

Presidential Address—Expertise, Advocacy and Deliberation: Lessons from Welfare Reform

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In 1996, I left the federal Department of Health and Human Services “with some drama,” as one friend described it, after the Congress passed and the President signed a welfare law (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) that I believed represented an abdication of federal responsibility for the poor and posed potentially dangerous consequences. The aftermath of the law has been different from what I expected—much larger caseload declines, significant increases in employment, fewer demonstrably adverse effects on children, and declines, though small ones, rather than increases in poverty rates for single mother families (DeVere et al., 2000; Urban Institute, 2000). The welfare law is clearly not the “cause” of these effects. The spectacularly good economy, dramatic increases in the EITC, and increased child support enforcement have all had their effects, and have certainly provided the material for large numbers of papers at APPAM conferences. Nor has the welfare law been the unqualified success that some have claimed. The problems of poverty and of too many children who are not thriving in this country have not been solved, another topic of compelling interest at APPAM meetings.

This piece is not, however, about welfare policy. Since 1996, I have been a kibitzer, not an active participant in debates about the welfare law, recognizing that even if I considered myself able to be an objective observer (which I did not) no one else was likely to share that opinion. I am not going to change that stance here. What I would like to do, though, given the theme of the 2000 conference (Doing and Using Public Policy Analysis and Management Research), is reflect on the role of policy research in making public policy and on the responsibilities of policy researchers in the democratic process, using welfare reform, past and future, as an example. In doing so, I follow in the tradition of previous APPAM presidential addresses that have taken up these issues (e.g., Friedman, 1999; Radin 1997).

THE WELFARE LAW AS A FAILURE OF PROCESS

My most vivid memories from 1996 are of moments of startling ugliness. During the Congressional debates on the final welfare bill, one Republican member held up a picture of a warning sign from the Florida everglades with a picture of an alligator and the admonition “Do Not Feed;” the not particularly subtle analogy was to welfare recipients being “fed” by the welfare system. A Democratic member responded by likening the Republicans to Nazis and accusing them of genocide. These speeches and others like them, often made to an empty chamber, were scrupulously recorded by C-Span and, with the recorded votes on welfare legislation, became fodder in the 1996 Congressional campaigns.

The welfare bill that was signed into law by the President contained some provisions that are best described as gratuitously punitive, a number of them added as amendments during the final debate. They included very tight work requirements for adult food stamp recipients and cutoffs of benefits for immigrants, provisions justified on the basis of not very pretty stereotypes. Some of these provisions, of course, were quietly repealed in calmer times.

These actions, both the provocative rhetoric and the specifically punitive policies, were clearly driven by electoral calculations. In campaign after campaign before the 1996 elections, Senators and members of Congress bragged about their toughness on welfare. Those who had voted against the welfare law (and even some who had voted for it, if they had voted against earlier harsher versions) were accused by their opponents of being anti-work and anti-family.

Back at the White House, advisor Dick Morris was conducting daily polls and focus groups for the President's reelection campaign. Morris reported that his polling results indicated that the president would drop 15 points in his approval ratings and risk defeat in the real polls if he vetoed the welfare bill; this finding, he says, strongly influenced the president's decision to sign the bill against the nearly unanimous advice of his cabinet (Morris, 1997). Both Congress and President appeared to be responding to a voting public that was angry about welfare, impatient for change, and ready to punish any politician that got in the way.

Interestingly, however, the provisions of the welfare bill that was passed and signed were in many respects more draconian than the public told the poll-takers they supported, about which more below. It would seem, then that the ugliness of the welfare process at its end was not the inevitable result of an angry and ugly electorate. So how do we understand what happened? How do we understand the role, if any, of policy research and analysis? And how should we think about what we, as policy researchers and analysts, might do to make the next round of welfare policy making less divisive and more civil?

POLICY, POLICY RESEARCH AND PUBLIC OPINION

Luckily, to understand what happened I am not forced to rely solely on my surely biased memory. Kent Weaver of the Brookings Institution has recently published a masterful study of the 1996 welfare reform, called *Ending Welfare as We Know It* (Weaver, 2000). I want to highlight and interpret some of his insights especially on the role of policy research, while absolving him of any responsibility for the conclusions I draw.

