

**Women and Welfare in Film: Portrayals of Female-Headed
Households and Their Connection to Public Opinion on Welfare
and Child Welfare Policies**

A thesis presented by

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to

The Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honors)

April 2012

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PREFACE

Film and politics are two areas that have fascinated me since the beginning of my academic career. I have always recognized a great overlap between the two: aren't many films, whether created for educational or purely entertainment purposes, inherently political? Don't political figures utilize film's ability to reach large amounts of people in order to spread their political agendas, and don't many filmmakers create pieces that will impact one's views on political issues, ranging across broad categories, from capitalism to the importance of obtaining a college degree? Growing up in Los Angeles and attending a middle and high school where a large number of the students' parents worked in the entertainment industry, film was very much ingrained in the daily politics and livelihood of my community. I would constantly hear banter over the necessity of finding funding for a certain film, or the politics behind who would become the next big Studio Head. Moreover, I was, and still am, obsessed with watching movies, loving every part of the movie making and viewing process. As I began taking political science classes in high school, my interest in politics grew, and I began to recognize that my future career would intertwine my two passions of film and politics.

Upon arriving at the University of Michigan, I pursued a double major in Political Science and Screen Arts and Cultures. During the first semester of my sophomore year of college, I took a Political Science class called Contemporary Politics, in which we spent a large portion of the semester focusing on poverty, welfare, and social inequality. Going into this class, I was extremely uneducated about the U.S. welfare system, and in my unknowledgeable opinion, the system was unethical and unjust. My favorite childhood

movie, *It Takes Two*, starring Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, told the story of a girl being sent to a horrific foster family, who “collected” children in order to receive welfare support and would then force their foster children to do manual labor. In Contemporary Politics, I realized that this one movie was the basis of my negative opinion of the welfare system. Not only was my view of the welfare system uneducated, but I soon learned that it was extremely ignorant. I was informed that the majority of Americans have a similarly adverse opinion of the welfare system that I held. I was flabbergasted by the amount of Americans who rely upon some form of welfare support (1 in every 6 Americans), and even more shocked by the shear amount of money required to maintain the system (.68 trillion dollars) (Ohlemacher, 2007; USgovernmentspending.com, 2012). Welfare became a subject that I was very interested in learning more about.

In my next semester at the University of Michigan, I was enrolled in the pre-Political Science honors seminar, in which we were required to write a proposal for a senior honors thesis. Coming straight from my Contemporary Politics class I knew that my topic would revolve around the welfare system. Furthermore, I was interested in combining my two majors, and focusing on whether film plays a role in the welfare politics of our society. Drawing upon my own experience, where a childhood film shaped my early opinion of welfare, was it possible that current film portrayals shape public opinion of welfare? It was upon meeting with one of my Graduate Student Instructors, Amanda Tillotson, that the concept for my thesis was developed. Amanda was in the midst of researching public opinion of “welfare queens,” the stereotype of welfare mothers as unmotivated, uneducated, and promiscuous. She suggested that I focus on

film portrayals of welfare mothers and how this might affect public opinion of welfare.

Excited instantly, I knew that this was the perfect topic for me.

Last summer, I interned at the Child Welfare Initiative (CWI) in Los Angeles in order to further my knowledge about the welfare system. I worked with the CWI on two large projects: applying for a federal grant and a court lab project. The federal grant involved developing a program for educating youth aging out of the foster care system. I was given the responsibility of researching current policies and practices that involve transition-aged youth. It was enlightening to see how many foster children exited the system each year, only to end up homeless or in jail. Beyond these baffling statistics, the cyclical nature of the system was perplexing. Many of these foster kids eventually had their own children whom they could not support. These children would end up in the foster care system, only to relive their parents' experiences.

Working on the court lab project, I observed hearings at the downtown Dependency Court and advised judges on educating youth aging out of the welfare system. I was tasked with observing and taking notes of the hearings in the courtroom that specialized in abuse, abandonment, and neglect. I would then interview the youth. Day after day, I watched children being separated from their siblings as parents lost custody of their children due to substance, emotional, and physical abuse. Each day in my interviews, I spoke to youth who had been in the foster care system for their entire lives, who had no adult figures upon whom they could rely. I spoke with children who thought graduating from high school was an unrealistic and unimportant goal because their foster parents were indifferent about their academic performance and failed to provide transportation to school. Others had to ask the judge in front of an entire courtroom to see

a doctor for minor issues like chronic eye itches or persistent coughs because the care they needed was too expensive for their foster parents. Each day, I found myself distressed about the issues of the child welfare and foster care systems.

When I returned back to school this past September, I decided to incorporate welfare policies regarding children into the core of my thesis topic. Welfare children are directly affected by public opinion of welfare, but have no input or power in shaping these opinions. In regards to my thesis, welfare children are not involved in developing the film portrayals that may shape public opinion on welfare. Yet, they are the ones whose lives are drastically altered by the way in which welfare politics play out in America. By focusing on child welfare policies, I hope to determine how greatly film portrayals impact the policies that directly affect these children.

