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Moving Away from Racial Stereotypes in Poverty Policy

Trends Suggest a Decline in Race Baiting, Creating Ways to Better Examine Race in Policymaking

By Joy Moses February 23, 2012

Center for American Progress

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Introduction and summary

The use of racial code words is a time-honored tradition in American politics. Within our culture, people rightfully react to racially insensitive remarks, especially when they come from our nation's leaders and elected officials. Race baiting to win votes is a disturbing and despicable practice.

But it doesn't begin to reach the level of damage done when racial stereotypes and prejudice influence our public policy decisions. Stereotypes about low-income African Americans and Latinos have a long historical legacy that continues to this day. Negative perceptions about entire groups of people are never good, but when those attitudes contribute to the derailment of efforts to develop effective antipoverty policies meant to help Americans of all races, it's a tragedy.

Stereotypes undermine public support for much-needed programs and, just as damaging, lead to misguided policies that are aimed at solving false or nonexistent problems while the true causes of poverty fail to receive proper or sufficient attention. Despite earnest and at times noble efforts to rid our country of these harmful stereotypes, the problem still stubbornly persists.

The good news is that there are various factors that point to the declining significance of this divisive race-baiting strategy—progress that should continue in the decades to come. This suggests there is value in efforts to hasten its decline while tackling the more daunting task of replacing the role of racial stereotypes in the policy world with policies that are built on being sensitive to racial dynamics without being stereotypical.

We note some of these signs of hope in this paper, factors that we see as going a long way toward reducing the influence of race baiting, but that may also have some impact on lingering racial stereotypes reflected in American poverty policy:

- The emergence of a younger generation of Americans who welcome diversity—67 percent say they think positively of America's demographic changes[1]

- Public opinion polls indicating modest progress in getting Americans to replace stereotypical notions such as laziness with ones that reflect an understanding that not all Americans have equal access to opportunity

- The rise of a more racially diverse America, which by 2050 will see non-Hispanic whites no longer in the majority as 46 percent of the population,[2] making it less and less advantageous to insult growing numbers of people of color by race baiting for political gain, and with effort on the part of progressives, hopefully reducing the success of flawed public policy built on racial stereotypes

- Changes in the media and technology that make it difficult for comments to go unnoticed and without comment, including growth in the number of media and social networking outlets for reporting and commentary

Yet it is not enough to simply wait on change to come. We also must become actively engaged in reducing the influence of racial misconceptions. And then we have to work to transition from using stereotypes to more appropriate considerations of race that help reduce poverty. These efforts should include:

- Fixing the flawed laws that were built on stereotypes
- Instituting a governmental "think tank" that works across agencies, researching the problem of poverty and the effectiveness of governmental responses
- Employing more targeted approaches, tailoring responses to meet the needs of specific demographic groups even while working within general programs that reach everyone
- Effectively measuring progress, including keeping track of how varying groups respond to interventions and experience progress
- Engaging low- and middle-income communities, allowing their views and experiences to inform policy and services

This paper is designed to help point the way toward a more inclusive and culturally enlightened America that understands that poverty has no racial, ethnic, gender, or regional boundaries.

Let's now take a closer look at the realities underlying racial stereotypes and misconceptions as they relate to the very real issue of poverty.

Background of public opinion and policy

The notion that poor people, particularly poor people of color, are lazy is the most significant and persistent stereotype affecting efforts to address poverty in our country. This particular stereotype takes various other forms—they are said to lack a strong work ethic and ambition, preferring to live off government benefits, and sneak into the country in order to take unfair advantage of government assistance programs.

Some version of this stereotype has been reflected in various public opinion polls taken throughout the past several decades. That some members of the public, including legislators, hold such beliefs may be the reason that we find these stereotypes making their way into policy proposals and legislation coming from Congress and statehouses throughout the country.

Public opinion

Historical studies provide interesting information concerning the evolution of attitudes pertaining to the economic condition of black and brown people in America. Although the earliest studies cited here dating back to the 1930s were limited to Princeton University students, they are nonetheless important because they reflect the views of the nation's elite at the time—individuals who likely assumed leadership positions such as holding public office.

More than 20 years later, nationwide data from a 1991 National Opinion Research Center poll shows the staying power of negative beliefs about the work ethic of African Americans in the 20th century while also suggesting those views were also attached to Hispanics. (see Figure 1 on following page)

FIGURE 1

The persistence of racial stereotypes in the 20th century

Three historical public opinion surveys

1933	75 percent—three in four—of Princeton students say "lazy" is an accurate description of black Americans.
1967	Around 25 percent—one in four—of Princeton students say "lazy" is an accurate description of black Americans.
1991	78 percent of non-blacks in a nationwide survey say black people are more likely than white people to prefer to live off welfare.
	62 percent say black people are more likely to be lazy.
	74 percent of non-Hispanics say Hispanics are more likely to prefer to live off welfare.
	56 percent say that Hispanics are more lazy.

Sources: Martin Gilens, Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Lynne Duke, "Whites' Racial Stereotypes Persist; Most Retain Negative Beliefs About Minorities, Survey Finds," The Washington Post, January 9, 1991.

In the years since the end of the last century, Americans have grown more sensitive to the ways that they discuss and think about race, but recent public opinion polls indicate that sizable numbers of Americans are still likely to make people of color and poor people proxies for the long-existing stereotypes of being lazy or being more likely to abuse government benefits. (see Figure 2)

FIGURE 2

The persistence of racial stereotypes in the 21st century

Seven public opinion surveys between 2007 and 2012

2007	47 percent say people are poor due to a lack of effort.
	48 percent say it's due to circumstances beyond their control.
2008	52 percent on some level agreed that "blacks should try harder."
	47 percent said that blacks had "no motivation."
2009	49 percent say African Americans and other minority groups lack the same opportunities as whites.
	42 percent say that immigrants are a burden on our country because they take jobs and abuse government benefits.
2010	73 percent of Tea Party identifiers thought "blacks would be as well off as whites if they just tried harder."
	39 percent said people are poor due to a lack of effort (national poll).
	49 percent said people are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.
	14 percent said it was a mixture of both.

2011	44 percent said immigrants are a burden on our country taking jobs, housing, and health care.
	45 percent said immigrants strengthen our country with their hard work and talents.
	60 percent said blacks who can't get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition.
2012	50 percent of whites said all races don't have equal access to opportunity.
	62 percent of non-whites said all races don't have equal access to opportunity.

Sources: The Opportunity Agenda, "Upholding Fairness, Dignity and Opportunity: Public Opinion Research on Human Rights in the U.S." (2007); Maria Krysan, "Data Update to Racial Attitudes in America" (Chicago: Institute of Government & Public Affairs, 2008); John Halpin and Karl Agne, "State of American Political Ideology, 2009: A National Study of Political Values and Beliefs" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009); Christopher Parker, "2010 Multi-State Survey of Race & Politics" (Washington: University of Washington Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race & Sexuality, 2010); Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "March 2010 Trust In Government Survey" (2010); Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "2011 March Political Typology Final Topline" (2011); Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, "Poverty, the Media and Election 2012: What Do Voters Think?" (2012).

It's notable that labels suggesting laziness or lack of effort that have been used to describe African Americans are also applied to poor people more generally. It is unclear from reviewing the public opinion polls whether stereotypes about the poor influence the image of African Americans (and perhaps other people of color) or if stereotypes about African Americans influence the public perception of the poor.

What is certain is that there's a philosophical battle occurring in our country over whether people are poor because they lack ambition or because they lack opportunity. As already noted, it is difficult to divorce this conversation from this nation's long history of stereotyping African Americans and other people of color as being lazy along with a host of similar race-tainted euphemisms.

Part of that history is the fairly recent era of welfare reform. Around about that time, in 2000, Princeton University political science researcher Martin Gilens published findings showing that one of the strongest predicators of white opposition to welfare was a belief that black people are lazy or don't want to work hard.[3] Within this context, Gilens also noted a pattern of support for government programs that depended on whether they were perceived as rewarding the lazy as opposed to helping poor people support themselves.[4]

Thus the battles in this area are won in the way that a program is framed, leaving all of them open to being characterized as rewarding the lazy no matter their substance.

Policy implications

It is bad enough when entire groups of people are negatively stereotyped in this way as being lazy and adept at gaming the system, but a more serious problem

comes into play when these negative narratives influence policymaking. Far too many laws and legislative proposals are misdirected because they are founded on misconceptions or stereotypes resulting in policies stipulating things such as unnecessary work requirements and participation limits on immigrant groups, harming families that experience food insecurity, inadequate housing, lack of health care, and other problems faced by people in poverty.

