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## Work Requirements and the Lost Lessons of 1996

The left fought to stop welfare reform and failed. Now they want us to forget the law's success. But Robert Doar remembers.

By Kate Bachelder Odell  
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No sooner did House Republicans and President Biden reach a debt-ceiling deal than the histrionics began. One magazine writer accused lawmakers of "selling out some of America's poorest and most vulnerable families." She was referring to the bill's provision that will require some Americans to work in exchange for welfare benefits. Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D., Mass.), [said the bill](#) "takes food away from hungry people."

The rhetoric is familiar. Opponents of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act raised similar alarms, but that bill passed with bipartisan support, Bill Clinton signed it, and for a time nearly everybody recognized it as a success. But the Democratic Party has moved to the left and forgotten the policy lessons of welfare reform.

Robert Doar remembers. Mr. Doar, 62, is president of the American Enterprise Institute, but earlier in his career he ran safety-net programs in New York, with stints in both state and city offices. He spent seven years running social services for Mayor Michael Bloomberg, overseeing everything from cash benefits and Medicaid to food stamps. Mr. Doar is unequivocal: Work matters, and when paired with public assistance it's a powerful "path out of poverty," a phrase he deploys more than once in our conversation at his Washington office.

In New York City, around the time of welfare reform in 1996, Mr. Doar says, "the number of men, women and children on cash welfare was 1.1 million, in a city of less than eight million." Yet "over a long period of time, in multiple administrations," that figure plummeted to about 360,000, even as the city's population grew. How? By "applying a consistent policy focused on work."

New York "transformed a system that was entirely focused on signing people up for benefits and enrolling them, and helping them become dependent on government aid and not work, to a system that wanted to help them get into work." Offices called "income maintenance centers" were recast as "job centers," and "eligibility workers" restyled as "job opportunity specialists." "We sent notices to people who didn't comply with certain requirements that their benefits were at risk, and they complied by going to work," Mr. Doar says. This wasn't a harsh order to report to the salt mines. Government provided daycare for families with preschool children.

"The labor-force participation rate in New York City and around the country went from roughly 50% or less for never-married single mothers to roughly 65% or 70%," Mr. Doar says. "That is

enormous change in behavior. That was good. It gave them the dignity of work. It gave them structure and a schedule. It gave them earnings.”

Some of his AEI colleagues have found in research that, since the 1996 welfare reform, [poverty in single-parent households has dropped by more than 60%](#). Yet the “focus on work has been eroded,” Mr. Doar says. The current debate in Washington doesn’t even involve parents, notwithstanding the evidence that they and their children are better off when someone in the house is working.

Take food stamps, whose work rules were adjusted by Congress’s debt-ceiling bill. In theory, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program already requires adults without kids at home to work or train for 20 hours a week: Hold down a part-time job or benefits expire in three months. It doesn’t apply to those with disabilities, among other exemptions.

Yet these requirements are nonexistent in practice. States can exempt a percentage of beneficiaries right off the bat. They can then apply for waivers based on dubious data suggesting that jobs are hard to find—and these waivers are in effect even as a labor shortage leaves employers desperate for more workers. “Look at the history of the Great Depression,” Mr. Doar says. “People were out of work, and the solution was jobs. And now we have jobs available, and people aren’t taking them, but we’re giving people assistance. And I think that makes Americans uncomfortable.”

States have little incentive to behave differently. SNAP “is 100% federal money,” Mr. Doar notes. States are enrolling residents, “sucking down the federal money” and funneling it to local grocery stores. “The problem with that is that you’re not serving well the low-income population in your community.”

One rejoinder from the left is that those on food stamps *are* working. “Many, many people do have earnings and receive these benefits,” Mr. Doar acknowledges. But then why fight a requirement? “Whenever anybody says, ‘These individuals you’re trying to impose this work requirement on—they’re working two jobs,’ I want to say, ‘Well, if they’re working two jobs, then they’re not going to be affected by these changes.’ ”

Some Americans on food stamps report “no earnings—zero,” Mr. Doar says, forming a circle with his index finger and thumb. [AEI research published last month](#) looked at able-bodied adults 18 to 49 without children at home. Only about one-quarter worked while receiving food stamps, and the low figure couldn’t be explained away by caring for relatives or other such obligations.

“We should ask what’s going on, and let’s address it,” Mr. Doar says. “It’s not one program. It’s a combination of programs.” More Americans, particularly prime working-age men, are cobbling together benefits from a constellation of benefits—from food stamps and housing subsidies to Medicaid and disability.

