

# WELFARE

## 4

### CHAPTER

THE POPULATION IS GRAYING, PUTTING A STRAIN ON SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE, AND THE LABOR MARKET IS SHIFTING RAPIDLY, LEAVING MANY WORKERS BEHIND. LIBERALS ARGUE THAT TRUMP SUPPORTERS VOTED AGAINST THEIR OWN INTERESTS BY ELECTING SOMEONE WHO MIGHT CUT WELFARE PROGRAMS, BUT CONSERVATIVES BELIEVE TRUMP'S TALK OF LIMITING GOVERNMENT WASTE WILL HELP THEIR COMMUNITIES AND SAVE THEIR OWN TAX DOLLARS.

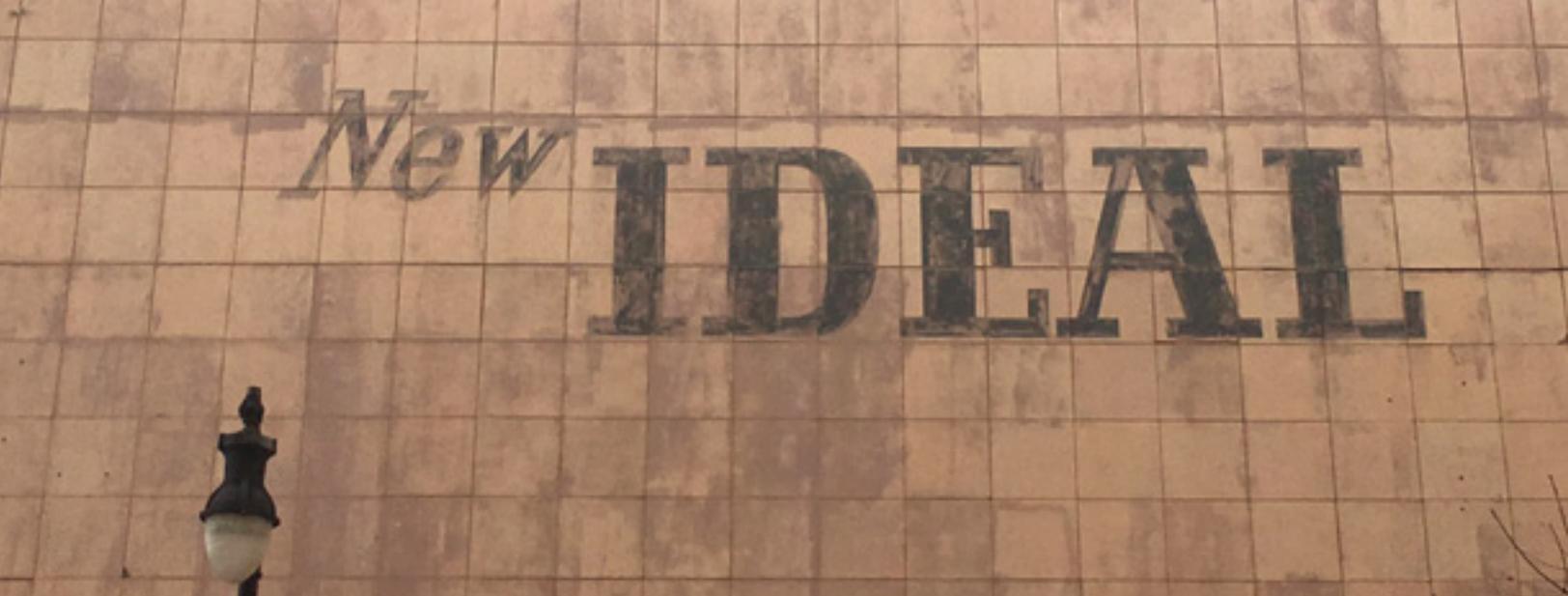
Why did Donald Trump's voters vote against their own interests? This question was splashed across the front pages and dominated the headlines of major newspapers and magazines following the November 2016 election. Many upper-middle class Democrats shook their heads. How, they wondered, could Trump voters have been so stupid?

The liberal logic went like this: Trump supporters, often poor and rural, benefit from government help and are most likely to be hurt by an economic downturn. Trump fooled his voters into thinking he cared about them and would bring back their jobs, when in fact he would make it the business of his presidency to cut the very pro-

grams upon which they relied. Meanwhile, financially secure urban liberals (as defined in the introduction) would be mostly shielded from Trump's promised cuts to government programs.

