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Author(s): Joe Soss, Sanford F. Schram, Thomas P. Vartanian and Erin O'Brien

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Setting the Terms of Relief: Explaining State Policy Choices in the Devolution Revolution

Joe Soss American University

Sanford F. Schram Bryn Mawr College

Thomas P. Vartanian Bryn Mawr College

Erin O'Brien American University

The landmark welfare legislation of 1996 offers students of politics a unique opportunity to pinpoint the determinants of state-level policy choices—a case in which the fifty states responded virtually simultaneously to a single policy mandate. Taking advantage of this opportunity, we investigate the factors that led states to make restrictive policy choices after 1996 and use this analysis to evaluate general theories of welfare politics. Specifically, we test six types of explanations for why some states responded by adopting “get-tough” program rules: theories that identify welfare policy as a site of ideological conflict, as an outcome of electoral politics, as a domain of policy innovation, as an instrument of social control, as an outlet for racial resentments, and as an expression of moral values. The results of our ordered and binary logit models suggest that state policies have been shaped by a variety of social and political forces, but especially by the racial composition of families who rely on program benefits.

In 1996, the federal government passed legislation that transformed public assistance provision in the United States. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) abolished the federal entitlement to aid that grew out of the Social Security Act of 1935 and reached fruition through legal victories in the 1960s (Mink 1998; Lurie 1997). In its place, the federal government created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a system of block grants that gives states more freedom to select among policy tools but also imposes a forceful mandate to promote work, reduce welfare usage, and change poor people’s behaviors (Albelda and Tilly 1997).

In this article, we present a political analysis of the ways states responded to this new policy environment. Specifically, we investigate the factors that shaped state-level policy choices after 1996 and use this analysis as a basis for evaluating general explanations for welfare policy outcomes. Our study builds on a long tradition of quantitative research that has attempted to illuminate state-level politics by asking why states adopt different welfare policies (Howard 1999; Rom 1999; Brace and Jewitt 1995; Peterson and Rom 1990; Plotnick and Winters 1985). The analysis presented here, however, departs from prior work in two important respects.

First, most state-level research has sought to explain interstate differences in benefit levels and spending patterns (Howard 1999, 424–425;

Joe Soss is Associate Professor of Government, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20016-8130 (jsoss@american.edu). Sanford F. Schram is Visiting Professor of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr College, 300 Airdale Rd., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010-1697 (sschram@brynawr.edu). Thomas Vartanian is Associate Professor of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr College, 300 Airdale Rd., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010-1697 (tvartani@brynawr.edu). Erin O'Brien is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Government, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20016-8130 (eo8950a@american.edu).

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Peterson and Rom 1990).¹ By contrast, we analyze variation in the institutional form of welfare provision—the rules and penalties that condition access to resources and structure the treatment citizens receive in government programs. In the 1990s, public officials showed renewed interest in using program rules as tools to modify poor people's behaviors (Mead 1997). The federal government's 1996 law emphasized such aid requirements, and as states responded to this directive, their policy changes focused less on the amounts of relief offered than on the terms on which aid is given (Schram 1999). Indeed, preliminary evidence suggests that states have differed markedly in the policies they have adopted (Mettler 2000) and that these policy choices have been a major factor driving interstate differences in caseload reduction (Rector and Youssef 1999).

Second, most prior research has been unable to compare policy choices made during a single time period under roughly similar conditions. Most cross-sectional studies, for example, appear to analyze variation in welfare grants for a single year, but the policy choices that set the grants for any given year were actually made at different times in different states. As a result, the analysis includes a great deal of unobserved variation in the political forces impinging on states as they acted to set their grant levels. In addition, such historical lags raise doubts about how well indicators for a given year of analysis actually measure the conditions that existed in the year grant levels were established. Our analysis addresses these problems by taking advantage of the unique circumstances surrounding the welfare legislation of 1996. Here, we have a case in which the fifty states responded virtually simultaneously to a single policy mandate. From an analytic standpoint, it is hard to imagine a stronger opportunity to pinpoint the determinants of state-level policy choices. To date, researchers have produced some good case studies (Francis 1999) and efforts to classify state policies (Mettler 2000), but there have been few systematic analyses of why states responded to the federal mandate in different ways.

In sum, this study presents an empirical assessment of theories purporting to explain welfare policy choices in the American states. In addition to shedding light on the political dynamics of contemporary reform, we intend for this quantitative case study to illuminate longstanding questions surrounding the political determinants of welfare policy.

¹The exceptions here include several studies that have addressed state-level differences in eligibility criteria (e.g., Hanson 1983, 1984; Grogan 1994) and some more recent studies of state waiver requests (Lieberman and Shaw, 2000).

Welfare Policymaking: A New Division of Labor

When the federal government abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program in 1996, it removed a framework of rules that had structured state-level administration of cash aid since the 1960s. With its new system of block grants, the 1996 law ended the federal guarantee of matching funds and allowed states to pursue a wider variety of policy innovations without seeking waivers from the federal government. Proponents touted the new TANF system as a “devolution revolution” that would liberate the states from stifling federal rules and allow them to create more effective poverty policies. Such claims contain a grain of truth regarding shifts in the intergovernmental division of labor, but they also convey the misleading impression that states now enjoy an unprecedented degree of liberty.

In the American political system defined by federalism, localism, and a relatively weak and fragmented national government, state-level politics has always played a key role in shaping the amount and form of public aid for the poor (Trattner 1999; Noble 1997; Skocpol 1996). Beginning in 1911 with mothers' pensions and later, after 1935, in the Aid to Dependent Children program, state administration and interstate variation were defining features of public aid for poor families (Gordon 1994). In the wake of insurgent activism and legal victories in the 1960s, the federal government applied a broad set of national standards to state-level administrators (Davis 1993; Melnick 1994). Interstate variation, however, remained a signal characteristic of the AFDC program that distinguished it from the national system of social insurance coverage in the United States (Peterson and Rom 1990).

With the passage of PRWORA in 1996, states gained more authority over eligibility rules and administrative procedures than they had enjoyed for three decades (Mettler 2000). At the same time, however, the federal law also imposed a variety of new mandates that constrained the policy options available to state lawmakers and bureaucrats (Kincaid 1998). For example, the federal government set strict quotas on the percentage of adult recipients who must participate in “work-related activities” and defined these activities in a narrow manner that left the states with little room to maneuver.² Likewise, the

²States were required to have 25 percent of the targeted caseload working twenty hours per week in 1997 and 50 percent of the caseload working thirty hours per week by the year 2002. Moreover, the law's definition of “work-related activities” limited education and training to no more than one year. Subsequent legislation restricted the number of recipients states could have in education and training programs to no more than 20 percent of clients counted in the work quota.

1996 law prohibited states from spending TANF funds on nonworking individuals who receive assistance for more than two years or on individuals who receive assistance for more than five years in a lifetime.

The public assistance system established in 1996 can be described as one in which the states enjoy increased discretion in choosing *means* so long as they toe the line in meeting federally prescribed *ends*. In principle, this system permits states to adopt policies that make benefits more accessible to poor families and that enable clients to pursue new opportunities. Indeed, a small number of states emphasized enabling and opportunity-producing policies, and most states passed at least some policies that fall into this category (Berlin 2000; Massing 2000). Momentum for welfare reform in the 1990s, however, was fueled by perceptions that AFDC was too permissive, and the federal legislation in 1996 reinforced this zeitgeist by creating outcome-based penalties for states that did not act quickly to enforce work and lower caseloads (Bryner 1998). The result, as Mettler (2000) has shown, is that policy innovation in the states has been skewed in a restrictive and punitive direction. Many states stuck close to the basic requirements set forth by the federal government. But among those that deviated, the vast majority “used their new authority to limit access to social provision and, most especially, to shift the balance in welfare policy design from rights to obligations, imposing burdensome sanctions on recipients” (Mettler 2000, 26).