In an early speech about policy research and the 1996 welfare reform law, my argument went something like this: Surely the process would have been more civil and rational if policy research (specifically that of colleagues whose arguments I found politically compatible) had had more of a role in formulating the legislation. Those policy researchers should have been listened to more. To help this along, policy researchers need to become better communicators and more effective spokespersons for rational, empirically based, right-minded strategies.

Weaver's analysis makes it hard to hold on to this line of thought. He reminds us that in 1988, policy research, especially the evaluations of welfare to work programs conducted by MDRC, was extremely influential in the formulation and passage of the Family Support Act. By that time, there was some consensus among the researchers that Congress paid attention to about what the data showed and about what should be done, and—though this is no doubt overstating the history—it more or less was.

Then a number of things happened. Welfare caseloads grew dramatically starting in about 1988. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton discovered in 1992 that when he

said “end welfare as we know it” his focus groups applauded and his poll numbers went up, so he kept saying it. The welfare issue was back on the agenda.

The policy research industry grew and became much more diverse, including, for example, policy research units that were part of both liberal and conservative advocacy organizations. Policy researchers also became much more sophisticated in communicating their analyses and findings, both to policy makers and in the media. They published in opinion magazines as well as in scholarly journals; they learned how to write press releases and to network with reporters. They also became more sophisticated in reinterpreting and discrediting research that suggested other conclusions.

The research that was being done and communicated was of several types. Some of it was straightforward description of growing problems, particularly long-term dependency and births out of wedlock, especially to teenagers. Some of it attempted to be explanatory of these trends, none of which was particularly definitive or persuasive. Program evaluations, of both work programs and teen pregnancy prevention programs, also tended to produce ambiguous and mostly small positive or negative results, thus documenting well what did not work but being much less able to identify programs that did.

Weaver notes three ways in which research and analysis can be and were used in the policy making process: to sound fire-alarms, to provide technocratic solutions, and to be used as ammunition for positions developed in other contexts. In the 1990s the research clearly sounded fire alarms, and focused attention on the problems of long term welfare use and of unmarried parenthood. (Weaver, 2000, pp. 135-168) It was ill-suited to provide technocratic solutions to these problems, since it revealed no clear consensus on either explanations or policy. For these same reasons, it was well suited to be used as ammunition by all sides, a process that was at least acquiesced in if not actively encouraged by policy researchers seeking to be relevant.

The research was used by three types of interest groups in influencing the 1996 legislation: liberal child advocacy groups, intergovernmental groups such as the National Governors Association, and newly important social conservative groups. All three groups could use research describing the problem as support for arguments that something needed to be done. To use an example of research which I know personally, all three types of groups at one point or other cited research documenting the length of time recipients stayed on welfare as evidence of a problem (Bane and Ellwood, 1994), but since the research showed that the caseload was indeed diverse, liberal groups could use it to emphasize the need for welfare as transition, conservative groups to emphasize the problem of long term dependency and intergovernmental groups to conclude that things were so complicated that the federal government should not mandate a universal program. As another example (which I also know personally) research showed no or very modest effects of welfare benefits levels on rates of unmarried parenthood (Ellwood and Bane, 1985). Liberal groups used this finding to argue that welfare benefits could be raised or at least should not be cut; conservatives to argue that to have any effect the welfare system itself needed to be abolished; and intergovernmental groups to argue for state flexibility.

More interesting than the play of interest groups, however, at least to my mind, was the role of public opinion. 1996 was, after all, an election year, and both presidential and congressional candidates were relentlessly polling and measuring public opinion in great detail. What they found was that the public hated welfare, a finding which was of course magnified by the political rhetoric designed to respond to it, and that the public wanted something done about it and done fast.

