



The Role of Racial Tensions in State Decisions to Cut Back Welfare

Hana E. Brown, Wake Forest University

In early June 2015, the Missouri state legislature voted to remove thousands of families, including 6,400 children, from the state's cash assistance program for the poor. The new law reduces the state lifetime limit for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families from 60 to 45 months, cuts cash benefits in half for those who do not work, and redirects a significant portion of welfare funds toward programs that encourage marriage and alternatives to abortion.

Why has Missouri made these changes now? Since the U.S. Congress acted in 1996 to change welfare funding rules and give states greater discretion, many states have taken steps similar to Missouri. My research suggests that racial dynamics drive these cutbacks – but not in ways many suppose. Demography and attitudes are insufficient explanations; the political context matters.

Race and Welfare Policymaking

Why have some states imposed welfare restrictions in recent years while others have retained more generous programs? Previous studies reveal a clear pattern: the higher the proportion of African Americans receiving cash welfare benefits, the more likely states are to adopt restrictive welfare policies. But not all racially diverse states have adopted punitive reforms and some predominantly white states have taken very restrictive approaches to welfare. Race clearly influences welfare politics, but how?

To answer this question, I examined the policy decisions that state legislatures made immediately after the 1996 national reforms transformed American anti-poverty policy. That law imposed new time limits, work requirements, and penalties on recipients of welfare benefits. After Congress gave states new flexibility to design their own programs, some states adopted the most generous policies allowed by federal law, while others imposed far more restrictive policies. To understand the decision-making processes better, I closely examined a number of states which had large minority populations at the time.

What I found was surprising: Legislators' decisions about welfare policy were heavily influenced by the political debates simultaneously raging in their states. When these other debates were rife with racial tensions, legislators enacted punitive welfare reforms. But when coterminous debates were not racialized, lawmakers tended to adopt more generous welfare programs. ***In other words, lawmakers used restrictive welfare changes as a strategy to appease white voters who felt threatened by other racial conflicts happening in the same period.***

Racial Conflicts and the Dwindling Social Safety Net

Welfare reforms in Georgia and Alabama show how this key process unfolded. After Bill Clinton signed his signature national welfare reform bill in 1996, Georgia passed some of the nation's most punitive welfare laws even as Alabama enacted far more generous policies. The starkly different paths are surprising, because public opinion polls show that white residents in both states harbored equally racist beliefs. Welfare caseloads were similar, with African Americans accounting for three-quarters of those assisted, and most Georgians and Alabamians had long viewed welfare as a "black" program. Yet as I combed through government records, interviewed the key players in welfare politics, and analyzed newspaper coverage, I discovered differences in the other political conflicts happening at the same time that the post-1996 welfare changes were debated in Georgia and Alabama.

- In Georgia, welfare reform was immediately preceded by a proposal from the governor to remove the Confederate emblem from the state flag. This multi-year conflict alienated many white voters, who saw the proposal as evidence of growing black political power. To appease racially resentful whites, the governor and legislators enacted restrictive welfare policies.
- Meanwhile, Alabama's lawmakers were engaged in less racially contentious battles over tort reform and punitive damage claims, so lawmakers felt less need to use welfare to placate white voters. The small number of lawmakers who tried to inject race into welfare debates were criticized. Although Alabama's resulting cash welfare program was not generous by national standards, Alabama legislators did authorize the most generous eligibility regulations the federal government would fund. Years later, Alabama did enact more punitive rules, but – tellingly – only amid racial conflicts over voter identification laws.

Lessons for Today

In the nearly two decades since President Bill Clinton signed national welfare reform, states still expand and contract their public assistance programs with some regularity. Racial dynamics continue to matter, but in indirect ways that political players rarely admit. Racial tensions always bubble beneath the surface, but their impact on welfare decisions depends on whether voters and lawmakers exploit these tensions. When racial conflicts intensify, often about matters quite apart from welfare, policymakers are tempted to appear tough on minorities lest they lose political credibility with white voters.

My findings shed light on recent welfare cutbacks in Missouri as well as on new calls for cuts in Maryland. Tellingly, the 2015 Missouri welfare cuts happened during the first legislative session since the August 2014 shooting in Ferguson of black teenager, Michael Brown, an incident that sparked black protests and white backlashes. In the wake of similar protests over a police killing in Baltimore, lawmakers in Maryland are now calling for cut backs in Temporary Assistance and Food Stamp benefits disproportionately flowing to the black poor.

The irony, of course, is that concentrated black poverty and its effects are due, in part, to America's paltry social safety net for low-income families. Yet when minority communities protest racial injustices, lawmakers often appease anxious or angry white citizens by further cutting back welfare benefits and protections desperately needed by poor communities, especially communities of color. Strategic political trade-offs, it turns out, are a key way in which racial tensions lead to welfare restrictions. When racial conflicts infuse a state's politics, politicians may make welfare cutbacks as a strategic ploy to signal whites that they are not "soft" on minorities.

Read more in Hana Brown, "**Racialized Conflict and Policy Spillover Effects: The Role of Race in the Contemporary U.S. Welfare State.**" *American Journal of Sociology* 119, no. 2 (2013): 394-443.