Trump supporters not only disagree with this perspective, but they are angered by it. Many reject the notion that those they view as "liberal elitists" know what is best for them. Where many liberals see a social welfare system stretched so thin it can barely provide for the basic needs of the nation's poorest citizens, conservatives (as defined in the introduction) see a bloated system awash in taxpayer dollars, benefiting shirkers instead of those in genuine need.





# New DEAL

## THE SYSTEM

About 52.2 million of the poorest Americans – 21.3 percent of the country’s population – received assistance from the government each month in 2012, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s most recent comprehensive survey on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Most of the aid, which ranged from food stamps to day care and cash assistance, went to families, especially those headed by single mothers.

Much of the current U.S. welfare system is a product of the Great Depression, perhaps the greatest economic test the country has faced. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal was a series of reforms that offered a safety net for the country’s poorest and most vulnerable. It also established financial protections, including greater regulation of banks and lending. Part of the New Deal was the Social Security Act of 1935, which created a system of cash assistance for those in need, a national pension system and unemployment insurance.

Further legislation was passed first by President John F. Kennedy in 1962 and then by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 and 1965 to expand benefits on the federal level.<sup>2</sup> Johnson’s so-called War on Poverty expanded Social Security, including benefits for retirees, the disabled and widows.<sup>3</sup> Johnson also established Medicare, which provides health insurance for the elderly and disabled, and Medicaid, which provides health insurance for the poor.

In 1996, Democratic President Bill Clinton made good on his campaign promise to “end welfare as we know it,” signing into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, authored by Republican Congressman E. Clay Shaw. The reforms

added work requirements for recipients of cash aid and gave significantly more control of these programs to state governments, meaning that assistance available varies significantly from state to state.

The U.S. government assistance system was created more than 80 years ago as a response to a national crisis and has been patched and amended over the following decades. States have significant control in selecting recipients, defining benefits and administering programs. This piecemeal approach leads to serious gaps in coverage for recipients.

## USERS AND ABUSERS

Conservatives have long complained that welfare programs are rife with abuse. While they support some social safety net for those whom they believe need – and deserve – it, they argue that the system allows many able-bodied people to stay at home when they should be working.

“I believe that [welfare is] very effective for the right people. For the right people, not for the people who make a career out of it,” says Blanca Gallego, a small business owner in Pecos, Texas.

Kathy Dobash, a Republican councilwoman in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, acknowledges that everyone goes through tough times at some point. “I myself have had my struggles and I’ve had to take care of my mother, and I even for a time in my life was on the welfare roll, and it was very minimal. I got \$80 a month. It was a very, very short time.” But like many conservatives, Dobash believes the system is being misused in her community as “a lifetime experience.”

“I know young individuals who’ve been on it and used the system since age 18, 19, as adults. And I don’t think the system was ever intended for that,” she says. “It was a hand up, not a handout.” While she says she wants to see every child fed and every family housed, she says the way to provide for the community’s basic needs is not through cash assistance but through jobs.



▲ Bruce Bradley, El Paso, Texas

*“I know young individuals who’ve been on it and used the system since age 18, 19, as adults. And I don’t think the system was ever intended for that.”*

————— *Kathy Dobash*

Bruce Bradley, a retiree in El Paso, Texas, voices a similar mix of compassion and skepticism, saying, “I got nothing against people who need the help ... but there’s too many out there that expect it. ... If the government would get all the people who are abusing the system, if they would get them off the system first, we wouldn’t be in as deep [a] hole as we’re in,” Bradley says. He blames the government for allowing people to shirk their own responsibilities by providing them with unnecessary support, further driving up the national debt.

But others say eradicating poverty will take not just jobs but also cultural and institutional changes. For most of his life, Mike Green has worked in manufacturing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he sees the cycle of poverty in his own neighborhood. “When you talk about the black kids, you have to talk about how they’re being raised in the home, OK? There’s no man in the home. They’re on generations of welfare. The education is

poor, OK?” Green, an African-American himself, says he does not hold his neighbors wholly responsible for their plight, but he believes his able-bodied neighbors could get off the system.

## IMMIGRATION

Many conservatives see undocumented immigrants as particularly egregious abusers of government assistance programs, coming to the United States to take advantage of the education, health care and welfare systems. “I don’t mind helping for a while, but there’s too many out there right now that I’m worried about that are here for the freebies,” Bradley says. “They never paid into it and they’re getting too much out of it.”