The debt deal’s provisions are modest. The bill Congress passed this week would raise the maximum age at which the food-stamp work requirement applies to 54 from 49. Some Republicans were disappointed the bill didn’t go further and revolted when the Congressional

Budget Office said the work requirements wouldn't save money. Mr. Doar argues that work requirements aren't about "savings" anyway, but "helping people get to a healthier, stronger, more positive life" even if they still need government benefits while they work.

But the reason for the bad CBO score is new carve-outs from work for veterans and the homeless. "That was a mistake," Mr. Doar says. The homeless can benefit from the stability and dignity of work. "People on the street who you see—and your heart goes out to them—they are recipients of public assistance," often in programs that don't require work. Programs such as disability aid have "financed their situation without actually helping them." As for veterans, they are often caricatured as traumatized or incapacitated—a stereotype perpetrated by endless movies about deranged Vietnam vets. Most veterans are more capable, not less, for their years in uniform.

Yet while Mr. Doar says the new work requirements aren't "transformative," he points out a sleeper provision that hasn't attracted much attention. The bill enshrines helping low-income Americans find employment and increasing their earnings as a purpose of food stamps, an update to the program's "mission statement" that will let reform-minded states focus more on work. He suggests the federal government could offer bonuses to states that boost their work-participation rates—a ripe idea for Republicans, who can build on their incremental progress in negotiations over the farm bill this year.

Even the bill's limited work provisions were a tough sell for President Biden, although he voted for welfare reform as a senator in 1996. The bipartisan consensus on work has devolved into "truly a party divide," Mr. Doar says. Democrats largely view welfare programs as universal entitlements. One example is the brawl over the child tax credit, which Democrats temporarily transformed into a cash allowance as part of the Covid-19 emergency. Democrats aspired to make that change permanent, "sneaking through a real retrenchment" against the 1996 welfare reform, Mr. Doar says.

The argument on the left is that work requirements merely punish children for the failures of their parents. Better to deposit cash every month. Yet unconditional money can leave children stuck in suffering far beyond what a check can heal—such as a parent with untreated mental illness or addiction. "Sending a check from Washington with no human connection" allows struggling families "to remain in the shadows," Mr. Doar says, or in "houses with the curtains drawn." On this issue, West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin was "the only real ally" among Democrats. His opposition helped scuttle a permanent cash allowance for parents.

Mr. Doar's view is popular with the public. [A May opinion poll](#) showed roughly two-thirds of Americans, including half of Democrats, support work requirements on food stamps and Medicaid. That support holds in other surveys across income and racial demographics. In April an advisory ballot referendum asked Wisconsin voters whether they support work requirements on welfare. It won with nearly 80% of the vote. And Mr. Doar notes that in the 2020 primaries, Mr. Biden "handily" outperformed Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren among black voters. He says one reason may be those senators' "welfare entitlement perspective."

One Republican seizing this political high ground is Sen. Tim Scott. "If you're able-bodied, you work," Mr. Scott promised in his 2024 presidential campaign announcement, crediting his

mother for offering an example of hard work. But Republicans are sometimes cowed by the accusations that they're heartless.

Mr. Doar suggests that the progressive resistance to work reflects a dim view of low-income Americans: "They're saying that those seeking assistance aren't capable of working, aren't capable of stepping up and fulfilling some form of responsibility and moving toward self-sufficiency. And what we found in welfare reform is—actually, they are capable. And when you ask these families to make some commitment to employment," then "they'll do it. And they can do it."

Republicans can also explain to voters that these rules aim to fix a broken bureaucracy—to put pressure "on the agency to make a better and more concerted effort to help someone get a job," he says. Those receiving benefits are responding to bad incentives in government. "If the message is, 'Don't worry about it. Here's your card. See you in a year,' they'll take the card, and you won't see them for a year, and you won't have really helped them."

One important misconception is that poverty is uniquely awful in America compared with, say, Europe. Such comparisons tend to "isolate one program" or fail to count a bevy of refundable tax credit for low-income Americans.

"The sad part of the popular impression is that the official poverty measure doesn't count all the benefits we provide," Mr. Doar says. A 2019 paper by economist Bruce Meyer of AEI and the University of Chicago and James Sullivan of Notre Dame found that taking better account of benefits and increased consumption power [reduced poverty](#) from the official rate of about 12%—barely changed since the 1970s—to less than 3%.

"I think we really are"—Mr. Doar searches for the right word—"plagued by this failure to recognize that we have made progress on these issues, and that we are a good and generous country to people who struggle."

That hesitancy to acknowledge success crosses partisan and ideological lines. On parts of the left, "they think if we say we've made great progress on reducing poverty, which we have, then we won't be able to justify further investments. We have to paint a dark, bad picture because that's what justifies more spending." For some on the right, declaring success "would mean that government actually could do something well over time."

*Mrs. Odell is a member of the Journal's editorial board.*