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Research by IWU Political Scientist Gauges Change in Public Attitudes Opinions on Welfare Reform Less Polarized

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Research by IWU Political Scientist Gauges Change in Public Attitudes

Opinions on Welfare Reform Less Polarized

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — As Congress revisits the subject of welfare reform by considering whether or not to reauthorize its historic 1996 legislation, the public opinion climate on the subject has become less polarized, according to research by Greg Shaw of Illinois Wesleyan University and Robert Shapiro of Columbia University.

Shaw, assistant professor of political science at IWU, and Shapiro, chair of Columbia's political science department, reported on their analysis in the March-April issue of *Public Perspective*, a publication of the [Roper Center for Public Opinion Research](#). The work is also the basis of an article in the current *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

The study examined changes in public opinion polls from 1994 through 2001 on questions about welfare and poverty issues. Using polls from Gallup, the New York Times/CBS, and the American National Election Studies, among others, Shaw and Shapiro demonstrated definite shifts in attitudes since the original bill was passed.

"We did not uncover huge swings, but the figures clearly show changing attitudes," said Shaw.

For example, a survey asking respondents to rate their attitudes on a "feeling thermometer" found a clear decline in hostility toward "people on welfare" from 46% in November 1994 to 30% in November 2000.

"This suggests that the rhetoric is being toned down," said Shaw.

Consequently, Shaw believes that the debate over reauthorization will be conducted in a calmer context and will be more constructive than was the case in 1996.

"In that respect, I am optimistic about what will occur," said Shaw. "On the other hand, the original bill has been successful in moving people into the work force but these are not long-term jobs that will offer a long-term solution to issues of childcare and health insurance. It is still critical to move these individuals up the ladder farther."

One additional factor in the upcoming debate will be the impact of the declining economy. As Shaw notes, many people who may now appear on the poverty rolls have never been there before. "This is apt to alter the way in which the public views problems of poverty and welfare," said Shaw.

Among the statistics that Shaw and Shapiro uncovered was the decline in media attention that the issue of welfare reform has received since 1996. Through a Lexis-Nexis search, they found that the number of stories on the topic peaked in 1995 with 2,193 and dropped to 350 articles on the same subject in 2001.