People of all races and socioeconomic levels are distasteful of laziness and disapprove of people who game the system. But stereotypical notions that take a broad brush to paint entire groups of people in a negative light simply don't match reality. The fact that more than 90 percent of entitlement and other mandatory spending is directed toward the elderly, the seriously disabled, or poor working families debunks the myth about lazy beneficiaries. This is why calls for more work-requirement proposals simply don't make sense.[5]

It's also difficult to say that recipients are otherwise undeserving. And in light of the policy debates swirling around immigration, it is important to bear in mind that, just like everyone else, immigrants pay taxes and therefore should be able to access government services when they need to as well. This is true even for those who are undocumented and contributing an estimated $8.5 billion each year just to Social Security and Medicare, not to mention other federal, state, and local taxes.[6]

Consider the following illustrative examples of harmful and illogical policies that come from racial stereotyping:

• Proposed child tax credit modification
• Rep. Paul Ryan's 2012 budget proposal
• Florida's drug-testing law

Each of these examples demonstrates the problem with employing racial stereotypes in policymaking.

Proposed child tax credit modification

At the end of 2011, members of the House of Representatives proposed but failed to enact a new restriction aimed at immigrants, blocking 4 million American children's families from claiming the part of the child tax credit that targets low-income families.[7] Likely at the heart of this proposed modification were anti-

immigrant sentiments alongside misplaced stereotypical notions about people who take from the government without contributing.

Reality, however, doesn't match stereotype because the intended beneficiaries of this tax credit were U.S.-citizen children living near the poverty line. And in order to claim the child tax credit, their immigrant parent tax filers must be working. These immigrant workers have contributed billions of dollars through payroll deductions, including those designated for Social Security and Medicare, and are using the tax credit to help ensure the next generation of Americans has the basic necessities to grow and prosper.[8]

Rep. Paul Ryan's 2012 budget proposal

Apparently presuming that low-income people are lazy and need to be pushed to work, the proposed federal budget for fiscal year 2012 unveiled in 2011 by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-MN), chairman of the House Budget Committee, included work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP—formerly known as the food stamp program.[9] The program is one example of where the stereotype doesn't meet the reality since the vast majority of participants are people for whom it doesn't make sense to impose work requirements—senior citizens, disabled, or already working.[10]

Florida's drug-testing law

The state of Florida is currently in the courts defending its law to drug test people enrolled in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. In doing so, they are promoting an image of program participants as people who want to sit around and do drugs all day rather than work. What's more incredulous, as many have pointed out, the state has already found that only 5 percent of people seeking benefits tested positive, which was actually less than the general population rate of 8.7 percent.[11]

Legislation built on stereotypes, by definition, doesn't solve real problems. Time, attention, and resources are needlessly taken away from the cause of actually serving low-income people who include people of color but who are largely white.

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How we got here and why we're stuck

Stereotyping and race baiting have been around for the entirety of our nation's history. Understanding this deeply entrenched history of prejudice is helpful in interpreting what's currently happening in American politics, which in turn helps us understand why misplaced policy prescriptions aimed at the poor so often perpetuate their poverty.

The historical backdrop

The "lazy black person" stereotype has a long and sordid history in American culture, with its roots in slavery. In combination with other stereotypes, it likely helped justify the clearly unjust and cruel institution—the implication being that black people who weren't under the threat of the whip would lack work ethic and be unproductive.

The stereotype persisted after slavery and was reflected in the culture via such avenues as minstrel shows, music, and early movies. The coon, a frequently seen black character type, embodied this negative imagery. "Jim Crow," the namesake of the segregation era, was such a minstrel show character: a white man in black-face who took laziness and shiftlessness to a new level during the late 1800s. There were countless imitators during that period, and many others followed, including 1930s and 1940s film star Stepin Fetchit, the self-described "lazy man with a soul" who was one of the most popular and recognizable Negro characters of his day.[12]

As the nation slowly and painfully made the shift from condoning the Jim Crow system to ushering in the civil rights era, another important movement was occurring—the War on Poverty, which President Lyndon Johnson declared in 1964, forming the foundation of modern-day government efforts aimed at ending poverty. This simultaneous occurrence of the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty helped associate the fight against poverty with African Americans and their fight for equality.

Of course other factors, including the following, could have contributed to these associations:

- The civil rights movement's need to redress a history of black people being legally locked out of employment and education opportunities

- Martin Luther King Jr.'s early leadership of the multiracial Poor People's Campaign

- The riots of the 1960s involving scores of blacks living in the inner cities of Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, Cleveland, and elsewhere, which led to the federal government's Kerner Commission report, highlighting poverty as a cause of the unrest

Thus, from its inception, the War on Poverty was closely tied to African Americans in the minds of policymakers and the general public, both of which were watching major events unfold on their televisions in addition to being inculcated by long-held societal attitudes toward blacks.

As time progressed, some indicators such as the public opinion polling cited earlier suggest that similar associations became attached to Latinos, including some of the same negative stereotypes about laziness and preferring to live off the government. With increases in the Latino population over the last several decades and the issue of immigration now at the center of public debate, there remains a segment of the American people who associates immigrants, including the subset who are Latino, with being a drain on government programs.

Yet the exact opposite is mostly the case. When the federal government undertook welfare reform in 1996, it ushered in a new era of federal and state legislation that systematically either limited or excluded the participation of immigrants, including those who are citizens and legal residents, from a long list of government services that have included Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, child care assistance, and Medicaid.[13]

Despite perceptions, it would be grossly inaccurate to suggest that antipoverty programs were not, and are not, reaching poor whites and people living outside of major cities. Not only have all groups benefited from general poverty programs, but some efforts have also been specifically targeted toward rural whites such as the Appalachian Development Act of 1965.

Conservative race baiting and stereotyping

In recent years, a number of conservatives have been accused of race baiting, or invoking our country's tragic history on race to advance a political agenda. Although political speech and policy development built on stereotypes is not the province of any one political ideology or party, conservatives often use these frames as a means of advocating for the dismantling of government programs that serve low-income and middle-class Americans. Getting tough on poor people is a way to try to win votes during elections, derail legislation, or distract attention from positions that would otherwise be unpopular.

Given modern-day sensibilities, however, very few single out groups directly—instead of using words like "black" or "Hispanic," they raise stereotypes and employ code words that let audiences know exactly which groups they are actually talking about without actually saying so. One of the most often cited examples of this approach is President Ronald Reagan's coining of the term "welfare queen." He often repeated a grossly exaggerated story of a woman receiving welfare benefits using several nefarious means to defraud the government out of $150,000.[14]

President Reagan continued to use the story even after the press pointed out its inaccuracies. Although he never noted the race of the woman, he identified her as living in Chicago, understanding the close association in the minds of many voters between welfare, African Americans, and large urban cities. It is a commonly held notion that President Reagan knew that his audience would assume her to be black with all the stereotypes that implies.

In the years since, several other politicians have followed President Reagan's lead. In appealing to voters that are drawn to stereotyping or disliking racial groups, they use racial code words. Consider one example from South Carolina Lt. Gov. André Bauer (R), who said the following about the school lunch program in 2010: "My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply."[15] He then went on to more directly invoke the laziness stereotype, saying, "there's a big difference between being truly needy and truly lazy."[16]

But, as noted above, many conservatives infuse these stereotypes into policy—most often in the absence of controversial remarks. These policies are premised on notions that program participants do not want to work or are undeserving due to

Getting tough on poor people is a way to try to win votes during elections, derail legislation, or distract attention from positions that would otherwise be unpopular.

immigrant status or other reasons. It is clear by the continued use of race baiting and stereotyping that some conservatives still see them as valid tools in communicating with their constituencies and building policies.

Progressive contributions to the problem

Progressives play a role as well in the continuation of race baiting and stereotyping in our political discourse and allowing this racial baggage to be tied to antipoverty programs. This is mainly through not adequately responding as well as well-intentioned efforts to highlight disparities.

Failing to respond

It is important for all people, including progressives and conservatives who know race baiting and stereotyping are wrong, to stand up and denounce it when it occurs. Remaining silent seems to condone the activity and hurts efforts to reduce racial stereotyping. That is not to say, however, that voices aren't raised, including many pundits and commentators who tend to step forward.

Television personalities such as Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Rachel Maddow often call politicians on ridiculous statements and policy proposals. But often missing are strong denouncements coming from political leaders and leading advocacy voices who aren't themselves African American or Hispanic or representatives of civil rights organizations.

Even worse, some progressives not only avoid condemning race baiting, but they also avoid defending antipoverty programs altogether due to the racial stigmas attached. The losers when this happens are not only low- and middle-income Americans of all races who are being served by these government programs, but also America as a whole. Programs that provide opportunities to lift people out of poverty, or help them avoid falling into poverty in the first place, strengthen our nation by moving greater numbers of Americans into positions where they can contribute to the prosperity and vitality of this country.