In what follows, we attempt to account for this predominant pattern. Why were some states more likely than others to pursue a “get-tough” welfare strategy based on restrictive and punitive policy choices? To answer this question, we begin by identifying the policy choices that best capture the 1990s movement against “welfare permissiveness” and then use leading theories of welfare politics to derive hypotheses regarding TANF policy choices.

Get-Tough Policy Choices in the States

In selecting policy choices for analysis, we emphasized two goals: covering the major domains of get-tough welfare reform in a thorough manner and identifying the policy choices that were most salient in public debate and widely considered in the states. Surveying scholarly books and articles, policy reports, legislative materials, and mass media, we found a consistent emphasis on four key areas in which lawmakers sought to end permissiveness.

The first focused on imposing obligations in exchange for assistance, especially the obligation to work. Here, the central policy choice for states was whether to

demand work from recipients earlier than the federal requirement of twenty-four months. The second goal for reformers was to end long-term program dependency. In this area, the key choice for states was whether to adopt a lifetime eligibility cutoff shorter than the federal limit of sixty months. The third dimension of the reform agenda focused on social behavior, especially the reproductive behaviors of poor women. Here, the most widely debated policy choice was whether to impose a “family cap” denying additional benefits to children conceived by recipients. Fourth, reformers called for penalties tough enough to force compliance with the new regime of program rules. Toward this end, states could choose a weak, moderate, or strong sanction policy to punish client infractions.

These four policy options received the lion's share of attention in media coverage of welfare reform in 1996 and 1997.³ Likewise, accounts of the legislative process suggest that these policies consistently took center-stage in national and state-level debates (Bryner 1998). Finally, we also found an emphasis on these same policy choices in our review of scholarly studies.⁴

Accordingly, our analysis predicts four types of state policy choices. First, we analyze the factors that led states to adopt weak, moderate, or strong sanctions.⁵ Sanction

³As a crude measure of media attention, we searched Lexis/Nexis for newspaper stories in the fifty states that addressed welfare reform. Between January 1996 and December 1997, we found 1,308 welfare stories on time limits, 1,094 welfare stories on work requirements, 682 welfare stories on the family cap option, and 909 welfare stories on sanctions policy. Attention to these four policy choices dwarfed coverage of other key policy changes such as “diversion” policies designed to stanch the flow of applicants into welfare programs (188 stories) and drug-testing policies aimed at curbing the use of illicit substances (343 stories).

⁴Secombe (1999, 168), for example, identifies time limits, work requirements, and family caps as the three most controversial new program rules under welfare reform. Gilens (1999, 184, 189) notes that work requirements “have been a part of every welfare reform effort since the Johnson administration” and argues that “time limits represent the most radical and potentially the most important element in the 1996 welfare reform legislation.” Writing during the midst of the debates that culminated in PRWORA, Handler (1995, 113) concludes that “the heart of current welfare reform proposals... are time limits and work requirements.” Summarizing legislative debates in the states, Bryner (1998, 249, 260) writes that “placing time limits on welfare recipients has become the most prominent restrictive reform in eligibility” and “the family cap has become the most popular reform” in the area of social behavior. Lieberman and Shaw (2000) conclude that the states “seem to be converging on a small number of policy instruments (of which the family cap, the time limit, and work requirements are the most important and well-known examples).”

⁵Our trichotomous measure is based on coding from an analysis by Rector and Youssef (1999). Sixteen states (AK, CA, HI, IN, KY, ME, MN, MO, MT, NY, NC, PA, RI, VT, WA) adopted weak sanctions that permit welfare agencies to sanction only the adult portion of the TANF check, except in unusual circumstances. Thus,

strength provides direct evidence of a state's willingness to restrict access to aid for families who are needy but deemed to be out of compliance with new program rules. In addition, states adopting stronger sanctions have experienced significantly larger declines in their welfare caseloads since 1996.⁶ Our other three dependent variables are dichotomies that measure whether states adopted a work requirement stricter than the federal requirement of twenty-four months, a time limit shorter than the federal limit of sixty months, and a family cap denying benefits to children conceived by current recipients.⁷ As a group, these program rules define the key terms of participation for citizens who seek aid under the TANF program; they also capture the most fundamental goals of 1990s welfare reform.

In analyzing these new program rules, it is essential to confront the possibility that political forces may affect different policy choices in different ways. Family caps, time limits, and work requirements are widely viewed as complementary tools for combating "permissiveness," but each is tied to a unique goal articulated by reformers: deterring childbirth among recipients, enforcing work obligations, and ending long-term dependency. In addition to variation across these three policy areas, we might also expect sanction policies to emerge from a distinctive set of political forces. Unlike the other three policies, sanctions are broad punitive tools used to enforce a di-

recipients retain the bulk of their family's TANF benefits even if they fail to perform workfare or other required activities. Twenty-one states (AL, AZ, CO, CT, DE, IL, IA, LA, MD, MA, MI, NV, NH, NJ, NM, ND, OR, SD, TX, UT, WV) adopted moderate sanctions. Nineteen of these states imposed a progressive sequence of penalties, sanctioning the full TANF check only after longer periods of noncompliance or repeated performance infractions. Two adopted policies that sanction the full family check only under specific circumstances. Fourteen states (AR, FL, GA, ID, KS, MS, NE, OH, OK, SC, TN, VA, WI, WY) adopted strong sanctions that eliminate aid for the full family at the first instance of noncompliance with a program requirement.

⁶Examining caseload changes from January 1997 to June 1999, we find that states with stronger sanctions had significantly steeper declines ($F = 7.745, p = .001$). On average, the TANF rolls dropped by 31 percent in states with weak sanctions, 41 percent in states with moderate sanctions, and 53 percent in states with strong sanctions. These results are consistent with those reported by Recitor and Youssef (1999) for January 1997 to June 1998.

⁷Our measures are based on a report published by the American Public Welfare Association (1997). Twenty-six states adopted a work requirement stricter than the federal requirement: AR, AZ, CT, FL, GA, IA, ID, IL, MA, MI, MN, MT, NC, ND, NH, NM, NY, OK, OR, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WA, WI. Twenty-one states adopted a time limit shorter than the federal requirement: AR, AZ, CT, DE, FL, GA, ID, IL, IN, LA, MA, NC, NE, NM, OH, OR, SC, TN, TX, UT, VA. Twenty-one states adopted a family cap: AR, AZ, CA, CT, DE, FL, GA, IL, IN, MA, MD, MS, NC, ND, NE, NJ, SC, TN, VA, WI, WY.

versity of program rules that may have very different political constituencies. Because of this greater reach and ambiguity, sanction choices may be subject to a wider range of influences.

Accordingly, we adopt a cautious analytic approach that takes no *a priori* position on whether the policy choices examined here should be treated as separate dimensions of reform or merely as multiple indicators of one outcome shaped by a single underlying political process. We begin by predicting state placement on a general index of policy severity constructed by giving states one point for each of the four restrictive policies it adopted. We then present separate analyses of each of our four policy choices. These analyses make it possible to directly observe whether particular political factors relate to our four policy outcomes in different ways.

Explaining State Policy Choices: Theories and Hypotheses

Theoretical and empirical literatures on welfare politics suggest states may differ systematically in their willingness to adopt stringent welfare policies. Our analysis tests hypotheses derived from six theoretical approaches. These approaches offer contrasting (but not mutually exclusive) images of welfare policy as an arena for policy innovation, a site of ideological conflict, an outcome of electoral politics, a mechanism of social control, an outlet for racial resentments, and a forum of moralistic problem-solving. (See appendix for measures, sources, and descriptive statistics for all variables.)