More specifically, polls fairly consistently showed public support for government help for the poor who cannot help themselves. They also documented a belief,

especially in the early 1990s, that most people on welfare could in fact help themselves. The public's conclusion was that welfare did more harm than good, in that it encouraged irresponsible family and work behavior. When polled on reactions to welfare reform packages, large proportions of the public indicated approval for any set of reforms (including "replacing welfare with tax credits and stronger child support enforcement") over the existing system. When asked about specific provisions, large proportions of poll respondents expressed support for work requirements, family caps, requiring teen mothers to live at home, time limits followed by a guaranteed job and separate benefits for children if their parents' benefits were cut off (Weaver, 2000, pp. 169-195; Gilens, 1999).

These polls could be interpreted as showing that the public preferred a policy package more like the early Clinton proposal than like the stringent law that was enacted. The strongest emotions, however, were anger at the existing system and support for something, anything, to be done about welfare, driven by a perception that most people on welfare did not need or deserve to receive it. The political dynamic in this context favored the policy makers who controlled the agenda, who after 1994 were the conservative Congressional republicans. Weaver documents the political positioning and repositioning that went on in the Administration and among moderate members of Congress as they joined the drive to pass a bill that would respond to the public anger. (Weaver, 2000, pp. 355-385) The result, not inevitable but understandable, was a relatively punitive bill and an even more punitive and divisive rhetoric.

What shaped the public's anger? Martin Gilens, in a fine book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, (Gilens, 1999) has attempted to explain it, especially in light of the fact that Americans also consistently express to pollsters a compassionate stance toward the poor and a general assent to the proposition that government should do more to help the poor. He concludes that racial attitudes are at least partly responsible for the hatred of welfare, and that media bias in reporting on poverty and welfare reinforces racial stereotypes.

What role, if any, might policy research have played in shaping these public perceptions? Perhaps policy research findings, communicated effectively by more sophisticated researchers, generated some stories, mostly likely of the "fire alarm" variety, which were not meant to be, but could have been, interpreted as documenting race or class differences in attitudes or behavior. Policy research might also have been used as ammunition by advocates and politicians who initiated stories and responded to reporters' calls, just as it was in the interest group debates. In this mode, given the character of the research, it would most likely have been used to discredit the ability of work-welfare, teen pregnancy and other programs to effectively speak to the problems.

Policy research and analysis is unlikely, to be sure, to have had a large independent effect on media stories and public attitudes. It may, however, have been part of an overall dynamic that led to the end that we observed. Policy experts were relatively active and sophisticated in their participation in media coverage and legislative decision making. The research was not, and given the problems could not have been, consensual. It was interpreted in the ideological frameworks of other participants in the debate, supporting positions that hardened over time, resulting in, I would argue, some ugly outcomes and an ugly process.

WHAT NEXT?

So there, in one interpretation, is more or less what happened.

The question now is that of how policy researchers and analysts should think about their roles in the next round of welfare reform debates, and in public policy making

more generally. The most important thing we should do, I believe, is to shift our perception of from seeing ourselves mostly as expert problem solvers to seeing ourselves mostly as participants in democratic deliberation. This shift casts some new light both on our own responsibilities and on the rules of the game.

The shift in perspective is warranted both for practical and for normative reasons. In the welfare reform case there was not, and given the nature of the problem probably could not have been, a technocratic solution to a well defined problem that was clearly in the public interest and that was attractive to all sides in the debate. The welfare policy context was thus quite different from the case of agricultural subsidies, which Lee Friedman discussed in 1998 (Friedman, 1999), about which analysts had solutions that they more or less agreed on. That welfare may be more typical is supported by Nancy Shulock's (1999) empirical study of the use of policy analysis by the U.S. Congress, which suggested that the main uses of policy analysis are in contentious and competitive situations. But even in cases like that of agricultural subsidies, the solutions still must be considered and adopted by democratic processes; the experts must still be participants in the debates.

What are our responsibilities as participants in these debates? First, we should be more self-conscious, realistic and modest about what we do: that we are making contributions to public discussion in which we do not control either the outcomes or the use of our findings.