After I graduate from the University of Michigan, I will be attending law school. I plan to continue doing work in the field of social welfare, and to utilize my law degree to tackle the devastating problems that plague the current welfare system. I eventually intend on incorporating my passion for film into my public interest work, but how this will be done, I am not yet entirely sure. I hope that this thesis is the next step in learning why such negative opinions of welfare exist in America and how we can prevent children and families from suffering due to negative welfare opinion adversely affecting welfare spending and policy inaction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Nicholas Valentino for his constant encouragement and invaluable advice, without which I would have never been able to complete this project. I also wish to thank Professor Andrei Markovits for his constructive criticism and helpful input through each stage of this process. Furthermore, I am grateful for my parents, who allowed me to attend the University of Michigan, and for my Mom for taking the time to edit this work. Next, I would like to thank Amanda Tillotson, who helped me develop the premise of my topic. Finally, I would like to thank my Political Science senior seminar class, who provided me with irreplaceable suggestions and support throughout the completion of this thesis.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of film portrayals on popular support for welfare policies. Negative portrayals of impoverished female-headed households in American film are expected to reduce support for welfare policies, especially if the central character is African American. Previous research has documented these effects for news framing of stories about welfare, but few effects studies have examined film depictions. I screened three films with randomized groups of viewers: one group saw a film containing a negative African American portrayal of a welfare mother (*Precious*), one viewed a film involving a similar portrayal of a Caucasian welfare mother (*8 Mile*), and the third group viewed a film completely unrelated to welfare (*The Shawshank Redemption*) as a control. Results were largely null: The films containing negative portrayals of welfare mothers did not consistently reduce support for welfare, and the effect did not vary by race. Further studies are proposed that might extend the investigation of the mass impact of popular film depictions of welfare.

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Introduction

Social welfare is a highly contentious subject in American politics. Support for programs to assist the least well off among us has waxed and waned over time, and varies widely across society at any point in time. What explains opposition to these programs at some historical moments but not others, or among some groups but not others? Some scholarship suggests many Americans oppose social welfare programs because they contradict the core American value of individualism and hard work (Hancock, 2004). On the other hand, there is also evidence that social welfare support depends on *who the recipients are* (Avery & Peffley, 2006). In particular, the linkage between class and race in America has often led discussions about social welfare to take on a distinctly group-centric caste (Kinder & Nelson, 1996). Finally, some scholarship has investigated the process whereby race and social welfare have become linked in the minds of many Americans (Gilens, 1996; Entman & Rojecki 2000). Racialized media representations of welfare recipients in news seem quite potent. Less is known, however, about whether and how these linkages have been forged via entertainment media, film in particular. This thesis will pursue exactly this question: Do film representations of social welfare affect mass opinion about public policy?

There are several reasons to believe that film might have a powerful impact on public opinion about a variety of policies. First, film is still a widely popular form of entertainment in American society and around the world, with about 1.47 billion annual admissions in the U.S. alone (MPAA Movie Attendance Study 2007). Second, film can elicit powerful emotions that might enhance opportunities to change beliefs and policy

opinions as much as, or even more than, more objective public affairs television (Blood & Zatorre, 2001). Finally, film narratives may be more memorable than public affairs news, even if fictitious, and thus might influence thoughts about societal issues and problems long after exposure.

For example, after viewing the 2008 film *Milk*, one may be more inclined to support gay rights. The filmmakers intended “to inspire future generations of gay activists” by exploring the struggle of a gay man to win rights for his gay community from the point of view of the underrepresented gays and turning the anti-gay rights characters into the antagonists (Edelstein, 2008). The film was released just after Proposition 8, the California proposition eliminating rights of same-sex couples to marry, was passed. Its release sparked a nationwide campaign of mass protests and civil disobedience, as gay rights activists were inspired by Harvey Milk’s fight for gay rights in the film, and saw the film as a call to action against the new Proposition (Lim, 2008). Though these protestors were surely not the majority of viewers to see the film, by having the protagonist in the film, Harvey Milk, be in support of gay rights, paired with uplifting music and narration revolving around the necessity of these rights, a larger number of viewers may have felt like they understood gay rights on a more personal level and therefore would be more supportive of pro-gay rights legislature.

So how might the portrayals of female-headed families in poverty in American film affect public opinion of child welfare policies? Furthermore, do racial representations exacerbate or reduce the effect of these films? Gilens (1999) argues that media portrayals result in ideas and opinions resonating in public opinion. These portrayals then affect the way the public views issues of welfare, more specifically

welfare policies regarding children, and therefore influence the way in which they vote. Entertainment culture, in particular film, therefore, may have something to do with the ideas people hold regarding welfare and whether recipients are deserving of it.

While others have focused on the impact of news media on opinion about social welfare, very few studies have attempted to pin down the exact impact of film or other entertainment media on policy opinion of welfare and child welfare policies. This question will help to determine how strongly filmmakers and producers influence politics, whether or not the filmmakers intentionally contain such portrayals in order to sway public opinion on welfare.

Currently, welfare spending comprises 11% of the federal budget, or .68 trillion dollars (USgovernmentspending.com, 2012). The majority of welfare policies revolve around unemployment compensation, retirement and disability insurance, housing assistance, food and nutritional assistance, and support for families and children. Child poverty is a grave issue in America; as of 2010, the National Poverty Center at the Gerald Ford School of Policy reported that 16.4 million U.S. children are living in poverty. Nearly 6 of every 10 children living with single mothers are near or below the poverty line, as 7.4 million children have single mothers who are unemployed or not in the labor force (U.S. Department of Commerce). Furthermore, over 13 million children live in homes with a limited access to a sufficient food supply (LSU AgCenter). Recent research shows that malnutrition not only leads to overall poorer health, but to negative behavioral and educational consequences (LSU AgCenter). In over 800 counties throughout America, one out of every three children relies on food stamps and vital governmental nutritional assistance (LSU AgCenter). If film portrayals affect the way in which the

public views welfare and specific child welfare policies, then film plays a crucial role in whether federal funding will exist to give poor children a healthy and productive start.

While predispositions, preexisting beliefs, and moderating variables such as partisanship, religious affiliation, education level, income, gender, attitudes about the size of government, level of racial prejudice, and ideology may contribute to the reason why one views welfare in a certain manner, my study focuses solely on the correlation of media, more specifically, film depictions, and welfare opinion. Research exists on the significant effect print and television news media have upon welfare opinion (Gilens, 1996; Clawson & Trice 2000). The overtly and overwhelming negative public opinion on welfare is due in part to the media's overrepresentation of welfare recipients as African American, unmotivated, and taking advantage of tax payers (Gilliam, 1999). While much has been researched on the portrayal of female-headed families in poverty in literature, television, news coverage, and print media, there has been little done on this portrayal in film. Furthermore, the question of how media influences public opinion has been addressed, but how film influences opinions on the issue of child welfare is not sufficiently researched.

Racial representations in the news seem to have a significant impact on welfare opinions. In both print and television, news that focuses on single black mothers produces much less support for welfare spending than similar stories focusing on single white mothers (Iyengar 1991; Gilliam 1999). I argue that film depictions of welfare mothers may have similar or even larger effects on opinion because of the powerful emotions they can trigger in the mind of the viewer.

To test my hypotheses, I designed an experiment in which I compared reactions to different portrayals of mothers on welfare. Film portrayals of women in poverty vary widely. I focused on negative portrayals found in the films *Precious* and *8 Mile*. These films depicted welfare moms whose lives were filled with violence and tragedy. Race plays a factor in these film portrayals as the mother in *Precious* is African American and the mother in *8 Mile* is Caucasian. This study is not about these films in particular; they were chosen to represent the different portrayals and frames of women, welfare, and race that exist in film that may affect mass opinion about welfare.

I screened each film to a randomly selected group of people. I also had a control group that watched a race-neutral movie completely unrelated to welfare and poverty, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Though race-neutral, this film is not unrelated to race, as it is an interesting depiction of a racially egalitarian friendship between a white man and a black man. Therefore, the control group was exposed to a film that had a central relationship involving both races, but that did not portray one race in a different light than the other. I issued each group a posttest that contained a wide-variety of questions regarding welfare and policy opinion. As a result, I was able to compare the responses of the groups who viewed the different films.

My results revealed that film portrayals do not negatively impact public opinion on welfare. Moreover, the race of the welfare mother did not increase or diminish this impact. Though the differences in reactions to these films were not very large, they did often move in the direction that I expected: those who saw either film involving welfare felt more negatively toward welfare policies compared to those in the control group.

In Chapter One, I begin with a review of the literature relating to public opinion of welfare, and the correlations between race, media, and opinion of welfare. In Chapter Two, I present my own case study. This includes my hypotheses, followed by my explanation of how I prepared for and conducted my study. I conclude Chapter Two by presenting my findings. Chapter Three begins with a thorough evaluation of my results, followed by a discussion of the restraints and drawbacks of my study. Finally, the thesis ends with concluding thoughts about the broader implications of film's effect on public opinion and policy making.

Chapter 1: Existing Literature on Public Opinion of Welfare and the Relationship between Welfare Opinion, Race and Media

LITERATURE REVIEW

The significant role media plays in shaping public opinion is well established in literature (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In addition, media's affect on public opinion of welfare and the relationship between race and welfare reform is well researched (Gilens, 1996; Gilliam, 1999). However, little attention to date has been given to the impact of film on public opinion about a wide variety of policy demands.

Much research exists with respect to the question of public opinion on welfare and how opinion changes with the race of the welfare recipient. One public view on welfare is found within feminist theory. Feminist theorists argue that the U.S. welfare system reestablishes America as a male-dominated society (Seccombe, Walers, & James, 1998; Miller, 1992). According to this perspective, social welfare policies such as the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) reinforce the concept of patriarchal necessity and make women seem like they are unable to support themselves without a husband. Miller (1992) claims that the welfare system not only encourages gender inequality, but it increases poverty among women by ostracizing the single mother and making her unpopular among politicians and the American public. Seccombe, Walters, and James (1998) suggest that women are stereotyped and stigmatized for not living within the traditional nuclear family structure. Women are blamed for disturbing social trends, such as the breakdown of the traditional American family and the decreasing birthrate (Seccombe, Walers, & James, 1998).

