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Award-Winning Study by IWU Political Scientist Shows Welfare Reform in States is a "Wildly Mixed Bag"

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— An Illinois Wesleyan University political scientist has won a top award from the American Political Science Association (APSA) for a study of state-welfare policies, a hot-button issue spanning the political spectrum.

Greg Shaw, assistant professor of political science, concludes that welfare reform across the states is "a wildly mixed bag." Program reforms have trimmed the welfare rolls by about 40 percent, he observed, but the poverty rate has remained stable at around 13 percent.

"We're getting people off welfare," according to Shaw, "but it's not clear we're lifting them out of poverty. We're not, in fact, since the poverty rate is static. We haven't gained much ground."

Shaw points out that during the 1990-91 recession about 5 percent of Americans were on welfare. "Now, roughly speaking," he said, "we have it down to about 2.75 percent." Wins Political Science Award

Shaw is co-winner of APSA's William Anderson Award for his dissertation, "Public Opinion and Welfare Policies in the American States," which he wrote as a doctoral student at Columbia University in New York City. He will receive the award Sept. 2 in Atlanta at APSA's annual meeting.

Shaw's interest in welfare reform was triggered by twin experiences that gave him firsthand encounters with U.S. public-assistance programs and welfare issues. He is a one-time social worker with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services in Oklahoma City, as well as a former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic.

"I saw social policy from a unique angle," Shaw said, referring to how government "extends or withholds help" to people.

Welfare Reform Driven by "Elites"

Shaw's research discovered that the drive for welfare reform, which swept the states in the 1980s and 1990s, generally was not triggered by a public outcry.

"More often than not," Shaw said, "welfare reform was an elite-driven process—not the result of public demand."

Among these "elites," according to Shaw, were governors, members of state legislatures, and some interest groups. More interest groups likely would have been involved, but "poor people aren't organized," Shaw added.

"Political leaders in the states," Shaw explained, "latched on to welfare as a crusade and ran with it to presumably please their constituents. These leaders could say they 'fixed welfare' and out of that they saw electoral gains."

When "ordinary citizens" were asked to list key issues for them, Shaw said, welfare was near the bottom of the list. Topping their agenda, he said, were education, the economy, crime, and healthcare.

However, welfare reform, Shaw said, resonated well with the grass-roots because of its

elements dealing with race, class, urban-suburban issues, and wealth redistribution.

Evaluation of States' Performance: Wisconsin, Illinois Eyed

"Some states," Shaw said, "instituted smart innovations—well engineered and well executed. Other states in copycat fashion picked up on programs from other states that were not the right tools for them to address welfare problems."

Shaw points to Wisconsin as a leader in welfare reform with its "tough love" approach.

"Prior to 1996," Shaw explained, "every welfare recipient had to be in some type of constructive activity like job training, an entry-level job, or community service to continue to receive benefits. Wisconsin continued to pay relatively high benefits and offered a lot of services like counseling and job placement.

"Wisconsin," Shaw added, "demanded a lot from recipients, but also extended a lot of services."

However, he pointed out, even Wisconsin did some "screwy" things like the bride-fare program, which rewarded single, young women who married fathers of their children. The policy was aimed at keeping intact families on welfare. However, Shaw said, it "coerced" bad marriages and there was an "outcry."

There also was a learn-fare program, which reduced benefits to families of chronically truant schoolchildren.

"There were two problems with this approach," Shaw said. "There was no evidence that it kept children in school. And, in isolated instances it allowed children to 'stick it' to their parents in this way: 'Get me this or that toy or game or I'll skip school and it will cost you.'

"Also," Shaw added, "educators didn't want to be put in the position of reporting attendance and being the 'bad guys.' So, teachers resisted it."

Shaw also is critical of Illinois, a state that saw itself as a "welfare magnet" since its benefits were perceived by some as more generous than surrounding states.

Consequently, an effort was launched to put in place a two-tier welfare system, where benefits for new migrants to Illinois were tied to what they received in their "home" state.

"There was no evidence that Illinois was a welfare magnet," Shaw said, adding that this approach violated the constitutional right to travel.

Poor Monitoring of Welfare-Reform Results

Welfare reform was complicated, according to Shaw, by the reluctance of states to spend money to monitor the effectiveness of changes.

"We've done a really bad job of monitoring people after they have left the welfare rolls," Shaw said.

Shaw is critical of the way states have tracked the impact of job-training programs and the success of former welfare recipients on the job. He also believes that more attention should be paid to family nutrition and childcare issues affecting former welfare recipients.

"States are reluctant to spend money on tracking," Shaw said. "There is little political gain in monitoring people after they leave the welfare rolls, compared to getting them off the rolls."

Gathering this type of information is made even more difficult, Shaw explained,

because many longtime welfare recipients feel they have been "humiliated and harassed so they don't want to sit down with bureaucrats and answer questions about their lifestyles."

Federal action to reform welfare in 1996 largely centered on shifting authority to the states for these programs and ending the entitlement basis of welfare, replacing it with block grants.

This means that the federal commitment to welfare was capped, according to Shaw, and that when program funding runs out benefits cease unless the states pick up the tab.

A dimension of Shaw's research into welfare reform included content analysis of news-media coverage of welfare reform over six years and six states.

"If mass circulation newspapers were supposed to be a key source of information about welfare reform," Shaw explained, "unfortunately, people were not getting balanced information. Coverage tended to tilt more to supporting innovations once legislated"—whether the reforms were liberal or conservative.

Earlier in the legislative process, however, before final decisions were made, coverage was somewhat more balanced, according to Shaw.

Anderson Prize

"The Anderson prize," Catherine E. Rudder, APSA executive director, wrote Shaw, "has been awarded annually since 1977 for the best doctoral dissertation in the field of federalism or intergovernmental relations, state, and local politics."

Shaw shares this year's Anderson Award with a Duke University doctoral graduate.

Shaw's Background

Shaw, who joined the IWU faculty last year, received a bachelor of arts degree in political science from Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford and a master of arts degree and doctorate from Columbia. He teaches various IWU courses dealing with national institutions, such as Congress and the presidency, as well as courses focusing on public opinion and political behavior.

His interest in poverty-related issues was reflected in a special course he taught last May, where he took a group of IWU students to Washington, D.C., and Chicago. In Washington, they studied how federal policy was crafted affecting low-income assistance programs. In Chicago, they saw firsthand how those policies were implemented. The students lived in a homeless shelter for a week and worked with various advocacy groups.

Shaw believes students should study political science for two key reasons: the discipline teaches critical-thinking skills and citizenship skills. He also sees political science as a liberal-arts field where graduates can find challenging job opportunities in government, research organizations, and other places requiring analytical thinking, research-methodology skills, and computer literacy.

About APSA

APSA is the major professional society for individuals engaged in the study of politics and government. It has 13,000 members in more than 70 nations.

APSA members are scholars who teach and conduct research in colleges and universities around the world. One-fourth of APSA's membership work outside

academe in government, research organizations, consulting firms, the news media, and private enterprise.

APSA was founded in 1903. Its annual meeting attracts about 6,000 scholars worldwide.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing.

The university's theatre program—then known as the School of Drama—began in 1947. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium.