Public Opposition to Welfare Spending Declines

When the U.S. Congress passed landmark welfare reform legislation in 1996, elected officials had the support of the public to back them. Six years later, Congress is debating whether to reauthorize the legislation, officially titled Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

However, Americans have become less opposed to welfare benefits since the law was first enacted, according to an analysis by Columbia Political Science Department Chair Robert Shapiro and Greg Shaw, GSAS, Ph.D’98, a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University.

The research was conducted at Columbia’s Institute for Social and Economic Research Policy (ISERP), an interdisciplinary research organization for the social sciences and public policy. Analyzing poll results from several sources, including Gallup, the New York Times/CBS News and the Wall Street Journal/NBC, Shapiro and Shaw noted that in December 1994, 57 percent of respondents thought that “most people who receive money from welfare could get along without it if they tried.”

But by January 2001 this percentage had dropped to 37 percent. Conversely, in December 1994 only 36 percent of respondents felt that welfare “really need this help,” but by January 2001, 47 percent held this view.

Shapiro and Shaw also note that according to a survey by the National Election Studies between 1996 and 2000, the percentage of Americans in favor of cutting federal spending on food stamps fell from 45 percent to 30 percent.

“Large percentages of Americans still believe most people on welfare don’t need government assistance, but in the past few years, that has become the minority position,” said Shaw.

“This shift in public opinion on welfare spending seems due to the adoption of stricter eligibility guidelines and work requirements for welfare recipients,” said Shapiro, co-author of “The National Public” (Chicago, 2002) and “Politicians Don’t Pander” (Chicago, 2000). “The public may be more willing to support welfare spending if they believe the money was spent on the working poor or those genuinely unable to provide for themselves.”

Additional limits of TANF include limits on increased benefits for additional children under welfare, limits on benefits for minor mothers and time limits on cash benefits.

Shapiro and Shaw attributed the shift in public opinion to the 1996 welfare reform legislation rather than changes in the economy. Historically, they said, support for welfare spending increases during tough economic times and recedes during prosperous ones. However, in the late 1990s, when the economy was booming, public opposition to welfare spending decreased—directly at odds with public opinion trends from the 1970s and 1980s.

They also noted news coverage of welfare as a topic had declined since the mid-1990s. Using a Lexis-Nexis search during 1995 and 1996, Shaw and Shapiro retrieved more than 4,000 stories—2,193 in 1995 and 1,861 in 1996. However, in 2001, a similar search retrieved only 350 articles on the same subject.

Their analysis appeared in the March-April issue of the Roger Center’s “Public Perspective” and will be included in an forthcoming issue of “Public Opinion Quarterly.”

Prominent Downtown Theatre Co. To Perform in Lerner’s Black Box

A fully staged reading of Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night” by Blue Heron Theatre, a prominent downtown theatre company, will launch Columbia’s new Arts Uptown program. The expansion of Passport to New York, Arts Uptown will bring theatre companies to the Morningside Heights campus for one-night performances.

The performance will take place in Lerner’s Black Box Theatre at 8 p.m. on Monday, March 18.

Thomas James O’Leary was the dolucion in “Phantom of the Opera” for two years on Broadway and on tour. He was most recently seen at Yale Repertory Theatre in George Bernard Shaw’s “You Never Can Tell” and takes on the role of the social climber Malvolio in “Twelfth Night.”

Others in the cast include Eunice Wong, a recent graduate of the Juilliard School, as Viola. Emmi Smith, an actor and singer with credits in such musicals as “Promenades Bound” and “As You Like It” to musicals from the 1990s to watch. The performance is at the Visitors Center, 212-305-9750 for more information about volunteering or donations of products, services or funds.

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