Furthermore, the general distaste for welfare and welfare recipients among the American public is well established. The welfare system is widely unpopular across the nation as Americans feel that welfare recipients take advantage of taxpayers. Lykes, Banuazizi, Liem, and Morris (1996) write “liberals and conservatives agree that welfare is the nation’s major problem, bad for the country and bad for the poor” (Lykes, Banuazizi, Liem, & Morris, 72). They argue that welfare negatively affects both America’s rich and poor, as it depletes public budgets and decreases efforts to find work, and therefore, worsens poverty.

Hancock (2004) describes the connection between opposition to welfare programs based on the race of the welfare recipient. According to a nationwide survey released in April of 1995, most Americans are disgusted with the welfare system because it “undercuts the ethical cornerstone of an honest day’s work” (Hancock, 65). The survey found that the public feels strongly that mothers on welfare should be mandated to work because it is unfair that they can stay home with their children while mothers who work cannot. Print and news media seem to reinforce the identity of welfare recipients as single, poor black mothers and this stereotype is found among elites and dominant groups across race, gender, and class boundaries (Hancock, 2004). Even wealthy African Americans embrace many aspects of this stereotype (Hancock, 2004).

Seccombe, Walters, and James (1999) reinforce the public perception of women on welfare as stated by other authors above: these women are despised by the American public as they are seen as lazy, as taking advantage of taxpayers, and in some cases, as having children just to receive more welfare support. These feelings of resentment are increasingly strong for African American women living off of welfare. African American

women are believed to choose to live without a male breadwinner in order to continue receiving welfare support (Seccombe, Walers, & James, 1999).

Kinders and Sanders (1996) find that the way public policies are framed can have a big impact on the link between racial attitudes and support. Furthermore, they write that racial resentment remains a prevailing determinant of white opinion on welfare. Drawing upon surveys carried out by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, they sought to examine public opinion on affirmative action and welfare reform in order to assess the views both whites and blacks hold on matters of race (Kinders & Sanders, 7). One statement found in the survey asked whites to state whether they agreed or disagreed and read “most blacks who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried.” The majority of whites agreed with this statement, and similar questions yielded similar responses. Through this experiment, attitudes of racial resentment were not only revealed, but Kinders and Sanders also found that when policies, like welfare, are discussed in ways where race plays no role, racial resentment still affects public opinion and policy making. Furthermore, personal interests also play a role in feelings of racial resentment. When policy questions are framed in a way that involves one’s self interest, for example affirmative action having the potential to harm the education of one’s children, then one is more likely to oppose the policy.

Jarrett (1996) performed in-depth interviews with African American mothers living on welfare, who believe they are targeted to a greater extent than white women receiving welfare support. The 47 African American mothers interviewed think that it is the opinion of whites that the welfare system, in particular Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), serves the undeserving poor. These welfare mothers believe that this

view is enforced throughout the media, as images show these AFDC recipients as having no work ethic. If women are unmarried and receiving welfare, the media portrays them as having children just to increase their welfare payments. This then leads to Americans viewing these women as inadequate mothers (Jarrett, 1996). Furthermore, these women believe that government action is based on the negative stereotypes portrayed by the media: AFDC participants are stereotyped as reluctant to work, and the AFDC policy reflects this belief as it encourages mothers to work. Jarrett concludes that the media can have a positive effect upon welfare policies by decreasing the portrayal of such negative stereotypes.

Fox (2004) argues that racial stereotype helps to explain the reason that many whites do not support welfare. Data collected from the 1990 General Social Survey revealed that 59 percent of whites believe that blacks prefer to live off welfare instead of living self-sufficiently and 46 percent of whites believed the same for Latinos. However, only 18.5 percent of whites thought this applied to Asians and 3 percent believed the same for whites. The survey also demonstrated that whites that think that blacks and Hispanics are lazy do not want tax dollars to be spent on these programs. Fox helps to develop my research as she sheds light on the effects of racism in supporting welfare; however, this article does not explain why this racism occurs. Because I hypothesize that entertainment culture that links non-whites to negative depictions of welfare will increase opposition to these programs, this theory applies to Latinos as well, thus further enhancing my research. This final article on racism and public opinion is also helpful in my research on race and public opinion on welfare because it not only gives a public view on social welfare, but it shows how racism only fuels dislike for welfare program.

In order to further my research, an understanding of media's relationship to the above literature on public opinion of the interplay of welfare and race is now essential.

With respect to the question of how substantially media influences public opinion, there is sufficient research to suggest that media, especially television news coverage, plays a role in doing so. Gilens (1999) examines media imagery beginning in the 1950s, consisting of print media in newsmagazines and television content analysis from network television news. He discovers that since the 1960s, negative images involving African Americans and depicting poverty have been used. Since the 1960s, two-thirds of imagery about poverty contains African Americans, when in reality African Americans only make up one-third of the poor. These images tend to restate the "centuries old stereotype" that blacks lack work ethic (Gilens, 78). Furthermore, Gilens found that fewer African Americans were portrayed in "sympathetic" stories about poverty and welfare than were Caucasians. Finally, 100% of the "underclass" depicted in newsmagazines were African Americans.