In this "open market" for research and analysis, we should, of course, adhere to the norms developed in all the scholarly disciplines to search impartially for the truth, to use high quality methodologies and to present our methods and findings with scrupulous clarity and honesty. But we must also, I believe, pay much more attention to our practices of drawing and communicating "policy implications," since we are often asked to do so, and since our own interest in policy motivates us to respond. Some of us will avoid the temptation; others of us will write those last paragraphs of the paper pretty much as an afterthought or as our own op-ed, perhaps expecting that because our research is good, our policy conclusions also deserve deference.

But in keeping with an attitude of humility and respect for democratic policies, policy researchers and analysts should instead scrupulously attend to and explicate the process by which we move from our empirical or analytic findings to our policy recommendations, when we choose to draw them, both in our scholarly writing and in our more public presentations. This also implies attending to the process by which others might move from the same findings to different recommendations. Occasionally the movement is straight-forward and dissent unthinkable: everybody has agreed on the definition of the problem, the analysis has yielded a uniquely attractive solution to the problem, and the implication is that the solution should be adopted. Usually, however, moving from analysis to policy requires background assumptions, value choices, assessments of what values or outcomes are more and less important, preferences about how to proceed or not in the presence of uncertainty, and so on. As contributors to the debate, analysts ought to put their whole thinking process on the table for discussion and examination. And they ought to be ready to examine and discuss alternative thinking.

To do this well, we ought, I believe, individually and collectively, improve our skills in integrating moral, cultural and political reasoning into our drawing of policy conclusions. Most policy analysts tend to operate, implicitly or explicitly, with a utilitarian model of how problems ought to be solved and a relatively crude interest group model of how politics works (Bardach, 2000; Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978). We can do better, and many of our colleagues in other disciplines have. One good approach would be to invite contributions from and collaborations with philosophers,

political theorists, theologians and other scholars of the humanities whose business is the explication of moral stances and cultural symbols (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; NCCB, 1986; Rawls, 1971). Policy debate is complicated, appropriately, because it involves so much of what we care about as persons and citizens: facts and analyses, of course, and individual preferences, but also deeply held ways of looking at and assessing the value of the world. Most of us are only good at one piece of this work. I suggest that we as a profession ought to take responsibility for expanding our horizons.

We should also educate ourselves, individually and collectively, on both empirical and normative approaches to understanding the process of policy making in a democracy. We ought especially to work to understand the model of deliberative democracy, as articulated by political theorists (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Mansbridge, 1980). Understanding that normative model might help us shape our contributions in ways that advance intelligent respectful deliberation, and that counter stereotyping and rash conclusions.

On the empirical side, we might turn some of our research and analytic attention to understanding the perceptions, values and ways of thinking that are so important in shaping public debate and decision making. Really understanding why Americans hated welfare, what shaped their attitudes, and how, if at all, their attitudes might have changed over the last few years, could be the most important contribution research could make to the next round of debates. Here too our colleagues in other disciplines, including psychology and sociology, in addition to political science, have much to contribute.

Finally, and I hesitate some to propose this, I suggest that we ought to engage as a profession with issues around the rules of the game. We need to be worrying not just about professional integrity in the standard disciplinary sense but also about how we present ourselves and ask to be recognized as participants in discussion: I have argued here for less of an expert problem-solving stance and more of one of contributor to the debates. In entering the debates, we implicitly agree to make our commitments and reasoning clear, to subject ourselves to questions and challenges, and to place our finding and our inferences into the public domain, as it were, for use by all takers. Perhaps we need some guidelines on when and how we ought to feel obliged to participate and when silence might be allowed or required.

In doing so for ourselves, we can also contribute to the rules of the game for policy making more generally. We can try to make and enforce a distinction between the use of information and analysis in open discussion and the use of information to degrade the process, by for example, violating principles of equal respect or equal voice. This would allow us to tolerate, indeed encourage, the widespread use and interpretation of information to explore all the political alternatives, but to challenge and call people on the use of information to stereotype or close off debate.

These would, I think, be splendid topics for future research conferences, that could make a genuine difference to the quality of contributions to our democracy by our profession—a profession that I have indeed been honored to serve as president of APPAM.

Seattle WA
November 2000

Some of the material in this talk was presented in the Beth and Richard Sackler Lecture in Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, September 1997.

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