Adding to misconceptions

Over the years, progressives have contributed to the continued association of African Americans and Hispanics with poverty. Publications, advocacy materials, events, and conferences, including those produced by progressive organizations, including the Center for American Progress, often emphasize racial disparities within a number of different poverty indicators. The findings frequently show that African Americans and Hispanics are relatively worse off than white Americans and draw greater attention to poverty within these groups than others.

Yes, it is important that the policies developed during the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement happened simultaneously and to be successful had to help African Americans achieve political and economic equality. Disparities within poverty indicators are sometimes proxies for the progress made on the road to achieving racial equality and civil rights objectives. What's more, an emphasis on disparities helps better understand a problem, hopefully leading to better solutions.

But sometimes there isn't a thoughtful reason for discussing disparities—many are just in the habit of doing so.

Even with the best of intentions, then, progressive efforts to discuss disparities may contribute to distorted views about poverty. Discussions of policy work in the poverty arena and in the press may sometimes lead to false impressions among those who aren't poverty-issue experts and may lead some to conclude that poverty is a black and brown problem.

In addition, approaches focused on how poor some groups are relative to others can lead to the false impression that the baseline group (white Americans) doesn't have a problem that needs to be addressed when they are actually the majority of poor people. By only framing issues of poverty in terms of African Americans and Hispanics, others get lost in the shuffle, either because data on their group are unavailable (American Indians and subgroups of Asian Americans and Hispanics, for example) or because they are doing relatively better than the groups with the worst numbers.

Changing circumstances, changing realities

Despite a long history of negative uses of race in some circles, there are reasons to be optimistic that some things could get better. There is evidence that race baiting will have declining influence as a political strategy and hopefully influencing factors can also have some impact on the stereotypes still reflected in public policy.

The Great Recession's imprint on Americans

There are certain things that happen during the course of a nation's history that leave a permanent or semi-permanent imprint on all that were alive at the time to experience it. The Great Recession (along with its accompanying economic concerns that include a disappearing middle class) is likely to be such an event. Certainly one byproduct of the Great Recession and the subsequent slow recovery is that an increased number of Americans have either relied on government safety net programs including unemployment insurance and SNAP (also known as food stamps) or personally know someone who has.[17]

The result: At the end of 2011, 57 percent of Republicans making less than $30,000 a year indicated that they didn't think the government was doing enough to help poor people.[18] Hopefully, these times in which we are living, as bad as they are, will also leave an imprint on all Americans that will make them less likely to stereotype antipoverty program participants as only being of certain races and possessing certain negative characteristics.

New generation, new attitudes

Looking to the future requires looking at America's youngest adults who have come to be called "the Millennials," the generation born between the late 1970s and 2000. To the extent that the Great Recession and its aftermath leaves an imprint on Americans, it will be most felt by this group, which has had the highest rates of

unemployment—last year the unemployment rate of 20-to-24-year-olds reached a high of 15.3 percent, more than double the unemployment rate of those over 45.[19]

Millennials also boast a clear set of views that could hold steady over time. They are, for instance, less skeptical of government than older Americans, being more likely to think that the government should step in to solve problems.[20] They are also more welcoming of diversity—67 percent indicated that they thought positively of America's demographic changes.[21] And they have come of age during an era marked by the election of the first African American president, an accomplishment that actually depended on their efforts.

Perhaps this means they are less likely to harbor negative judgments and stereotypes about people of color. Yet researchers at the Applied Research Center find that Millennials are not really in a "post-racial state of mind," meaning that they are more likely to think race still matters and that racial unfairness still exists, especially in certain areas such as criminal justice and employment.[22] Taken together, these factors suggest an emerging young America that may be turned off by race-baiting tactics and stereotypes while also being open to appropriate government action aimed at problem solving and addressing race-based barriers to opportunity.

Existing progress

As various public opinion polls suggest, things have gotten better over the years in terms of racial stereotypes. This might be particularly true for Hispanics. In 1991 at least one pollster found that 56 percent of Americans thought the group was lazy and 74 percent thought they preferred to live off welfare. By 2011 perspectives changed. If we use the far-from-perfect proxy of "views on immigrants"—obviously not all immigrants are Hispanics and not all Hispanics are immigrants but arguably the two groups have become intertwined in the minds of many, making poll numbers for immigrants informative but not perfect when gauging attitudes about Hispanics—we find one 2011 Pew Research Center poll showing nearly half of Americans characterizing immigrants as being hardworking and contributing to society.[23]

Similarly, Spotlight on Poverty, a nonpartisan initiative aimed at finding poverty solutions, conducted a recent survey that suggests that most Americans (50 percent of whites and 62 percent of nonwhites) now believe that all racial groups do not have equal access to opportunity.[24] Acknowledging problems with access to

opportunity in our society and economy suggests a belief that factors other than laziness account for one's economic status.