Problem Solving and Morality Politics

Since the earliest Poor Laws in England, the morality of the poor and the propriety of their behaviors have served as focal points for debates over public aid (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991). Critics in the 1980s and 90s (e.g., Murray 1984; Mead 1985, 1992) echoed a long tradition of observers who argued that permissive welfare policies invited personal irresponsibility and that more paternalistic welfare policies would achieve moral uplift and "improve" poor people (Katz 1989, 1995). Scholars typically link such uses of welfare policy to two types of political goals: the instrumental goals of punishing and changing behaviors perceived to be deviant and the expressive goal of affirming majoritarian values to the broader citizenry (Gans 1995; Handler 1995).

From this perspective, recent changes in welfare policy may be viewed as a form of problem solving driven

by concern over counter-normative behavior among the poor (Bryner 1998). In the 1990s, as in earlier periods, two such problems took center stage. The first arose from perceptions that poor people were spending too much time on the welfare rolls and that caseloads had become bloated due to a deepening problem of welfare dependency (Mead 1992, 1997). The second moral dimension focused on women's reproductive and marital behaviors (Mink 1998). To many public officials, the AFDC program seemed to discourage the formation of two-parent families and, perhaps, to encourage childbirth among unmarried women and teens (see Luker 1996). Public debates over welfare returned repeatedly to what critics called "the illegitimacy problem" (Bryner 1998), and in its preamble, the PRWORA identified the promotion of two-parent families as an important goal for TANF programs in the states (PL 104-193).

To influence policy choices, political discourses of "dependency" and "illegitimacy" need not be grounded in actual patterns of behavior (Gans 1995; Schram 1995; Fraser and Gordon 1994). But policymakers concerned about such issues may also respond to real conditions, adopting tougher policies when confronted with behavior patterns that deviate more sharply from prevailing values. Accordingly, our first two hypotheses suggest that tougher welfare policies should be adopted in states with higher rates of "problematic" behavior. The *dependency hypothesis* predicts that states with higher caseload-to-population ratios under AFDC in 1996 will adopt more restrictive policies under the TANF system. This hypothesis is general in scope but applies with particular force to time-limit policies that explicitly target dependency by placing absolute boundaries on program usage. The *reproductive-behavior hypothesis* predicts that more restrictive TANF policies will be adopted by states in which a higher percentage of all 1996 births were to unmarried mothers. While unmarried birthrates do not have an obvious connection to work requirements and time limits, we expect them to have a greater impact on the family cap (a policy aimed squarely at reproductive behavior) and sanction policy (a general punitive tool).

Welfare Liberalism: Ideology and Practice

Responses to the new TANF system may also reflect relatively durable differences in state orientations toward welfare provision. Differing beliefs about government's proper role in ensuring social well-being define an important cleavage in welfare politics. Relative to conservatives, liberals have historically favored a larger government role in securing protection from the market and, hence, have supported more generous benefits and more inclusive eligibility standards in public assistance programs (Rom

1999, 357). In the 1990s, some aspects of this ideological split underwent change. A significant number of liberal public officials began to worry about dependency, to warm up to the idea of work requirements, and to join calls to "end welfare as we know it" (Handler 1995, 28-32). Nevertheless, there has also been continuity in this policy area, with conservative officials taking the lead in promoting the toughest new policies (Bryner 1998).

Two hypotheses are suggested by the durable relationship between general welfare liberalism and specific policy positions. First, one might expect states to take an incremental approach to changing public assistance policy, producing a pattern of continuity rather than backlash (Lindblom 1959). States that adopted a more liberal approach under the old AFDC system might continue to pursue a more liberal path after 1996. Conversely, states that worked to keep their caseloads down under the old AFDC system might simply deepen their efforts to promote caseload reduction under TANF. In contrast to the dependency hypothesis, this *continuity hypothesis* predicts that states that had higher caseload-to-population ratios in 1996 will adopt less restrictive policies under the TANF system.

Second, looking beyond past practices, one might also expect state policy choices under TANF to be shaped by the ideologies of current elected officials. Previous research indicates that government ideology varies significantly across the states (Berry et al. 1998) and conservative states are more likely to pass meager benefit packages and restrictive eligibility rules (Rom 1999). Accordingly, our *government-ideology hypothesis* predicts that states with more liberal governments (as measured by Berry et al. 1998) will adopt less restrictive TANF policies. On the view that welfare liberalism is a broad policy orientation, we expect the continuity and government-ideology hypotheses to apply to all policy choices analyzed here.

Policy Innovation

A third perspective on welfare policy suggests that state choices under TANF might be best understood as examples of policy innovation. A long tradition of research in political science suggests that states are characterized by general orientations toward innovation, with some tending to be leaders and others laggards. Most empirical research in this area has focused on the question of what factors predict state tendencies toward innovation (Walker 1969, 1971; Gray 1973; Berry and Berry 1990; Skocpol et al. 1993; Soule and Zylan 1997; Lieberman and Shaw, 2000). The key claim underlying these analyses has been that state responses to particular policy choices are likely to reflect a fundamental and somewhat stable propensity toward innovation (Gray 1973).

TANF work requirements, time limits, family caps, and sanction schedules share a get-tough quality, but within a constrained area defined by the federal government, they are also openings for policy innovation. States that have adopted stringent policies have chosen a path that deviates more sharply from the policies that characterized the old AFDC program. Thus, our *policy-innovation hypothesis*, which applies to all four policies considered here, suggests that states with a stronger propensity toward welfare policy innovation will be more likely to adopt restrictive TANF policies. To measure state orientations toward welfare policy innovation, we employ the first year in which each state requested a policy waiver of any kind under the AFDC program (data are for 1977–1996, from Lieberman and Shaw, 2000).⁸ Our hypothesis is that states that acted earlier to request waivers under AFDC (during the two decades leading up to the 1996 reforms) will be more likely to implement stringent rules and sanctions under TANF.

Electoral Politics

A fourth theoretical tradition suggests that TANF policy choices might reflect two important features of state electoral systems. The first is the degree of inter-party competition. In his classic analysis, *Southern Politics*, V.O. Key (1949) argued that the policy process is more likely to respond to the needs of the disadvantaged when political parties are more evenly matched and, hence, forced to contend with one another by mobilizing and swaying voters. Early analyses cast some doubt on this argument (Dawson and Robinson 1963; Boyne 1985). But time has been kind to Key's thesis, as a number of studies have suggested that states with more competitive elections tend to produce more liberal social policies (Brace and Jewett 1995; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993).

The second feature of the electoral system that may shape state policy choices is the degree to which low-income voters go to the polls. All else equal, stronger

⁸For two reasons, we are persuaded that this measure taps a general orientation toward welfare innovation and not just eagerness to "get tough." First, early requests to experiment under the AFDC program encompassed a wide variety of different policies, not just restrictive initiatives. Second, to test the validity of this measure, we examined its relationship to Gray's (1973) classic indexes of *liberal* policy innovation during the first half of the twentieth century. Our measure of policy innovation under AFDC has a significant positive correlation with Gray's measure of overall policy innovation ($r = .36, p = .01$) and with Gray's measure of welfare policy innovation ($r = .37, p = .01$). The innovators early in the century (as measured by Gray) were more likely to be the innovators in the last quarter of the century (as measured by the year of their first waiver request). Consequently, we conclude that our measure taps a general orientation toward welfare innovation that is somewhat stable over time at the state level.

turnout among low-income voters should push politicians to be more responsive to the grievances and needs of the poor and working class (Piven and Cloward 1988). Indeed, previous research suggests that states with stronger participation among low-income voters tend to adopt more liberal welfare policies (Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Hicks and Swank 1992; Hill and Leighley 1992). Thus, in relation to the electoral system, we investigate two hypotheses. The *lower-class mobilization hypothesis* predicts that states with higher turnout among low-income voters will adopt less restrictive welfare policies. The *inter-party competition hypothesis* predicts that states with more evenly matched two-party systems will adopt less restrictive welfare policies. Like welfare liberalism and propensity toward innovation, these features of the electoral context may be seen as general influences on policy choice that apply to each of our four policy domains.