▲ Lou Jasikoff, Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania

*“If you’re going to come here – come and work – but you can’t just come here and take advantage of all the things that Americans have.”*

————— *Lou Jasikoff*

Lou Jasikoff, a Libertarian radio personality and newspaper publisher in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, takes a similar view:

“You can’t have open borders where people are going to come in and get free food and free medical – and free is only free because it’s going into someone’s pocket. And free is never free. Somebody’s paying for it. Free education. But as long as that’s still there, people are going to find their way to the United States and they’re going to take advantage. It’s human nature. ... I would say – wait a minute – if you’re going to come here – come and

work – but you can't just come here and take advantage of all the things that Americans have. Or come here and expect free education, free medical, free health care or free schooling for your children. There has to be some sort of balance here. That's just the way it is."

Professor Josiah Heyman, director of the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso, says Jasikoff's concerns are unfounded.



 Josiah Heyman, El Paso, Texas

"There are two myths about unauthorized immigrants. One is that they take advantage of the welfare system and the other is that they have a high rate of criminality. And it's almost exactly the opposite. It's harder to get public benefits," he says. "There are some public benefits that unauthorized people can get, largely through their children. So mothers of U.S. citizen children can get things like women and infant nutrition programs, because there's a belief that it's worthwhile to invest in the children because of the long-term cost of having unhealthy children, uneducated children. But the vast majority of welfare programs are not available to the unauthorized themselves."

Unmentioned in this discussion are public schools and emergency room care, arguably forms of assistance available to undocumented migrants. But regardless of what constitutes assistance or how much of this assistance undocumented people actually take, there is a pervasive anxiety that immigrants, particularly undocumented ones, are taking advantage of the American system.

## GETTING YOUR FAIR SHARE

One point of deep concern for voters, especially conservatives, is how their tax dollars are being spent. This worry is particularly acute for working class citizens

struggling to pay their bills every month. Many make a direct connection between the money taken out of their own paycheck each month and the food stamps their chronically unemployed neighbor receives.

Dominik Salazar, an auto mechanic from El Paso, Texas, is frustrated to see apparently able-bodied men in his neighborhood walk around with no income and no place to live. After watching a group of men loiter by the home that he shares with his wife and daughter, he says, "Those gentlemen who just passed us, they're kinda homeless. We need to put those guys to work. Between you and me, I'm not going to give them any handouts. Because they're gonna go and buy liquor or something. ... That's what this town needs: a little affirmative action as to get people working."

Kathy Dobash, the Luzerne County councilwoman, is concerned as both a policymaker and a taxpayer that her community's tax money helps certain groups collecting benefits rather than the entire community that has paid the taxes. "Citizens' hard-working tax dollars should be utilized for everyone to protect everyone and scrutinized on how it is spent, and we have an overspending problem in this country, and we need to get a handle on it," she says.

Many see spending on assistance programs not just as a waste of government funds, but as a waste of their own money. This perception can lead to frustration within the community and resentment toward those receiving aid.

## TEACH A MAN TO FISH

One central cause of frustration is the belief that many receiving government assistance are not working but could be. Renee Chambers is a 35-year-old single mother in Yakima, Washington, who for years worked in an ophthalmologist's office. Now unemployed, she is learning computer skills in a program at a local nonprofit organization for dislocated workers and is considering going back to school to improve her chances on the job market. Chambers explains why she voted for Trump:

"What it came down to was jobs. My ability to function as a citizen of the States and – function for my family, for my kids. ... We're doing a shift [from] being given everything [to] having to work for everything. I've worked since I was 14. I had two jobs in high school ... And it didn't kill me one bit. But the kids nowadays,

they think that they're entitled to that, so they tend to be in more of the liberal mentality, because the liberal tends to be 'here, here, here, here, and here.' [I believe] that you have to work for what you get. Everything isn't handed to you. And the world doesn't owe you nothing. If you're not willing to get off your butt and go do it, then you're not going to have nothing to show for it."