Gilens (1996) associates the media's exaggeration of the proportion of poor blacks with a greater resistance to welfare. Gilens finds that at times, subgroups such as the elderly and the working poor that are likely to elicit sympathy are rarely depicted, while blacks, the least sympathetic group, are overrepresented. Out of every subgroup, the discrepancy between the media's portrayal of the poor group and the true nature of their poverty is the greatest for African Americans. African Americans are depicted as poor in the media more often than any other subgroup (Gilens 1996). These portrayals are shown to affect viewers' opinion of welfare and overall concern for impoverished group's wellbeing. When media portrayals of black poverty increased from 50 percent in

1985 to 63 percent in 1991, the percentage of poor blacks also increased from 39 percent in 1985 to 50 percent in 1991. Gilens' work suggests that racism is key to the way whites vote on welfare reform and a large part of these views stem from the media's inaccurate and racist portrayals.

Clawson and Trice (2000) extend Gilens' work by looking at media portrayals of the poor between 1993 and 1998. They found that pictures of African Americans were disproportionately used in news and print media, particularly in issues such as welfare. When overrepresented in the imagery associated with areas of welfare, African Americans were then less likely to receive compassion from observers. Issues that elicited more sympathy, such as welfare regarding children, rarely used African American imagery. Based on this, Clawson and Trice conclude that images of poor in the news "do not capture the reality of poverty; instead, they provide a stereotypical and inaccurate picture of poverty which results in negative beliefs about the poor, antipathy toward blacks, and a lack of support for welfare programs," (Clawson & Trice 63). Therefore, these authors begin to explain the relationship between negative and inaccurate media representations adversely affecting children in need of welfare support.

Entman and Rojecki (2000) describe a similar pattern in the representations of African Americans in film, as those found in print and television news media. Images of black males and females in film receive criticism for "calling upon stereotypes of irresponsible and irrepressible black sexuality and criminality" which thus allows film to "reinforce Whites' ignorance of blacks' variety and humanity," (Entman & Rojecki, 182). As a result, fictional film portrayals, paired with the negative images of blacks in television news and printed stories, "participate in the preexisting White discourse of

blame and denial that undermines racial comity," (Entman & Rojecki, 183). Thus similarly to other forms of media, film has the ability to negatively affect public opinion of African Americans, through portraying them in an unrealistic and stereotyped manner.

Bullock and Williams (2001) argue that in portraying African Americans in this way, media are able to devalue them. A few powerful corporations control many mainstream media outlets in the United States and as a result, less powerful groups, such as the poor, minority groups, and women are stereotyped and diminished by them. In television, prints, and newspaper articles, women receiving welfare are portrayed as unmotivated, uneducated, and promiscuous, exemplified in the stereotype of the "welfare queen." The poor are rarely depicted on television sitcoms, only heard on reality talk shows, in which they are shown to be dysfunctional and unruly.

After examining the content and frequency of stereotypic media images of the poor through looking at televised images, print media, and newspaper articles, Bullock and Williams also reveal that children receive the most welfare of any group in the United States; yet, they receive barely any media attention because the media focuses on depicting their mothers as "immoral and neglectful" (Bullock & Williams, 235). Though these children are receiving welfare support, the public still feels negatively towards it due to believing that their mothers, and therefore the children, are undeserving of it.

Furthermore, Bullock and Williams suggest that these media portrayals of women affect policy makers. An example is the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which promotes two-parent families and denies welfare benefits for additional children born to welfare mothers. This policy unswervingly reflects the public opinion that welfare mothers, often times unmarried, have children just

to gain additional welfare support. Davis and Hagen (1996) argue that American public opinion revolves around the idea that the sole goal of welfare mothers is to take advantage of taxpayers. As a result, the majority of policy proposals for welfare reforms aim to modify and regulate these women's behavior. These articles not only begin to examine the relationship between media and public opinion, but they show how media can shape policy legislation.

Gilliam (1999) notes that the news media, and television in particular, are the primary sources in shaping American public views on policy issues because it helps to shape what the public thinks welfare "ought" to be (Gilliam, 1). Gilliam performed an experiment in which he looked to see how television news stories of "welfare queens" affected white people's attitudes about welfare policy, gender, and race. He created four random groups of people, who each viewed a different story about a "welfare queen" named Rhonda Germaine. In one story, Rhonda was a white woman, while in another she was a black woman. In the third story there was no visual representation of Rhonda, and in the fourth story, which served as the control story, the group watched no TV news images about welfare. Gilliam's results showed that upon viewing the portrayal of black Rhonda as opposed to her white version, opposition to welfare spending increased by 5 percent, with a 10 percent increase in an attribution of cause to individual failings. Furthermore, Gilliam concluded that upon being exposed to media portrayals of "welfare queens," whites were not only less likely to support welfare programs, but they believed in increased support towards maintaining traditional gender roles, and African American stereotypes were amplified to a larger degree.

Iyengar (1991) claims “media framing attributes to public views on Americans blaming the victims of poverty” (Iyengar, 47). In comparison with crime and terrorism, television networks spend little time depicting poverty, with less than one story a month; however, this scant coverage does have a great effect upon public opinion of poverty. News coverage of homeless people encourages viewers to hold poor people responsible for being homeless. Since so few instances of homeless people are portrayed, viewers see these stories as extreme cases, and therefore these extreme cases make viewers feel that the homeless should be individually responsible for their homelessness, as it is not a commonplace issue (Iyengar, 1991).