Controlling the Poor

Scholars who analyze welfare systems as mechanisms of social control suggest a fifth perspective on TANF policy choices. Complex societies rely on a range of instruments to maintain social order and, particularly, to regulate the behaviors of marginal populations (Suttles and Zald 1985; Mizruchi, 1983). In a well-known argument, Piven and Cloward (1993) identify welfare systems as secondary institutions that function to meet the broader needs of states and markets. When hard economic times combine with civil unrest, relief is readily extended to mollify the poor and maintain legitimacy for the state. Under stronger economic conditions, access to public aid is restricted in order to push potential workers toward available jobs, thereby easing the pressures that tight labor markets exert on employers. Given the strong national economy in the late 1990s and the relative scarcity of civil unrest, Piven and Cloward's thesis suggests that states with tighter labor markets should be more likely to enforce work and limit access to welfare benefits. In states where the number of active job-seekers is small relative to the number of job openings, employers are likely to desire an expanded labor pool and policymakers are likely to see more reasons to make recipients work. Accordingly, our *labor-market hypothesis* predicts that states with lower unemployment rates will adopt more restrictive TANF policies—especially in the area of work requirements.⁹

⁹As an alternative to the official unemployment rate (based on active job seekers), one might use the civilian labor force participation rate (which includes discouraged workers) to measure labor market conditions. For two reasons, we believe the official unemployment rate is more appropriate for a test of the social control hypothesis. First, because the official unemployment rate is more

Beyond labor markets, social-control theory also suggests that TANF policy choices may reflect general orientations toward the use of formal mechanisms to enforce social order. Political communities combat disorder through a mix of informal controls in families, neighborhoods, and communities and formal controls deployed by the state (Rose and Clear 1998). Greater reliance on strong institutional tools such as incarceration is generally viewed as an indicator of more political will to "crack down" on marginal or deviant social groups (Hunter 1985; Jacobs and Helms 1996; Rose and Clear 1998). Imprisonment is an especially important state instrument for controlling the poor (Reiman 1998), and as Ehrenreich has argued, "if there is any handy measure of a government's repressiveness, it is the proportion of its citizenry who are incarcerated" (1997, 14).

Indeed, research suggests that differences in incarceration rates over time can be traced to the political orientations of public officials (Jacobs and Helms 1996) and that the use of criminal systems to combat social problems represents a preference for get-tough approaches to community policy (Goetz 1996). During the 1990s, state officials throughout the U.S. passed stiffer penalties for criminal behaviors, increased funding for prison construction and maintenance, and imposed tough new work requirements on prisoners (Parenti 1999; Lafer 1999). Between 1990 and 1996, the years immediately preceding the enactment of PRWORA, incarceration rates soared throughout the nation (especially among the poor), but the rate of this increase varied considerably across the states (Lynch and Sabol 1997).¹⁰ Following the view that incarceration rates indicate state dispositions toward tough formal regulatory mechanisms, our *state-control hypothesis* predicts that states with larger increases in incarceration from 1990 to 1996 will make more restrictive TANF policy choices. Such a disposition may promote tougher TANF policies in general, but we would expect this factor to be especially relevant for decisions to

widely used as an indicator of labor market conditions, it is the indicator most likely to influence state policy choices. Second, from the standpoint of employers, the tightness of a labor market is defined by the number of people who are actively seeking jobs. Additional groups included in the civilian labor force participation (for example, the non-institutionalized elderly population) make this measure a distorted gauge of the real conditions confronted by employers. Thus, while civilian labor force participation is a better measure of how many people are not working, the official unemployment rate offers a better indicator of the likelihood that employers and legislators will believe that the labor market is tight.

¹⁰Between 1990 and 1996, state incarceration rates increased by an average of 44.9 percent. At the high end, the number of imprisoned residents in Texas rose by an astonishing 164.5 percent; at the low end, the incarceration rate rose by only 12.8 percent in Vermont and actually fell by 4.2 percent in Maine.

force welfare recipients to participate in directive and supervisory work programs.

Race and Ethnicity

Welfare politics in the U.S. has always had deep roots in race relations. In debates over the Social Security Act of 1935, southern members of Congress managed to exclude domestic and agricultural workers from social insurance coverage, effectively channeling people of color into public assistance programs controlled at the state level (Brown 1999; Lieberman 1998). Many scholars argue that state administration of these programs continued to be shaped by race from the 1930s to the 1990s, and that programs associated with nonwhite clients are more likely to be saddled with popular hostility and punitive rules (Quadagno 1994). Two streams of literature lend credence to this argument. First, state-level research offers a small but fairly consistent body of evidence pointing to a link between race and welfare generosity. Studies in the 1970s showed that, all else equal, AFDC benefits were significantly lower in states where black recipients made up a higher percentage of the caseload (Orr 1976; Wright 1976). Similarly, Howard (1999) reports that states with larger black populations offered significantly lower AFDC benefits as recently as 1990.

A second link between race and welfare can be found in individual-level research on public opinion. Although the theoretical debates in this field remain heated, most observers agree that racial attitudes have some significant impact on white Americans' orientations toward welfare policy (Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000). Broad feelings of racial resentment are strong predictors of white attitudes toward public assistance policy (Kinder and Sanders 1996) and so are narrower beliefs in anti-black stereotypes (Gilens 1999). Media stories tend to overrepresent black people in stories about poverty; white Americans tend to overestimate the percentage of welfare recipients who are black; and partly as a result, racial stereotypes provide a key foundation for white Americans' attitudes toward welfare policies (Gilens 1999). Thus, at the individual level, racial identity and welfare politics remain deeply intertwined.

All of this evidence suggests race may play a key role in shaping state policy choices under the TANF system. Most existing research focuses on African Americans as the group most likely to be targeted by anti-welfare sentiment and less generous welfare policies.¹¹ Some observers,

¹¹Consistent with this emphasis, Gilens (1999) reports that when beliefs about black people are compared with beliefs about other ethnic minorities, negative stereotypes of African Americans are far stronger predictors of opposition to welfare.

however, have speculated that “as the country’s Hispanic population continues to grow, attitudes toward welfare and poverty may become as strongly associated with perceptions of Hispanics as they are now with perceptions of blacks” (Gilens 1999, 71). Consequently, we investigate two variants of our *racial-disparity hypothesis*. The first predicts that tougher TANF policies will be adopted in states where African Americans made up a higher percentage of the AFDC caseload in 1996. The second predicts that tougher TANF policies will be adopted in states where Latinos made up a higher percentage of the AFDC caseload in 1996. Given the diversity of ways in which race has become entangled with perceptions of welfare (Gilens 1999; Quadagno 1994), we would expect to find racial effects in all four of our policy domains.

Empirical Analysis

We begin our analysis by treating TANF policy choices as indicators of a single underlying construct, welfare stringency, and measuring this construct with an additive index.¹² The ordered-logit analysis presented in Table 1 assumes that the political forces shaping choices in each of our four policy areas share a common structure and, hence, that we can use a single equation to ascertain what factors encouraged states to adopt an overall package of stringent policies. The chi-square test for this analysis indicates that our ten variables do a significantly better job of explaining the overall pattern of policy choices than would a null model in which these variables are assumed to have no explanatory power. Turning to the results for individual coefficients, we see a relatively simple story grounded in race and ideology. States were significantly more likely to make restrictive TANF policy choices if they had conservative governments and if African Americans made up a higher percentage of their AFDC recipients. None of the other coefficient estimates reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

These preliminary results suggest that we can draw some insight into the politics of welfare policy from an analysis of what factors led states to move toward a more or less restrictive *package* of TANF policies. As we noted earlier, however, the policies grouped together in Table 1 express somewhat distinctive political motives and, hence, may actually be influenced by different configurations of political forces. In exploring the data, we find empirical

¹² The index is coded 0–4. States received one point for adopting a family cap, one for adopting a time limit shorter than sixty months, one for adopting a work requirement shorter than twenty-four months, and one for adopting strong sanctions. This index yields a modest Chronbach’s alpha of .60.