These movements in the right direction further suggest that there is hope on the horizon even though there still remains much work to be done and that an evolving of attitudes still must take place. Far too many people still attribute negative qualities to both Hispanics and African Americans, and for the latter group it is noteworthy when considering the same 2011 survey that suggests 60 percent of Americans believe blacks are mostly responsible for their own condition, which is a number similar to the percentage who simply qualified the group as being more lazy in 1991.[25]

The approach of 2050

America is rapidly becoming more racially diverse. By the year 2050 it is projected that non-Hispanic whites will be 46 percent of the population, with there being no clear racial or ethnic majority in the United States.[26] Voters of color have been growing in number—between 1988 and 2008 they went from being 15 percent to 26 percent of all voters.[27] This upward trend is likely to continue, with some estimating that people of color together will represent 34 percent of all voters by the 2020 election.[28] These changes will make it less and less advantageous to insult those groups by race baiting during elections or by creating flawed policies built on racial stereotypes.

Further, many people from these groups are concerned about opportunity—in a recent poll, 62 percent of nonwhites said that children of different races don't have equal access to opportunity.[29] Notably, Hispanics (48 percent) were much less likely to say this than African Americans (72 percent).[30] Even still, the beliefs about access to opportunity among nonwhites suggest that politicians would be better received by nonwhite voters by speaking to opportunity barriers as opposed to advancing specious arguments steeped in racial stereotypes.

America is rapidly becoming more racially diverse.

Media and technology changes

There may be multiple reasons to decry the direction of the mainstream media in recent years—the 24-hour news cycle and the rise of politically polarizing punditry—but in some ways, these changes are actually helpful. The constant need for content and the competitive inclination to highlight conflict encourages the cover-

age of incidents of race baiting, which in turn results in the coverage of reactions to those incidents. These reactions should be seen as powerful tools for disseminating accurate information about people of color and government programs.

In addition, the proliferation of political blogs and social networking avenues such as Twitter means that when controversial and offensive comments are made, they immediately come under attack by multiple people on multiple platforms. With so many people with something to say and means to say it, it is almost impossible for race-baiting remarks and comments based on racial stereotypes to slip under that radar and escape scrutiny.

And then there are the miniature video cameras in cell phones and other devices that should put everyone on notice, particularly politicians, that all of their words are probably being caught on tape. And if those words are controversial, those videos will most certainly be posted on the Internet and from there all bets are off.

What's next going forward

Even embracing the optimistic view that as America continues to evolve, the hold that old race-based stereotypes have had on our culture and government policies will decline, specific action is still required, and we still have a long way to go. First, we need to hasten the decline of race baiting, and then aggressively work to remove reflections of old stereotypes from public policy. And second, steps must be taken to replace antipoverty policies and programs that improperly used racial stereotypes with efforts and initiatives that account for race in a much more appropriate, realistic, and effective way. Let's consider each of these approaches in turn.

Hastening the decline

Accelerating the decline of race baiting and stereotyping will require robust efforts addressing a number of significant challenges, specifically:

- Recasting "welfare"
- Addressing perceptions of failure
- Addressing federal deficit concerns
- Confronting fears about racial diversity

A closer look at each of these challenges indicates we can indeed hasten the decline of racial stereotyping.

Recasting "welfare"

First up is the need to recast the term "welfare." Since the days of welfare reform in the 1990s, opponents have continued to be extremely successful in making "welfare" into a dirty word and continuously attaching it to a host of government services with hopes of stigmatizing those services, those who support them, and those who use them.

Take the Heritage Foundation, an influential conservative think tank that regularly decries the amount of money our nation spends on "welfare," a term heavily associated with the cash assistance program that was reformed in the 1990s into the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, with the appropriate emphasis on temporary. Heritage, however, less frequently explains that it is using the term to describe a broad range of popular government services, including health care, kindergarten-through-12th-grade public education, child care, senior citizen supports, and job training.[31] Another example, this time from the media, is Fox News's coverage of a story from South Carolina in which the outlet framed comments about children eating school meals as insults against "welfare users,"[32] a descriptor not often used for children using school services.