Iyengar also notes that race, episodic framing, and narration play a role in how viewers feel about issues regarding welfare. Episodic framing occurs when coverage focuses on a specific event or instance without providing background or contextual information on the subject. In his study, Iyengar found that news stories covering black poor mothers elicited twice the amount of individualistic responsibility feelings than did stories of white mothers among viewers. The feelings of racism elicited by the racial imagery and narrative story telling in these news stories then affect the types of solutions proposed to deal with poverty and unemployment. After viewing news coverage, told through episodic framing and narration about a poor black person, viewers suggested that poor people need to work harder. However, after viewing a similar story that involved a poor white person, societal solutions were recommended instead. This book is very beneficial to my research as it explains how television media affects public opinion on welfare. It also adds to my research by reflecting how different framing of a story, as told from an African American or Caucasian perspective, like in the films I screened, alter

one's opinion of the poor. However, whether film in particular affects opinion on welfare has yet to be covered and I intend on exploring this issue in more depth.

This notion of racist imagery and narration is presented by Avery and Peffley (2006) as they write that news media in the United States plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and behavior. They suggest that this news coverage increases public cynicism of welfare. White political attitudes are influenced by news coverage of welfare reforms because news coverage “racializes” welfare policy by excessively using images of African Americans to accompany news stories on poverty (Avery & Peffley, 132). Off-putting coverage of poverty is more likely to be illustrated with pictures of African Americans, while images of whites are depicted in more positive stories. As a result, “the consequences of such coverage are potentially severe: by creating the inaccurate impression that a majority of welfare recipients are black, public support for welfare is likely diminished and negative stereotypes of African Americans as the “undeserving poor” are doubtless reinforced,” (Avery & Peffley, 132).

Finally, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argue that the media can change political public opinion without changing public attitudes through priming, framing, and agenda setting. They discovered that when people viewed a television news story involving unemployment about a black individual, viewers were significantly less likely to believe unemployment to be a pressing national issue than when the story featured a white person. Both this article and the one by Avery and Peffley tie together my key issues of public opinion of welfare in relationship to race and the media.

While this research is beneficial to my research as it both explains public opinion of women on welfare in relationship to race and it shows the effect of media in shaping

public opinion on welfare, existing literature is inadequate in the area of film's affect upon viewers. While there is much written about the portrayals of the poor and impoverished women in print and news media, there is insufficient research on portrayals of this in film and the effects that these portrayals have had upon viewers. Furthermore, almost no information exists about public opinion of child welfare in relationship to media portrayals.

Based on this existing literature, I believe that media have the ability to shape public opinion on welfare through different types of portrayals of female-headed families in poverty. My literature review states that much research exists on the effects of media upon public opinion and the current public view on welfare; however, I have discovered a gap in the research in areas regarding the effects of film, in particular of the portrayals of impoverished women, upon viewers and political opinion. I plan on filling in these missing pieces by developing a theory based on arguments of several pieces of existing literature and by adding to this literature.

I contend that film can prove to be just as powerful a medium as print, news, and television, as it combines elements of all three of these mediums. Film involves various types of modalities, such as music, narrative, pictures, and episodic framing. According to Jeffrey Sadow (2004) film is able to "have a significant, perhaps even large, impact on specific issue preferences, or even on a person's entire political orientation." Viewers tend to assume preferences that more directly align with those that the film depicts (Sadow, 2004). Sadow argues that by watching the portrayals depicted in film, viewers are swayed to align their beliefs with the position that the film is representing. I concur with Sadow in arguing that film does indeed have an effect upon viewers' political

beliefs; however, building on the idea that people are impacted by the films that they watch, I say that people's opinions on welfare are affected by film because film acts as a sustained and extended version of episodic framing. Film forces viewers to see the film's stance on an issue for an extended period of time, and therefore has the power to change and affect viewers' opinions. For instance, if a woman on welfare is depicted as lazy and taking advantage of taxpayers' money in a film, viewers will be less likely to be in favor of welfare.

As argued by Hancock (2004), the media reinforces the identity of the welfare mother as single, poor black mothers, who look to take advantage of taxpayers. Building upon both Sadow and Hancock's arguments, I contend that film, with its portrayals of woman on welfare being harmful to society, as Hancock describes, will sway viewers' political beliefs on the welfare system and make viewers react negatively towards welfare. This debate also allows me to argue that filmmakers, then, are able to use film portrayals to sway political public opinion. This may negate the often-quoted idea that filmmakers merely create film to be "art," as this suggests that filmmakers may indeed have a larger agenda.

Episodic framing of narratives are proven to be effective ways of influencing public opinion, and film is the ultimate form of episodic framing. With its audio and visual effects, film can have a particularly large impact on its viewers. According to Blood and Zatorre (2001), viewers feel an intense biological response when listening to music. Music that one enjoys elicits euphoric responses; therefore, if pleasurable music is paired with images, viewers are more likely to respond with positive emotions toward the images (Blood & Zatorre, 2001). Taking Blood and Zatorre's argument into account, I

argue that music, paired with imagery depicting poverty, affects public opinion. Viewers will feel less supportive towards welfare reform if negative imagery depicting impoverished welfare mothers is paired with dismal music, as found in both of my films containing welfare portrayals.