TABLE 1 State Policy Choices Analyzed as a Single Dimension

	Stringent Policy Outcomes	
	Coeff.	S.E.
Unmarried Birth Rate	-.034	.090
Caseload-to-Population Ratio	-.265	.334
Government Ideology	-.027**	.013
Inter-party Competition	-.951	1.795
Low-Income Voter Turnout	-7.216	7.121
Unemployment Rate	-.336	.386
Change in Incarceration Rate	.003	.014
Percent Latino	.039	.026
Percent African-American	.043***	.017
Welfare Innovation	-.023	.052
Intercept 1	-10.561	6.237
Intercept 2	-8.739	6.148
Intercept 3	-7.562	6.117
Intercept 4	-6.289	6.130
Overall Model	LR χ^2 (10df) = 22.02 p = .015 N = 49 PRE = .09	
Method of Analysis	Ordered Logit	

*p<.05, **p<.025, ***p<.01

Notes: The significance test for caseload-to-population ratio is two-tailed; significance tests for all other coefficients are one-tailed. PRE (proportional reduction in error) is based on classification of concordant and discordant pairs. All analyses were performed in STATA 6.0.

signals that bolster this expectation and suggest that these four policy choices do not reflect a single underlying policy shift. Analyzing our additive index of policy choices, we find that the median state adopted only one of these four policies and that only five states adopted all four policies. In addition, a factor analysis of the four constituent variables yields a solution with two factors rather than one.¹³ Finally, it is worth noting that the analysis shown in Table 1 yields only a modest proportionate reduction in error (PRE) of .09. For all these reasons, we see good cause to be skeptical that an analysis of a single ordered dimension can adequately illuminate the political underpinnings of TANF policy choices.

Table 2 presents results for separate analyses of each of our four policies. The overall pattern of results indicates that our hypotheses have a significant amount of explanatory power. The significant chi-square tests for all four models suggest that, in each of the policy domains, stringent policy choices are systematically related to

¹³Based on a principal components analysis, the loadings for the first factor are .61 for time limits and .62 for the family cap; the loadings for the second factor are .83 for work requirements and .80 for strong sanctions. Details regarding this analysis are available from the authors.

TABLE 2 State Policy Choices Analyzed as Separate Dimensions: Sanctions, Time Limits, Work Requirements, and Family Caps

Dependent Variable:	Strength of Sanctions		Stricter Work Requirements		Stricter Time Limits		Family Cap	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Unmarried Birth Rate	.188*	.109	.040	.124	-.036	.108	-.090	.117
Caseload-to-Population Ratio	-1.319***	.447	.087	.367	-.274	.372	.016	.402
Government Ideology	-.055***	.019	-.022	.017	-.008	.018	-.015	.018
Inter-party Competition	-5.441***	2.358	-.617	2.315	-1.237	2.229	-.314	2.401
Low-Income Voter Turnout	-10.094	9.750	-2.975	10.447	-11.571	9.865	-12.453	10.150
Unemployment Rate	.333	.452	-1.048*	.571	.061	.501	-.854	.655
Change in Incarceration Rate	.010	.017	.051*	.028	.039	.029	-.035	.021
Percent Latino	-.019	.029	-.006	.034	.071**	.034	.087**	.043
Percent African-American	.039**	.018	-.017	.022	.049***	.021	.072***	.025
Welfare Innovation	-.202***	.073	-.078	.067	.070	.068	.023	.071
Intercept 1	-26.026	9.069	11.848	9.003	-2.454	8.200	9.199	8.203
Intercept 2	-22.521	8.788	-	-	-	-	-	-
Overall Model	LR χ^2 (10df) = 39.75 p = .001 N = 49 PRE = .46		LR χ^2 (10df) = 21.10 p = .020 N = 49 PRE = .63		LR χ^2 (10df) = 19.23 p = .036 N = 49 PRE = .30		LR χ^2 (10df) = 20.13 p = .028 N = 49 PRE = .50	
Method of Analysis	Ordered Logit		Binary Logit		Binary Logit		Binary Logit	

*p<.05, **p<.025, ***p<.01

Notes: The significance test for caseload-to-population ratio is two-tailed; significance tests for all other coefficients are one-tailed. PRE (proportional reduction in error) estimates are based on classification of concordant and discordant pairs. All analyses were performed in STATA 6.0.

state-level characteristics. Examining the PRE statistics, we see that, relative to the model based on our additive policy scale, these separate models explain a greater proportion of policy variation: .46, .63, .30, and .50, respectively. Taking the results for these four models as a group, we find that nine of our ten independent variables yield statistically significant results in at least one equation. In addition, it is worth noting that the results presented in Table 2 prove to be robust across a wide range of model specifications.¹⁴

¹⁴To test the robustness of our findings, we employed a number of alternative measures for our independent variables and introduced supplemental controls into our models. Our tests for supplemental controls included (1) using per capita personal income to control for state economic conditions, (2) using AFDC benefit levels as a measure of state generosity, (3) using the proportion of adjacent states adopting a given policy to capture the effects of interstate competition, and (4) using a dummy variable to indicate the more conservative political culture and lower levels of support for public aid found in southern states. The first three of these four variables were not significantly related to any of the state policy choices considered in our analysis. The dummy variable for southern states achieved statistical significance only once, in the model predicting work requirements. In all cases, introduction of these supplemental controls produced no discernible difference in the results for other variables reported here. Our tests of alternative measures for independent variables are described in footnotes that follow.

Turning to tests of our individual hypotheses, we see some striking patterns. To begin with, family caps and strict time limits (policy choices that loaded together in our factor analysis) emerge here as outcomes that seem to arise from virtually identical processes: both appear to be a direct function of race. All else equal, family caps and strict time limits were significantly more likely in only two kinds of states: those with a higher percentage of African Americans in their AFDC caseloads and those with higher percentages of Latinos in their AFDC caseloads. Our analysis of work requirements offers parallel results in the sense that it points to a small number of determining factors. In this domain, however, the driving forces are those related to our social-control hypotheses. States with larger increases in incarceration from 1990 to 1996 were significantly more likely to adopt strict work requirements, as were states with tighter labor markets.

Finally, in the results for sanction policy, we find a more complex set of relationships. Here again, we see evidence of racial effects. All else equal, states with larger numbers of African Americans in their AFDC caseloads were significantly more likely to adopt stricter sanctions. We also find evidence that strict sanction policies were significantly more likely in states with conservative governments, states with less vigorous party competition,

states with higher unmarried birth rates, states that engaged in policy innovation by making earlier requests for AFDC waivers, and states that maintained smaller AFDC caseloads.