This conservative strategy must be met with constant vigilance by progressive watchdog groups such as Think Progress and Media Matters. More aggressive and ongoing public information campaigns are also required in order to set the record straight. This means using all available media avenues plus government and non-profit outreach to communities in order to actively promote programs, what they do and their effectiveness, and paint an accurate picture of the participants via all available media avenues. Examples include the "Hard Times Generation" report by "60 Minutes," which focused on homeless children; governmental websites at all levels that provide useful information about programs and participants; and the Half in Ten campaign's "Road to Shared Prosperity," a collection of videos of people who have participated in a diversity of programs and want to share their stories.[33]

Addressing the perceptions of failure

Another key step is for stakeholders to promote constructive dialogue about the successes (and failures) of the War on Poverty that began in the 1960s. To the extent that most Americans associate antipoverty efforts with people of color, they may wrongly conclude that those efforts have failed since those groups are still more likely to be poor. There is clearly a problem if people know about the racial disparities but have no clear narrative in mind to explain why they exist—that leaves room for stereotypes or easy assumptions to take root. This might also explain some of the public opinion data. If you know that African Americans are still more likely to be poor but you don't fully understand why, you might be apt to say, "maybe they just don't work hard enough," even as there continue to be barriers to opportunity in education and employment.

Also, our national conversation on disparities may be outshining all of the positive outcomes that black and brown participants have gained through individual programs—the families that have been able to live in safe and secure housing, have food when they are hungry, or receive the job training and higher education assistance that allow them to obtain better employment and economic opportunities for their families. And these positive outcomes also fail to account for the same set of benefits accrued by people of other races, all races, that resulted in measurable drops in poverty after the initiation of the War on Poverty (from 22.4 percent to 11.1 percent) and then again during the Clinton era (from 15.1 percent to 11.3 percent).[34]

Finally, there are other distorting factors, the most significant being economic shifts that have caused jobs to disappear and wages to decline, both of which are worsening the poverty problem in ways that may be confused with government program failures. Such misconceptions about antipoverty programs put them at risk for cutbacks even when they are achieving some positive results.

These perception of failure challenges suggest that greater care must be taken in how progressives frame discussions about racial disparities. While it remains important to thoroughly understand the problems we are trying to fix, highlight the need for necessary reforms, and finish the job of the civil rights movement, it can't be at the expense of emphasizing successes and positive developments. It also seems important to put a proper spotlight on other racial groupings, including white Americans, and to a greater extent highlight the commonalities among groups. Finally, presenting a clear narrative about why racial disparities still exist and ensuring that the narrative reaches as many people as possible could also be helpful.

Addressing federal deficit concerns

In 2011 researchers at the Pew Research Center found that a 15-year high of 51 percent of Americans believe that the government "can't afford to do much more to help the needy."[35] Undoubtedly, respondents were influenced by the ongoing national conversation focused on reducing the federal budget deficit. For a subset of respondents, another factor may be coming into play—to the extent that antipoverty programs are associated with groups that are not theirs, they may be more willing to support or passively accept the idea that we can't afford these programs and that they should be cut. This may be especially true when the respondents believe those other groups are associated with negative stereotypes that are being advanced by some national leaders.

This suggests that progressives need to effectively communicate and popularize plans for reducing the federal deficit while at the same time address the needs of low-income Americans. In 2011 the Center for American Progress offered just such a plan, balancing the budget by 2030 while making increased investments in areas such as education and job training that would also cut poverty in half by 2030.[36] This would require limiting spending in other areas and raising revenues from America's top earners who have benefited from tax cuts since the George W. Bush years. Expanded public information outreach efforts are needed to ensure Americans are aware of deficit-reduction alternatives and make informed decisions about which policies they support.

Confronting fears about racial diversity

Then there are the implications of our nation's demographic destiny of becoming a majority of minority groups by 2050. While the approach of 2050 should exert a certain downward pull on race baiting and stereotyping, it also presents some challenges. The rapid diversification of America is becoming ever more salient to all Americans and represents a significant change that some may find unnerving, particularly more elderly white Americans, some of whom are associated with the Tea Party. There may be questions, or even fears, among some of these Americans about how their position in society might change that could foster an "us versus them" mentality.

If antipoverty efforts are considered programs for "them" (blacks and Hispanics), then there may be a growing antagonism toward those programs even though more whites than people of color tap these programs. This misconception fits with conservatives' claiming that socialism is on the rise in our nation and that the objective of progressives is the redistribution of wealth. It suggests that wealth and power are going to be taken away from whites as a group and given to other groups, especially as those groups grow larger.