Following in Iyengar's (1991) argument of the impact of using episodic framing of narration when judging whether media affects public opinion, I argue that the use of narration and episodic framing is crucial in influencing viewers' opinions as it allows viewers to connect on a deeper level to the story being told and the characters being depicted. I also agree with Iyenger's assessment of racism and imagery. Racist attitudes of white viewers when watching stories of blacks make whites disfavor policies in support of welfare. Iyengar has shown that when people viewed a story involving unemployment about a black individual, they were considerably less likely to believe unemployment and welfare to be a significant issue than when the story involved a white individual. However, Iyengar's discussion only covers television and news coverage. Building on the idea that these short television and news stories impact viewers based upon episodic framing, narration, and imagery, I argue that film influences viewers to a similar extent as television and news coverage, because it combines these three elements of episodic framing, narration, and imagery and displays each for a longer amount of time than television and news stories. While Iyengar's study deals with the short-term exposure of television and news stories, viewers see these elements for an extended period of time and are more intensely exposed in film. My research will contribute to this literature by revealing how these existing theories of the effects of television and news media on the public also apply to and are escalated in film.

Similar to Iyengar, Martin Gilens (1999) discusses the association between negative images shown in the print and news media, racism, and attitudes towards welfare. I follow Gilen's argument by stating that inaccurate and stereotypical imagery depicted in media influences viewers into voting against welfare and racism proves to be a key factor in the way whites vote for welfare based upon this racist imagery in the news. Building on Gilen's work, I argue that negative and stereotypical imagery in film will also have an impact on viewers, especially white viewers, in their beliefs when voting on welfare. Film will have a significant effect upon viewers, similar to the effect found with news media, because viewers will be exposed to these negative and inaccurate portrayals for a greater consecutive amount of time than when watching the news.

I follow in Bullock and Williams argument of negative media portrayals affecting policy makers as well. Bullock and Williams dispute that women receiving welfare in media are depicted as unmotivated and immoral. As a result, policies such as the PRWERA, which promotes two-parent families and denies welfare benefits for additional children born to welfare mothers are put into effect. Taking this argument into account, I argue that these negative and stereotypical portrayals in film will affect policy decisions as well. Film portrayals of women on welfare are developed over a longer period of time and in more depth, as in most cases a movie is longer than a television show. In addition, a film is normally viewed by more people than a specific television show, as there are far less films than television shows. Therefore, I argue that when being exposed to a negative portrayal of a woman on welfare in film, viewers will be in favor of enacting reforms to punish women who are in need of government assistance. In addition, these portrayals will have a great social impact. If millions of viewers are seeing a certain

film portrayal, than many more people are likely to obtain the beliefs that the film is representing. If my theory is correct, I will expect that portrayals of female-headed families in poverty in film do affect public opinion of welfare and as a result, affect the way in which the public votes and policy making.

Chapter 2: Jenna Marine's Case Study

HYPOTHESES

The first question motivating my research is whether film portrayals affect public opinion on welfare and child welfare policies. Drawing on the previous discussion, I predict that films will powerfully boost opposition to social welfare policies, especially those which might be seen as encouraging out of wedlock birth, due to film's ability to incorporate music, imagery, and narrative in its framing of portrayals of welfare mothers. To answer this question the following prediction is made:

H1: Negative film portrayals will adversely affect public opinion on welfare and welfare policies involving children.

More specifically, those viewing *Precious* and *8 Mile* should exhibit less support for welfare policies than those that viewed my control film.

The second question central to my thesis is whether the race of the welfare mother portrayed in the film affects one's attitude towards welfare policies. Previous research leads me to suspect that depictions of African American welfare mothers might have more powerful effects on policy opinions because they tap into long-standing negative racial stereotypes. Due to overwhelming attitudes of racial resentment found among the American public as a result of the overrepresentation of African Americans as poor and taking advantage of welfare in the media, the public will feel less supportive of welfare

portrayals when African Americans are involved. This question is answered through the following prediction:

H2: The impact of negative portrayals of African American mothers on welfare will depress support for welfare policies more than similar portrayals of Caucasian mothers receiving welfare.

With regards to my experiment, I expect to find that after viewing *Precious*, respondents will tend to view welfare in a more negative light than those who viewed *8 Mile*.

The third question motivating my thesis is whether moderating variables such as religious affiliation and ideology will impact the effect the portrayals have upon respondents. It is well documented that Jews are among the most liberal of groups in America, and therefore, are likely to be more supportive of welfare policies to begin with (Liebman & Cohen, 1996). Thus, Jews will be more resistant to the negative portrayals depicted in the films than non-Jews. Jews will tend to read the negative depictions differently than non-Jews, as they will be more opposed to the negative portrayals of welfare in the films, and their opinions of welfare will therefore be less likely to change. However, because conservatives tend to be less supportive of welfare policies to start, the negative images in the films will resonate with what they already believe welfare to be and the effect will be larger. This question is answered through the following prediction:

H3: The negative portrayals depicted in the films will have less of an effect upon Jews and liberals than upon non-Jews and conservatives.