Because logit coefficients do not provide a familiar metric for interpretation (Kritzer 1996), it is helpful to extend the analysis presented in Table 2 by employing interpretive procedures developed by King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000). The *Clarify* program developed by King, Tomz, and Wittenberg makes it possible to predict the probability of an outcome under specified conditions, estimate shifts in the probability of an outcome when the value for an independent variable is changed, and obtain standard errors for these shifts in probability.¹⁵ Table 3 reports estimated changes in predicted probabilities obtained by fixing all variables at their means and then shifting the value of a single predictor from one standard deviation below its mean to one standard deviation above its mean (for ease of style, we refer to these values as “low” and “high”).¹⁶

The first thing worth noting about Table 3 is that the confidence intervals around our estimated shifts in probability confirm the significant relationships shown in Table 2 but are generally quite large. This result is not surprising given the small number of cases in our analysis; it simply underscores that while we can have a reasonable degree of confidence in the existence and direction of the relationships we have found, we are less certain about the precise magnitude of effects. With this caveat in mind, the changes in probability reported in Table 3 should be viewed as informative “ballpark” estimates of effects—imprecise, but the best we can derive from a cross-sectional analysis of forty-nine states.

Consider the effects of racial composition, beginning with the low-probability event that a state would adopt all four strict policies (.07 with all variables set at their means). All else equal, as the black percentage of the rolls

rises from low to high, the probability of a state adopting all four policies rises from .03 to .19. The effects of conservative ideology appear to be comparable but slightly more modest, lifting the probability that a state government will adopt all four policies from .04 to .13. Standing out among our collection of ten predictors, racial composition has a substantial impact on three of the four policy choices analyzed here. As the black percentage of recipients rises from low to high, the probability of strong sanctions increases from .05 to .27, the probability of strict time limits shifts from .14 to .66, and the probability of a family cap climbs from .09 to .75. The estimated effects of having more Latinos on the rolls are similarly large, lifting the probability of strict time limits from .22 to .61 and boosting the probability of a family cap from .19 to .63.

Effects associated with our two social control measures are concentrated in the area of work requirement policy, but are estimated to be quite large. With all independent variables set at their means, the estimated probability of a state adopting strict work requirements is .54. All else equal, as the amount of increase in a state’s incarceration rate rises from low to high, the probability of a state adopting work requirements climbs from .27 to .78. Similarly, as the unemployment rate falls from high to low, tightening labor markets along the way, the probability that states will adopt work requirements increases from .29 to .77. It is worth noting that the 95 percent confidence intervals for these estimated shifts of .51 and .48 include zero. Our simulation of first differences, however, confirms the one-tailed significance tests shown in Table 2. Based on one thousand simulations, a shift from high to low in the unemployment rate has a 95.4 percent probability of producing a positive change in the likelihood that a state will adopt work requirements. Similarly, a positive change was observed in 96.3 percent of the simulations in which the incarceration rate was shifted from low to high.

Finally, the lower half of Table 3 presents estimated effects for the five factors that, in addition to race, have a significant impact on the likelihood that a state will adopt a strong sanction policy. As a state’s caseload level under the old AFDC program rises from low to high, its estimated probability of imposing strong sanctions drops from .43 to .03.¹⁷ By contrast, as a state’s unmarried birth rate rises from low to high, the probability of adopting

¹⁵We used Monte Carlo analysis to simulate sampling distributions of coefficient estimates based on our original forty-nine observations ($M = 1000$). We then used these simulated distributions to estimate the predicted probability of observing the strictest outcome in each policy domain (a value of 1 for our three dichotomous outcomes, 3 for sanction policy, and 4 for our general index of policy severity). Finally, for each significant coefficient, we estimated outcome probabilities at specified values of the independent variable, first differences, and their confidence intervals (for a full discussion of the method, see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000).

¹⁶Low-income voter turnout has no entry in Table 3 because it did not reach statistical significance in any of our five models. As alternative specifications, we also tested whether turnout among low-income voters might interact with the effects of government ideology or party competition. Neither of these interaction terms produced significant results in any equation.

¹⁷As an alternative measure for our dependency and continuity hypotheses, we replaced the caseload-to-population ratio with the percentage of each state’s recipients who had spent longer than 24 months on the rolls. The two variables are positively correlated ($r = .63, p = .001$), and substituting one for the other (or using a factor score based on both variables) yields no noteworthy changes in the results presented here.

TABLE 3 Predicted Probabilities for Strict Policy Choices at Selected Levels of Significant Predictors

Predictor	Value	Adopting All Restrictive Policies		Adopting Strong Sanctions		Adopting Stricter Work Requirements		Adopting Stricter Time Limits		Adopting a Family Cap	
		Prob	Difference	Prob	Difference	Prob	Difference	Prob	Difference	Prob	Difference
All Set at Means		.07		.12		.54		.36		.34	
Percent African American	Low	.03		.05				.14		.09	
	High	.19	.16 (.03, .38)	.27	.22 (.02, .47)			.66	.52 (.08, .80)	.75	.66 (.25, .90)
Percent Latina	Low							.22		.19	
	High							.61	.39 (.02, .68)	.63	.44 (.01, .77)
Unemployment Rate	Low					.79					
	High					.29	-.48 (-.84, .03)				
Change in Incarceration	Low					.27					
	High					.78	.51 (-.10, .85)				
Caseload-to-Population Ratio	Low			.43							
	High			.03	-.40 (-.70, -.12)						
Unmarried Birth Rate	Low			.05							
	High			.28	.23 (-.03, .56)						
Government Ideology	Low	.13		.35							
	High	.04	-.09 (-.24, -.01)	.04	-.31 (-.57, -.09)						
Interparty Competition	Low			.26							
	High			.05	-.21 (-.45, -.04)						
AFDC Waiver Innovation	Low			.35							
	High			.04	-.31 (-.57, -.09)						

Notes: All predicted probabilities are for the highest category of each dependent variable. "Low" refers to results when a predictor is set at one standard deviation below its mean. "High" refers to results when a predictor is set at one standard deviation above its mean. For Percent Latina, "Low" is set at zero because the value at one standard deviation below the mean is a negative number. The "Difference" columns report predicted changes in probability associated with a shift from "Low" to "High" on a given variable; the values in parentheses identify the 95 percent confidence interval around these first difference estimates. All first differences reported in this table are for statistically significant variables as shown in Table 2.

strong sanctions goes up from .05 to .28.¹⁸ Movement from a more liberal state government (high) to a more conservative one (low) lifts the probability of strong sanctions from .04 to .35. As competition in a state's party system increases from low to high, the probability of strong sanctions drops from .26 to .05.¹⁹ And finally, the results for our measure of policy innovation indicate that while the probability of adopting strong sanctions was .35 in states that made early requests for AFDC waivers, it was only .04 in the states that did so in later years.

Discussion

The policies analyzed in this study were implemented during a single time period, under the same federal mandate, and in the wake of state legislative debates that gravitated toward similar issues and arguments (Bryner 1998). Yet, as we have seen, state governments chose different paths of action, and did so for systematic reasons. Far from being a pure technocratic search for policy solutions, the construction of public assistance policy remains, now as in the past, a function of the social and political characteristics of states.²⁰

If the major reform areas are treated as branches of a single movement against permissiveness, our findings suggest a straightforward account of policy choice. The states that acted quickly to impose tough welfare policies were those in which conservative governments held sway

and in which black families made up a higher proportion of clients. Thus, in the new era of welfare reform the terms of relief for poor families continue to be shaped by race, ideology, and control of representative institutions. Taken as a whole, however, our results suggest that important opportunities for insight are lost when diverse policy choices are analyzed as an undifferentiated movement against permissive program rules.

Relative to time limits, work requirements, and family caps, sanction policies are significantly related to a larger number of variables included in our models. At a minimum, this finding suggests that the theories of welfare provision tested here do a better job of accounting for sanctions than of accounting for the other three policies. As a further interpretation of these results, we see reasons to suspect that sanction policies actually may be shaped by a more complex configuration of political forces. Rather than being tied to a specific program goal, strict sanctions raise the stakes for clients who fail to comply with *any* of a variety of new welfare initiatives. As a result, they may be embraced by proponents of very different reforms or by lawmakers who simply believe that threats are necessary to bring about change. We suspect that the versatile uses of sanction policy make it an ambiguous political object that is open to an especially broad array of political influences.

