively paltry media coverage of the long and complicated debates seem to be evidence that the U.S. public is no longer concerned with this issue. Our findings support this interpretation of events.

Further research into the question of state-level impacts would expand on our findings and is a logical next step in exploring the nuances of specific program options, such as time limits and family cap policies, under PRWORA. In many respects, U.S. public cash assistance is now a state-level program, and the variance in program types and philosophies among states may have a strong influence on public opinion. It seems reasonable that individuals may have more clearly formed attitudes toward the effectiveness of their own state's welfare program and that policy learning may be a more important factor on the state rather than the federal level. Replicating our models using state-specific data or expanding our models to include independent variables related to specific programs would be helpful next steps in expanding on and understanding the policy implications of this line of research.

The research we present also has practical implications. It suggests that government actors can alleviate public dissatisfaction with policies through policy reform. Furthermore, given that public reactions are, at least to some extent, symbolic rather than based on reform success, perhaps even the mere appearance of reform will positively affect public attitudes. These findings are consistent with those on government spending and the public's thermostatic reaction (see Wlezien, 1995). When the government makes an adjustment to spending on a policy area in the direction the public prefers, the public responds with satisfaction. This does not mean, of course, that the spending changes result in any substantive policy changes the public might prefer (presuming they have them). One could argue that, in effect, the public's reaction is symbolic rather than resulting from any true policy change.

This discussion offers thought-provoking implications for democratic theory. On one hand, if the public's reactions are not substantive, then the public does not perform the expected role of holding government actors accountable for their actions. On the other hand, if the public is content with a government's action, even regardless of substance, then does that not address the idea of a government responsive to public preferences, and vice versa? Whether these symbolic reactions from the public are consistent with the democratic ideal of a responsive public remains an open question.

Notes

1. Another potential source for public policy preferences and changes is context. If conditions, such as the state of the economy or political context, change, then public opinion on specific policies may form in response.

2. Yankelovich Partners conducted this survey for *Time* magazine and Cable News Network on December 7 and December 8, 1994. It is based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national adult sample of 800.

3. A second common factor is opinion of the welfare program itself. The data sets we use in this analysis had very limited options for analyzing this effect. We did, however, conduct all of the tests in this article on a less than ideal program perception variable (whether welfare encourages women to have more babies) and found the same effects we find here for opinions of recipients. The consistency of the effects across both sets of attitudes is noteworthy.

4. The 1994 survey was conducted December 7 to 9 among 1,200 respondents nationwide. The 2001 survey was conducted January 4 to February 27 among 1,952 respondents. Both surveys used traditional random-digit-dialing methods and probability sampling and were fielded by KRC Communications Research in 1994 and IRC Communications Research (the former KRC) in 2001. The 2001 survey was also sponsored by National Public Radio.

5. The scale has an alpha of .56. This alpha is lower than we might ideally want—although it is not unreasonable for a two-item scale. For this reason, as a reliability check, we also tested our models as logistic regression equations with each separate recipient variable as a dependent. The results for these individual models were statistically and substantively similar to those presented here with the combined variable.

6. Education would be another potential control variable. It should, however, be directly contributing to awareness of reform rather than to opinions of recipients. Indeed, the education variable is highly correlated (to the point of potential multicollinearity in an ordinary least squares model) with the awareness of reform variables. For this reason, we do not include the education variable in the models. We should note, however, that the addition of education does not change the nature of the overall findings.

7. It is also possible that there are differences within some of these demographic subgroups over time; however, preliminary analysis of these potential differences demonstrated few such effects.

8. The full frequencies for the need welfare variable in the index are as follows: 1994—really need help (44%), could get along without it (46%), don't know or refused (10%); 2001—really need help (47%), could get along without it (44%), don't know or refused (9%). The full frequencies for the welfare recipients want to work variable in the index are as follows: 1994—really want to work (40%), do not really want to (47%), don't know or refused (12%); 2001—really want to work (47%), do not really want to (44%), don't know or refused (9%).

9. We also tested the hypotheses with the 2001 data alone, looking at differences in opinion between the aware and not aware groups. The effects of awareness and effectiveness were of the same significance and substance in those tests as in those we present here, which include the comparison to 1994 prereform opinions.

10. All probabilities are calculated with control variables held constant at their mean values, with the exception of the gender, party, ideological, and welfare recipient dummy variables, which are coded to 0, and the White variable, coded to 1. The results therefore represent an average White female respondent who does not receive welfare and is a moderate political independent.

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