*"Everything isn't handed to you. And the world doesn't owe you nothing."*

————— Renee Chambers

Betty Wilkerson is in the same program for dislocated workers as Chambers. She has long held mid-management positions in Yakima, but she now faces age discrimination in her job hunt. She says many employers are not willing to hire someone so close to retirement. Despite her own personal challenges, Betty still believes that government assistance is a barrier to success for people who are on it:

"I think part of what's going on is that for quite a few years we've – instead of teaching people how to fish, we've handed them the fish. And they've become [accustomed] to receiving the fish. ... Now [we are] teaching people how to fish. And people are going to struggle with that. ... There's people that are excited about that because they've been demoralized and down – I mean it is not a positive thing ... continually ... being on that handout. But ... because it's been that way for so long, that transition and that mentality ... is a really good thing. And we've got generations that have lived on the fish. ... And they're like, 'Well, the way it's supposed to be.' And it's like, well, that was then. This is now. So that change is not easy. It's not easy. But that's kind of what I'm seeing. And I see that as a very positive thing. Because then that does give you control of your own life."

Across the country, those who advocate for cutting benefits say it could nudge recipients to become more self-sufficient. "I have high hopes for those on our welfare rolls to gain the skills they need and get off them – not stay on forever," Kathy Dobash, the Luzerne County councilwoman, says. "I'm hoping that this new president, I'm hoping for someone to track – to freeze hiring, to track the waste."

## THROWING THEM TO THE WOLVES?

While many conservatives call for limiting government assistance, many liberals say the current system does not offer enough support for those in need. "Our safety net, ... it's not in very good shape. The U.S. tends to throw people to the wolves," says KC Golden, a senior policy adviser at the Climate Solutions Group in Seattle, Washington. Liberals, particularly in urban areas, tend to advocate expanded government assistance and universal access to resources such as health care, housing, food and education.



▲ Vicky Pettis, Colorado Springs, Colorado

*"The leaders don't know what the poor [are] going through, what the middle class is going through, because they've been born with a silver spoon in their mouth."*

————— Vicky Pettis

Vicky Pettis served in the military for 20 years before becoming the executive director of the Colorado Veterans Resource Coalition in Colorado Springs. She and her staff acknowledge that the veterans they serve need to work hard to bring themselves out of poverty or difficult times, but Pettis says policymakers do not appreciate the level of need for services.

"The leaders don't know what the poor [are] going through, what the middle class is going through, because they've been born with a silver spoon in their mouth. ... That's why they want to shut down so many social service agencies," Pettis says. Particularly, she

cites the need for Planned Parenthood, which provides reproductive health care and which is a perennial target of the Christian right, and Meals on Wheels, which provides meals to the homebound and was slated for deep cuts in the budget proposed by Trump.

## NAVIGATING THE BEAST

Government assistance helps many in need, but the benefits and regulations can be complicated to navigate. When Michaela C., a mother of four in El Paso, Texas, decided to escape the domestic violence that she faced at home, she had no place to go. She had not worked in five years and feared that she would not be able to support her family on her own. Michaela found her way to a women's shelter where staff members helped her master a complicated web of government assistance programs designed to help people like her get back on their feet. If she had known about the services, she says, she probably would have left the relationship much earlier.

The quality and availability of assistance varies drastically from state to state. Programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) offer cash assistance, subsidized employment and even day care for families in need. Although much of the funding for programs like TANF comes from the federal government, states administer the programs and make choices about the types of services available and the requirements for enrollment. For cash assistance, recipients are often required to work a minimum number of hours or be actively searching for a job.

After escaping to the shelter, Michaela quickly found a job at a local real estate office and started studying for her real estate license. For now, her salary at the office is subsidized through a government program. She also receives free day care for her children, Medicaid and food stamps. Although Michaela found assistance, adhering to the program's strict rules proved difficult when her child was hospitalized recently and she could not work the required minimum number of hours:

"I'm gonna lose my Medicaid ... benefits for me and the children at the end of the month because ... I wasn't able to meet my required hours last week because I was taking the kids to the doctor's appointments. ... One of my children ended up in the hospital and I had to meet with the counselors at school ... and I met with a lawyer because I had court on Friday. So all my week

was spent between doctors, the lawyer, court, ... and I didn't go to work except for two hours last week. And because of that, I lost the benefits. So it's just like you're put in a position where, like, what do you do?"



 Michaela C., El Paso, Texas

Many of the women in Michaela's shelter face similar challenges negotiating the government assistance system. Patricia C., a single mother of six, says the family lost an estimated \$200 in food stamps when her daughter went to college. "They want her to work," says Patricia, who nonetheless encourages her daughter to stay in school for the better career opportunities an education can bring.

## NONPROFITS

Although many Americans receive some assistance from the government, charities are a lifeline for those who fall through the cracks.

