## Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy

## Martin Gilens University of Chicago Press, 1999, 296 pages, \$23.00 Reviewed by Amy Bartels

Martin Gilens' book, Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media and the politics of antipoverty policy, effectively uses evidence from public opinion polls, an analysis of public policy and welfare reforms and content analysis of media reports to examine the complex reasons for opposition to welfare in the United States. Based on his empirical analysis, Gilens concludes, as the title suggests, that negative feelings about welfare are related to the perception of welfare as a program for African Americans and the misrepresentation in the media of most welfare recipients as black and the undeserving poor. This book informs researchers in a variety of fields including public policy, political science, mass communications, social welfare and race relations.

Although most would agree that social and political structures shape government policy toward the welfare state, Gilens argues that there is less general acceptance about the influence of public opinion. Using data from 10 different public opinion polls over an almost ten year period (1986 - 1995), Gilens examines the public opinions of Americans in relation to increasing or decreasing spending on social welfare programs (Table 1.2, p. In almost every program area, the majority interviewed believes that spending 28). should be increased. The data indicate that the general support for social welfare is not limited to just programs benefiting large numbers of Americans, such as social security and education but also for more targeted populations, such as the poor - 71 percent polled believe that spending should be increased to fight poverty (Table 1.2, p. 28). The results would seem to indicate that Americans do support social welfare programs but when asked about whether welfare spending or support for people on welfare should be increased, Americans indicated they were strongly opposed to these general programs. Sixty-three percent believe welfare spending should be decreased and 71 percent indicate spending for people on welfare should be decreased. These two results are essentially contradictory - Americans support helping the poor but do not support welfare, the primary program designed to help the poor.

Gilens presents four possible explanations for the opposition to welfare - individualism, economic self-interest, perceptions that welfare recipients are undeserving and racial attitudes. Using data from public opinion polls, Gilens rejects that individualism and self-interest can explain the underlying opposition to welfare but finds support for the influence of racial attitudes and the perception that welfare recipients are undeserving.

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Gilens analysis is not simply limited to presenting descriptive data from multiple surveys and polls to support his arguments. Using survey data from the 1991 National Race and Political Study he also completes a careful statistical analysis of his four possible explanations of individualism, economic self-interest, perceptions of welfare recipients as undeserving and racial attitudes. Restricting the statistical model to non-black respondents he finds strong support for the explanation of racial attitudes (blacks as lazy) and welfare recipients as undeserving as "central elements in generating public opposition to welfare" (p. 92).

The question Gilens poses is how do we account for these perceptions of welfare recipients as undeserving and the racial attitudes, in particular the attitude of blacks as lazy. To understand how the poor have been portrayed in the media, Gilens traces the media representation of the poor over the past forty-five years in *Time, Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* as well as television news coverage for three historical periods, 1968, 1982-83 and 1988-1992. From 1950 through 1964, the poor people portrayed were predominantly white, but from 1967 through 1992, blacks averaged 57 percent of the poor portrayed, almost double the proportion of blacks in pictures of poverty, during the period of 1972-1973, when there was general widespread public opinion of problems with welfare, African Americans were represented in 70 percent of the stories indexed under poverty and in 75 percent of the stories indexed under welfare (p. 123).

Gilens suggests that this misrepresentation in the media contributes significantly to Americans' opposition to welfare. The deserving poor - the elderly and the working poor - are typically portrayed as poor white individuals whereas poor blacks have appeared mostly in stories about welfare abuse or the underclass (p. 154). The stereotype of blacks as lazy is an image that has prevailed throughout history, and as stated earlier this perception was found to be a strong determinant to non-blacks opposition to welfare.

Gilens states that his focus of this book is not on racial policy but rather welfare policy, a program designed to be race neutral but that beliefs about blacks are central to opinions about welfare and therefore should be considered in discussions of welfare. The recent welfare reforms emphasize work and returning welfare recipients to work as soon as possible. This emphasis lends support to Gilens' argument that opposition to welfare is driven by images of the undeserving poor and welfare recipients as lazy.

The focus on decreasing caseloads by quickly returning individuals to work leads states to concentrate on placing the most employable first. According to research by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) (2003) the face of welfare is changing. While the representation of blacks among welfare recipients stayed stable three years after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), they are the only group who experienced an increase in the percentage of non-welfare low-income single parents. IWPR states their findings are consistent with research that white low-income single parents may be able to move out of poverty easier than racial/ethnic minority groups. These findings also support Gilens' concerns about the racialization of welfare and the need for awareness of welfare policies that may unfairly impact racial minorities.

Although Gilens more than adequately addresses the impact of racial attitudes on the opposition to welfare, he neglects to consider the issue of gender and how the picture of the welfare abuser is often portrayed as a black unemployed mother with several children. Racial inequalities are important to consider when discussing welfare reform, but as an overwhelming number of welfare recipients women, it is important to also consider inequities related to gender including labor market and education issues (IWPR, 2003).

This book adeptly analyzes a complex subject by using multiple sources of data and techniques to support the author's arguments. The book is an important contribution to framing public policy in relation to social welfare, poverty and race relations. In addition the book contributes to the knowledge base on the power of the media in influencing public opinion and political viewpoints and helping to shape the nature of welfare reform.

## References

Institute for Women's Policy Research (2003). *Before & after welfare reform: The work and well-being of low-income single parent families*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

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