A diversifying America could foster further divisions among people of color too. African Americans and Latinos may stereotype one another. What's more, there is the potential for intragroup differences and stereotyping—believing that a subgroup within your own race or ethnicity is more likely to be lazy or holding some other negative stereotype that may affect support for, or the shaping of, antipoverty policy.

There are no easy answers to any of these issues but they definitely suggest a need to foster unity among all Americans and investments in our joint destiny. With

A diversifying America could foster further divisions among people of color too.

that is a need to ensure all groups are being well served by government programs and that programs are not associated with any one or any two racial groups.

Moving toward new ways of appropriately considering race

Progressives should not be content in simply removing troublesome hurdles on the road to reducing the impacts of race baiting and stereotypes. Rather, we should work toward replacing stereotypes with a system that more properly considers race, including:

- Fixing flawed laws
- Building a better knowledge base
- Targeting approaches to poverty alleviation
- Effectively measuring progress
- Engaging low- and middle-income communities

Let's consider briefly each in turn.

Fixing flawed laws

We must initiate a concerted campaign to reform existing policies and prevent new ones built on the assumption that certain people are lazy and are just looking to live off the government. Laws built on stereotypes aren't as likely to solve the problem of poverty as ones built on solid research and an understanding of the variety of people being served.

Instead of assuming that entire groups don't want to work because they are lazy, we might use solid research to discover that many members of this group aren't working because they don't have access to reliable child care and then, knowing that, seek to create policies that provide child care.

Building a better knowledge base

CAP recommends establishing a federal government think tank focused on understanding the causes of poverty and the effectiveness of government poverty-reduction efforts. The problem of poverty is far more complicated and complex

than simply saying certain groups of people are just being too lazy to do better. The problem of poverty also tends to evolve, change, and be experienced differently not only based on racial groupings but also on other demographic factors such gender and region of the country. Thus, it would be useful to invest in constant, committed, and thorough study that should be institutionalized within our government.

If such an entity worked across agencies, it would have vast amounts of data and information at its disposal and would be well suited to design measurements of success and monitor them. Its birds' eye view would also allow the federal government to have a coordinated and coherent plan to address poverty that includes recommendations about potential new directions.

Targeted approaches to poverty alleviation

Examining how various groups experience poverty suggests that we can then apply targeted approaches that are shaped according to specific group needs. Doing so does not require creating millions of new programs. The federal government could simply allow for, and support, flexibilities for general programs that reach people of all colors and other demographic groups.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University has coined the term "targeted universalism" to refer to this type of approach.[37] As a practical matter this may translate into varying outreach strategies, prioritizations of services, or personnel choices (employing people who are familiar with communities). Many programs already employ the approach but more could do so. Adequate investments in research would support efforts to accomplish this in the most advantageous way possible.

Effectively measure progress

Ensuring that rising tides lift all boats will require keeping track of all boats and noting what types of repairs each boat will need as economic circumstances change. The No Child Left Behind Act is one example of legislation that sought to achieve just such goals. It requires schools and districts to demonstrate that they have increased achievement within each racial grouping as well as within other student categories such as special education participation.[38]

The same tracking and monitoring structures could be applied to other antipoverty programs such as those focused on job training and health outcomes. Such policies focus attention on the fact that multiple racial groups experience poverty, which forces policymakers and service providers to learn and think about how groups (and subgroups) experience poverty similarly and differently, and lead the way toward crafting better general and group-specific solutions. It would lead the way toward efforts genuinely aimed at lifting all boats because evaluations of program success depend upon it.

Engage low- and middle-income communities

In trying to better shape policies to meet the realities of low-income families rather than stereotypes, it makes sense to actually engage low-income people and middle-income people in danger of slipping down the economic ladder in order instead to grow our middle class. Diversity is important—people from the various racial and ethnic groups should be represented within these efforts, but finding the best way to engage different communities hasn't always been an easy task.

This is another area where solid research would be useful, illuminating the most effective outreach strategies and methods of engagement, but at a minimum programs should be asking more participants to give their opinions on the services provided while tracking their outcomes.

Conclusion

America still has some ways to go in overcoming its legacy of racial stereotyping and race baiting. While some conservatives still find them to be useful tools in tearing down antipoverty programs, to win votes, and advance their political agendas, there is reason to believe that race baiting and stereotyping are on the decline. This tired tactic of using race as a trigger to advance political agendas must be replaced with a much more thoughtful, informed, honest, and realistic approach to crafting effective policies that puts race in its proper context. The content and recommendations included in this paper hopefully point toward a variety of solutions.

About the author

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