Sanction policies appear to be a function of racial composition and government ideology (factors related to scores on our four-policy index), but they also are shaped by additional forces. Tougher penalties were adopted in the more innovative states that led the way in requesting AFDC waivers. Problem-solving impulses (or backlash dynamics) also appear to play an important role, as indicated by the finding that lawmakers in states with higher birthrates among unmarried women were more likely to pass strong sanctions. But this conclusion is tempered by evidence that states carrying proportionately higher caseloads under AFDC were significantly less likely to pass tough sanctions under TANF, a finding that is consistent with the continuity hypothesis but inconsistent with the dependency hypothesis. Finally, as predicted by V. O. Key's party-competition hypothesis, states with more evenly matched party systems were less likely to impose tough sanctions on poor families.

Relative to sanction policies, work requirements are a less ambiguous dimension of welfare reform. Instead of denying benefits to particular classes of individuals (a feature shared by sanctions, time limits, and family caps), work requirements impose a directive and supervisory system of behavioral controls on adults who receive public assistance (Mead 1997). In light of this emphasis on behavioral regulation, we are not surprised to find that, in

¹⁸To provide a further test of the reproductive behavior hypothesis, we replaced the unmarried birth rate in each model with the rate of teen births. The two variables are positively correlated ($r = .57$, $p = .001$), and neither this substitution nor the use of a factor score based on both variables produced any significant changes in our results. It is also worth noting that while the confidence interval for the first difference here includes zero, a shift from low to high in the unmarried birthrate produces a positive change in the odds of strong sanctions in 95.4 percent of our simulations.

¹⁹As an alternative to our measure of party competition, we substituted the Ranney Index updated for the 1990s by Holbrook and Bibby (1996, 1999). Unfortunately, no version of this index was available for 1996, leaving only the less appropriate Index computed for 1989–94. Nevertheless, the index for 1989–94 is positively correlated with our measure of party competition for 1996 ($r = .67$, $p = .001$), and use of this index produces results indistinguishable from those presented here.

²⁰Our emphasis on internal state characteristics reflects our failure to find any evidence that states were influenced by their neighbors. As noted in footnote 14, neighbor's policy choices did not have significant effects in any of our models. These results suggest that while interstate competition may be important in other areas of welfare policy making (Peterson and Rom 1989), internal characteristics have had a stronger influence on restrictive policy choices under TANF.

our analysis of work enforcement policy, the diversity of factors that shape sanction policy are replaced by a tight cluster of predictors centered on social control. Consistent with the state-control hypothesis, states that pursued incarceration (and in many cases, work requirements for prisoners) more vigorously in the years leading up to 1996 were significantly more likely to pursue work enforcement under TANF. In addition, we find support for the thesis that when labor markets tighten, lawmakers are more likely to use welfare policy to set the poor to work.

Finally, the analyses of time limit and family-cap policies return us to what is arguably our strongest and most troubling set of findings. Of the five multivariate models presented here, four produce support for our racial-disparity hypotheses. The most concentrated racial effects, however, are found for time limit and family-cap policies. In debates over welfare in the 1990s, the quintessential "welfare queen" was often portrayed as a black woman with a long-term addiction to the dole and a willingness to use childbirth as a way to prolong and increase her welfare check (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Lubiano 1992). With welfare reform in 1996, lawmakers gained new tools to combat these problems: time limits provided a way to cut off long-term recipients and the family cap offered a way to end benefit increases for childbirth. For each of these two policies, we find that state adoption was unrelated to any factor other than racial composition (including objective indicators of the allegedly problematic behaviors), and for each policy, we find significant effects associated with *both* the percentage of black recipients and the percentage of Latino recipients.

From these results, we draw two conclusions. First, and most obviously, we conclude that welfare politics in the United States remains racialized. Our evidence does not allow us to specify how race influences TANF policy-making. Punitive policies may be fueled by racial resentment. Recipients of color may trigger stereotypical perceptions of entrenched "behavioral problems" that, in turn, promote get-tough policy approaches. Policymakers may be less hesitant to impose harsh program conditions on families of color—perhaps being less fearful of political costs down the line. Or welfare politics may simply be characterized by a different balance of interests, values, and power in states with more people of color.²¹ Under

²¹Here, it is worth noting that people of color can make up a high percentage of the welfare rolls because they are especially numerous among a state's residents, because they use public assistance at a rate that is disproportionate to their population, or for both reasons. Since some might argue that "overrepresentation" would be especially likely to produce racial resentment, it is reasonable to ask whether restrictive policies are driven by prevalence in the caseload (the proportion of recipients who are people of color) or

any of these interpretations, however, our findings clearly indicate that race matters for state-level decisions regarding TANF policies.

Second, we conclude that the "devolution revolution" has created openings for new forms of racial inequality that disadvantage African Americans in the U.S. welfare system. Because states with more black recipients have adopted stricter policy regimes, black families are now more likely to participate under the most punitive program conditions. Such disparities in TANF policy not only can produce inequalities in the distribution of resources, they also subject citizens from different social groups to systematically different treatment at the hands of government. Thus, a black woman who conceives a child while receiving welfare is now less likely than a white woman to live in a state that offers additional aid for the child. Likewise, a black client who misses a meeting with a caseworker is now disproportionately likely to live in a state where this single infraction results in a termination of benefits for the full family. White clients committing this same infraction are more likely to live in states that respond in a more lenient fashion.²²

Conclusion

For students of politics, state policy choices under the TANF system offer unique opportunities for analysis. The process that sets the terms of relief for poor families is replicated fifty times over in the states, each time under a slightly different configuration of political forces. Taking advantage of these circumstances, we have asked why some states have been more likely than others to get

by overrepresentation in the caseload (the proportion of state residents who are people of color minus the proportion of recipients who are people of color). The problem is that these two measures are highly correlated. (.85 for African Americans and .86 for Hispanics.) States where people of color make up a higher proportion of the rolls are also states where they are overrepresented in the rolls. When we substitute the overrepresentation measure for the one we have used, we get results that closely follow the patterns reported here.

²²An analysis of TANF policies for black and white recipient families in 1997 indicates the following. While 47 percent of white families participated under weak sanctions, only 37 percent of black families did so. By contrast, 23 percent of white families participated under the threat of strong sanctions, as compared to 29 percent of black families. In addition, 50 percent of black families participated under a time limit shorter than the federal cutoff, while only 39 percent of white families did the same. Finally, while 45 percent of white families were subject to a family cap policy, 57 percent of black families lived in states that denied aid for additional children.

tough on the poor by making restrictive and punitive policy choices. Pursuit of this question strikes us as important, not only because of what it reveals about state politics, but also because of what it tells us about where contemporary reform stands in relation to the history of American welfare provision.

From the era of mothers' pensions up until the welfare rights victories of the late 1960s, public aid for poor families was characterized by virtually "unregulated state discretion over eligibility conditions and the amounts of grants" (Rosenblatt 1982, 266; Patterson 1994). Historians have demonstrated that such discretion was used for a variety of social purposes. Program rules (such as "suitable home," "man in the house," and "substitute father" clauses) were used to control women's sexual and parental behaviors (Abramovitz 1988; Gordon 1994). They were also used to regulate the labor activities of the poor, absorbing them during slow economic times and forcing them to work when more hands were needed in the factories or fields (Piven and Cloward 1993). In addition, states tended to administer benefits in a racially biased manner, imposing tougher conditions for aid on people of color and using program rules to punish those who violated racially biased norms of social conduct (Bell 1965). Some states were consistently tougher on the poor than others, but race, class, and gender shaped the provision of aid throughout the nation (Gordon 1994).

