Race, work, and welfare: Attitudes toward the required employment of young mothers who use welfare

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Abstract. This study examines the views of blacks and whites toward the required employment of mothers who have young children and who use welfare. Using national survey data collected in 1988, attitudes toward these women are analyzed as a function of sociodemographic characteristics and various measures of inequality-related beliefs. Findings indicate that blacks are more likely than whites to agree that mothers using welfare should work in exchange for their benefits, although neither racial group overwhelmingly approves of such an exchange. Further, black attitudes are influenced more by economic self interest and other sociodemographic attributes than by stratification beliefs and the perceived consequences of welfare, the reverse is true for whites. The policy implications of these and other results for research on policy attitudes are discussed.

Key words: Attitudes toward welfare, Race and welfare, Work and welfare

Introduction

Most attempts to explain policy attitudes relating to race or to the advancement of blacks share a preoccupation with specifying the determinants of white beliefs (e.g., Condran 1979; Firebaugh & Davis 1988). Thus a great deal is understood about white views toward busing (e.g., McClendon 1985), affirmative action (e.g., Kluegel & Smith 1983; Steeh & Schuman 1992), residential segregation (Schuman & Bobo 1988), and racial inequality in general (Kluegel & Smith 1986), but little information exists regarding the basis of policy beliefs and preferences of blacks. Reasons posited for this oversight and the resulting inability to make racial comparisons include the presumption of homogeneity in black views on most policy issues, especially those concerning race (Smith 1987). However, the relatively few studies of black public opinion (e.g., Gilliam 1986; Hamilton, 1982; Sigelman & Welch 1991) conclude that black views vary widely, and in many instances are as heterogeneous as the views of whites.

The present study addresses the lack of attention to black policy attitudes and to racial comparisons by examining beliefs about welfare for both blacks and whites. Research on welfare policy is especially topical; political debates on welfare reform have intensified since the early 1980s (Besharov 1989), and proposed legislation in several states would deny increased benefits to a
woman receiving assistance if she has an additional birth. Further, racial differences in welfare policy attitudes are clearly evident. In the mid 1980s, for example, about half of all blacks believed that too little was being spent on welfare and 20 percent concluded that too much was being spent (Sigelman & Welch 1991). Corresponding figures for whites were 15 percent and 45 percent; most of the remaining individuals in each racial group agreed that welfare expenditures were about right.

Although both races tend to identify welfare with blacks (Kinder & Sears 1981; Sigelman & Welch 1991), the striking racial differences in attitudes toward welfare spending suggest the importance of identifying factors that shape beliefs about welfare policy. Understanding black attitudes is especially relevant since blacks disproportionately use public assistance (although whites constitute an overwhelming majority of recipients), and are therefore more likely to be affected by changes in welfare policy.

The present research focuses on one example of welfare policy, the extent of support for a required work effort of mothers who have young children and who receive public assistance benefits. Such a policy provision was embodied in the 1988 Family Support Act, a legislative initiative which perhaps represents the most significant change in federal welfare policy in recent decades. While a few studies have examined general views toward welfare and welfare recipients, no known research has addressed specific policy proposals that target particular groups of public assistance recipients such as those included in the Family Support Act. Essentially this legislation overturned the long-standing, no-work policy for mothers with preschool aged children; only the work effort of mothers with older children had previously been targeted in voluntary and mandatory demonstration programs (Eberstadt 1987). Consequently, most women targeted by the new legislation were never-married mothers, and among whom blacks are most affected; never-married black women are more than three times as likely as comparable whites to give birth (Rexroat, forthcoming).

Two questions are addressed in this paper. First, how varied is black and white opinion toward the required employment of these mothers? And second, what accounts for the variation in these beliefs? The answers to these questions relate strongly to policy implications if blacks and whites differ in their attitudes toward the required employment of mothers using welfare or if the determinants of their beliefs vary substantially. These implications are elaborated later in the paper.

Previous research

The most cogent model to date of general policy attitudes related to race was proposed by Kluegel & Smith (1986). To summarize, the model posits that race-related policy beliefs are shaped by social and demographic characteristics (especially those that reflect economic self interest), stratification