"Philanthropy in America fills in lots of gaps. Lots of gaps," says Christiano Sosa of the nonprofit Denver Foundation, in the Colorado city of that name.

*"Philanthropy in America fills in lots of gaps. Lots of gaps."*

————— Christiano Sosa

In 2015, Americans donated \$373 billion – roughly \$2,974 per household – to charitable causes.<sup>4</sup> According to the Charities and Aid Foundation World Giving Index, the United States is the second most "generous country" in the world, after Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> Although some of these dollars go to art museums and expensive private universities, a large proportion also goes to helping the needy. "There's constantly this sort of ebb and flow. In theory, we're part of a safety net. But at any given

time, that shrinks on the government level, expands on our level,” the Denver Foundation’s Julie Patiño says. Philanthropy cannot fill the gaps left by government, Patiño argues. “We simply cannot. I think the gaps that we’re already filling are enormous enough.”

One major gap, she says, is providing basic health care to undocumented immigrants, “who can’t get any iteration of health insurance in this country,” even though, “we’re completely reliant on undocumented individuals throughout this entire country to support our economy and the informal employment sector.” Organizations such as the Denver Foundation fund clinics that offer basic services – and do not ask to see ID cards.

Although nonprofits do fill in many gaps in government assistance, government grants also help power many of those nonprofits.



▲ John O’Lague, Aberdeen, Washington

“What happens ... within the federal government and within the state government is that the money funnels down,” John O’Lague, of the Coastal Community

Action Program in Aberdeen, Washington, explains. For his organization’s affordable housing programs, for instance, he says, “[T]he money trickles in from the federal government. So it comes from a federal block grant to our nonprofit agency and then we’re able to distribute those funds through our programs.”

Lecia Brooks, director of the Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, Alabama, says her conservative state relies too heavily on nonprofits instead of making policy changes to reduce poverty. “Alabamians are some of the most generous people that I’ve ever seen. But ... OK, you accept that people are poor and you should give them charity, but you don’t want to do the work to help people take care of themselves,” Brooks says. “They’ll take care of you. They’ll give you some food. But they’ll vote against an expansion of Medicare, or vote against an increase in the minimum wage.”

Some conservatives would prefer to see civil society, including nonprofits, take care of the needy. Sharon Dowd, a retiree originally from Canada who now lives in El Paso, Texas, advocates limited government. She praises welfare cuts that she witnessed while living in Michigan and that she says shifted responsibility for helping others from the government to the community:

“I think we could get government out of a few things. Or minimize it. Certainly Michigan ... they minimized and people had to go to work or go to school if they were on welfare, you know, unless there was a really good reason they should be on it, and it was fascinating. What really happened was that society started, instead of saying, ‘It’s the government’s job,’ society across so many



levels started taking responsibility, in so many ways. Feeding, housing, in churches, just all the things that weren't being done before that because it was the government's job. And I think it was good for us. I really do."



 Sharon Dowd, El Paso, Texas

## A FINAL WORD

Regardless of political affiliation, liberals and conservatives can agree that the government assistance system is unsustainable. The population is graying, putting a

strain on Social Security and Medicare, and the labor market is shifting rapidly, leaving many workers behind (as discussed in Chapter 5).

Liberals may believe that Trump supporters are voting against their own interests, but conservatives believe Trump's talk of limiting government waste will help their communities and save their own tax dollars. As neither party is likely to change its position on government assistance, to address the myriad challenges that face the system they must focus on their shared goals.

Even if the parties could agree on some type of reform to welfare, it's very unlikely to be a more comprehensive system such as Hartz IV in Germany, which provides more generous benefits to the unemployed. A major expansion of cash benefits would be unpopular with many U.S. voters. American perspectives on work are so deeply entwined with the debate on welfare that it is unlikely that any sweeping changes could be made to the current system without a significant emphasis placed on work.

ASSISTANCE <sup>6</sup>	DESCRIPTION
TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)	Gives cash to poor households to meet the basic needs of dependents, including children and the elderly. Regulations vary by state, but heads of household are often required to work or obtain job training.
Child Support Program	Provides families with state-regulated child care placement assistance that enables parents and caretakers to pursue work or job training by paying for child care in part or in full.
SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)	Provides subsidies to help poor people and families buy food.
Medical Assistance (Medicare and Medicaid)	Medicare is a federal health-insurance program for the severely disabled or elderly. <sup>7</sup> Medicaid is a state and federal health-insurance program for the poor. <sup>8</sup>

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