Today's TANF system exists in a social, political, and legal context that makes it unlikely that the worst of these earlier practices could persist for long. Still, an analysis of state policy choices in the 1990s suggests nothing so much as that the past remains prologue. Policy continuity is, of course, directly implied by our evidence that state behaviors under AFDC (maintenance of lower caseloads and the pursuit of innovation through waivers) predict state behaviors in relation to sanctions under TANF. Beyond these findings, however, we are struck by the extent to which welfare policy in the United States continues to be rooted in a politics driven by race and ethnicity, gender and family relations, class and labor market conditions.

Surveying state policy choices in the 1990s, a number of observers have pointed to new rules that explicitly target women's sexual and familial behaviors—measures designed to dissuade unmarried women from having sex, deter current recipients from bearing children, and promote two-parent family formation (Albelda and Tilly 1997). Based on our analysis of sanction schedules, we would add that women's reproductive behaviors also have influenced TANF policy choices that might seem, on their face, to be unrelated to gender norms. Like control of sexual and reproductive behaviors, regulation of

work behavior remains critical in the contemporary reform era. States that embraced the toughest work enforcement policies have been those experiencing tighter labor markets and those that have ratcheted up incarceration of their (disproportionately poor and minority) populations. Finally, and most pointedly, our analysis underscores that the "problem of the color line" remains central to American welfare politics. States with caseloads that include more people of color score significantly higher on our index of policy severity and are significantly more likely to adopt strong sanctions, restrictive time limits, and family caps.

Thus, our analysis underscores the continued importance of race-, gender-, and class-based analyses for political theories of the welfare system. At the same time, our findings also suggest that such theories must account for the connections between conventional electoral politics and the quality of aid available to the poor. To be sure, the evidence here is mixed. Turnout among the poor did not have a discernible impact on any of the state policy choices we examined. But in analyzing sanction policies, we find support for the claim that competitive party systems offer advantages for the poor (Key 1949; Piven and Cloward 1988). In addition to electoral competitiveness, we also find that electoral outcomes matter for the shape of welfare policy insofar as they affect ideological control of policymaking institutions. States with conservative governments score significantly higher on our index of policy severity and prove to be significantly more likely to impose tough sanctions on their welfare populations.

Reliable evidence regarding the consequences of TANF policies is only just beginning to emerge. Much more research is needed before we can begin to understand how different policy regimes are affecting the rates at which poor families use public assistance, the conditions of state-citizen relationships in welfare programs, the quality of life available to poor families, and the social organization of poor communities. At a time of such uncertainty, the present study casts only a sliver of light on what we should want to know about policy choices under the TANF system. Still, the evidence from our analysis should give pause to those who celebrate the freedoms of policy devolution. As many policymakers hoped, the states are pursuing somewhat different approaches to welfare provision. But in contrast to salutary images of detached experimentation, our findings demonstrate that state policy choices in the 1990s were shaped systematically by social and political forces.

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Appendix Sources and Measures

- (1) Government Ideology, 1996: Ideological score for each state government in 1996. Range = 1.3 to 93.9, on a 0 to 100 scale, with higher values indicating a more liberal government. Mean = 39.8; standard deviation = 26.4. Source: William D. Berry, Evan Ringquist, Richard Fording, and Russell Hanson. 1998. "Measuring Citizen and Government Ideology in the American States, 1960–93." *American Journal of Politics* 42:327–348.
- (2) Interparty Competition, 1996: Based on the difference of proportions for seats controlled by each major party (Democrat and Republican) in each state's lower and upper house. Range = .30 to .97, on a 0 to 1.00 scale, with higher values indicating greater party competition. Mean = .74; standard deviation = .18. Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 1998. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- (3) Low Income Voter Turnout, 1996: Based on the proportion of all individuals falling below the US Census Bureau's poverty threshold who voted in the 1996 elections. Range = .34 to .62, with higher values indicating a higher proportion of low-income persons voting. Mean = .45; standard deviation = .06. Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 1996. *Current Population Survey: Voter Supplement File*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Commerce.
- (4) Per Capita Welfare Caseload, 1996: The average monthly number of AFDC recipients in each state as a percent of the total resident population as of July 1, 1996. Range = 1.9 to 8.2 with higher values indicating a higher per capita caseload. Mean = 3.96; standard deviation = 1.40. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 1997. *Indicators of Welfare Dependence: Annual Report to Congress*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- (5) Percentage of Welfare Caseload African American, 1996: Based on the proportion of each state's AFDC caseload in 1996 that was classified by the government as African American. Range = .3 to 86.2, with higher values indicating that African Americans made up a higher proportion of the caseload. Mean = 32.07; standard deviation = 26.51. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Office of Family Assistance.
- (6) Percentage of Welfare Caseload Latina, 1996: Based on the proportion of each state's AFDC caseload in 1996 that was classified by the government as Hispanic. Range = 0 to 57.4, with higher values indicating that Latino/as made up a higher proportion of the caseload. Mean = 11.00; standard deviation = 14.73. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Office of Family Assistance.
- (7) Unemployment Rate, 1996: Official unemployment rate for each state. Range = 3.1 to 8.1 with higher values indicating a higher percentage of the labor force was unemployed. Mean = 5.19; standard deviation = 1.13. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: Local Area Unemployment 1996.
- (8) Unmarried Birth Rate, 1996: Percentage of all births born to unmarried women. Range = 16.0 to 45.0, with higher values indicating that unmarried women accounted for a higher proportion of all births. Mean = 31.30; standard deviation = 5.69. Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 1998. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- (9) Policy Innovation: The year of each state's earliest AFDC waiver request. Range = 77 to 97, with higher values indicating a later starting date for waiver requests (97 indicates no waiver requests under the AFDC program through 1996). Mean = 87.5; standard deviation = 7.1. Source: Robert C. Lieberman and Greg M. Shaw (2000). "Looking Inward, Looking Outward: The Politics of State Welfare Innovation Under Devolution." *Political Research Quarterly* 53:215–240.
- (10) Change in Incarceration Rate, 1990–1996: Based on the percentage change in the state prison population from 1990 to 1996. Range = –4.2 percent to 164.5 percent, with higher values indicating larger increases in incarceration. Mean = 44.9; standard deviation = 25.0. Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- (11) Sanction Policy by State, 1997: Range = 1 to 3, where 1 is weak sanctions (delayed and not applied to the entire family's benefit), 2 is moderate sanctions (delayed but applied to the full family), and 3 is strong sanctions (full-family immediate sanctions). The frequency distribution is 30.6 percent (weak); 42.9 percent (moderate); and 26.5 percent (strong). Source: Vee Burke and Melinda Gish. 1998. *Welfare Reform: Work Trigger, Time Limits, Exemptions and Sanctions Under TANF*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 98-697, EPW. August 6.
- (12) Work Requirement by State, 1997: Range = 0 to 1, on a 0 to 1 scale where 0 is a work requirement that is the same as the federal twenty-four-month requirement and 1 is less than twenty-four months. While 51.0 percent of the states adopted stricter work requirements, 49.0 percent did not. Source: American Public Welfare Association. 1997. *Survey Notes* 1: 7–8.
- (13) Time Limit by State, 1997: Range = 0 to 1, on a 0 to 1 scale where 0 is a time limit that is the same as the federal five-year requirement and 1 is less than five years. While 59.2 percent of the states adopted stricter time limits, 40.8 percent did not. Source: American Public Welfare Association. 1997. *Survey Notes* 1: 7–8.
- (14) Family Cap by State, 1997: Range = 0 to 1, on a 0 to 1 scale where 0 is no Family Cap is adopted and 1 is where the Family Cap is adopted. While 41.0 percent of the states adopted the family cap, 59 percent did not. Source: American Public Welfare Association. 1997. *State Survey on Welfare Reform*, 23.

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