METHOD

Sampling

In total, 89 people participated in this study. I contacted a convenient sample, comprised primarily of the author's friends and family members, the majority of which were students from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The mean age of the sample was 21 years old (with a range from 16 to 52 years old). In terms of religious affiliation, 80.9% were Jewish, while 9% were Protestant, 4.5% were Catholic and the remaining 4.5% identified as "other" or "no religion". Regarding race, 92% of my respondents were Caucasian, 2.2% were African American, 3.4% were Asian, and 2.2% identified as "other." Most of the respondents were wealthy: 58.4% came from a family with a yearly income of \$250,000 or above. Finally, in terms of party identification, 48.3% were Democrats, while 22.5% identified themselves as Republican, 13.5% as Independent, 6.7% as other, and 9% refused.

For the majority of the respondents, I made personal telephone calls, or sent individual emails and Facebook messages in order to solicit them for my study. Because my project required a significant time commitment from each respondent and I asked all of the out-of-state respondents to acquire and watch the movies on their own, I realized that a personal explanation of my project and a persuasive plea for why I needed them to participate was required. I also solicited participants by emailing my on-campus sorority house.

Once the individual agreed to participate in my study, I rolled a six-sided die to randomly assign them to a movie. Numbers 1 and 2 represented the *8 Mile* group, numbers 3 and 4 were assigned to *Precious*, and numbers 5 and 6 were asked to view *The*

Shawshank Redemption. I then emailed them the electronic link that would lead them to the survey pertaining to the film that I asked them to view. The link directed them to the Qualtrics website, an online survey resource. For those respondents out-of-state, I gave them a two-week deadline to view the film and asked them to complete the survey immediately following the viewing.

For the in-state respondents, the majority being students at the University of Michigan, I gave them the option of viewing the film and completing the survey on their own, or attending one of my screenings. I conducted two separate screenings, one at my house, and one at my sorority house, where, through rolling the die, I randomly assigned people to different rooms to watch the three various films. They then had the option of taking the survey online or completing a paper and pen version by hand immediately following the screening.

My response rate was extremely high at 90.8%. Of the 31 people asked to view *Precious*, 26 did so, 36 of the 38 individuals solicited for *8 Mile* completed the assignment, and 25 of the 29 people assigned to the control group viewed the film *The Shawshank Redemption* and took the survey. The response rate was high due to the researcher's persistence in calling subjects and encouraging them to complete the study. It often took two or three phone calls or emails in order for them to participate. Regarding my manipulation check, 96.1% of my respondents answered both questions correctly, revealing that the vast majority of respondents closely watched the films.

Materials

For the two films screened that involved welfare, I aimed to find portrayals that were as similar to one another as possible, except for the race of the mother on welfare.

By matching the portrayals closely, the experiment isolated the impact of racial portrayals on opinions about social welfare. I attempted to find films that had a similar tone, narrative, and setting, so that I could isolate the race of the mother as the reason why responses from the two groups varied from one another. However, I was limited in options, as few films containing negative portrayals of welfare mothers exist. *Precious* and *8 Mile* both take place in the 1990s, in large, poor, and desolate neighborhoods. Both stories are told from the perspective of the abusive mother's child and while both have dramatic and depressing tones, they end on an uplifting beat, with hope and promise for a better future for their protagonists. *The Shawshank Redemption* was selected as my control film for being race-neutral, even race-positive, and for containing an intense, yet inspiring undertone; similar to that found in both *8 Mile* and *Precious*.

Other than race, the films did differ in ways beyond my control. The mother depicted in *Precious* is more violent and abusive than the mother in *8 Mile*. While the mother in *8 Mile* is verbally abusive, the mother in *Precious* is not only emotionally abusive, but physically, and sexually abusive as well. When being compared, this places the mother in *Precious* in a more negative light than the mother of *8 Mile*. Furthermore, because the protagonist in *Precious* is forced to deal with constant physical and sexual abuse from multiple members of her family, the overall tone of *Precious* becomes more dismal and disturbing than that of *8 Mile*. These differences undermine, to some extent, the experimental control that I have over the stimulus. This weakens the degree to which I can claim that any differences I find in my results are due to the race of the welfare mother portrayed in the film. However, in order to have isolated the race of the mother as the only difference between the two films, I would have had to produce my own film

stimuli. Given the fact that I wanted to examine films that existed in the real world, these two films were the closest match available to me.

Measures

I developed a survey to measure various attitudes about welfare, including general spending preferences and opinions about more specific policies designed to help young mothers and children (See Appendix for copy of the entire survey). I wrote several questions regarding specific child welfare programs expressly for this study, but I took the majority of items from the American National Election Studies (ANES) codebook and the general social survey. My survey also captures information about respondent demographics, political affiliation, racial attitudes and non-welfare policy opinion. I performed manipulation checks by asking respondents to recall specific information about the movie they were supposed to have watched. This was done in order to guarantee that my respondents did indeed pay attention when watching the films.

After ensuring all responses were accounted for, I began a recoding process in which the majority of the responses for “no opinion,” “no response,” “refused,” and “don’t know,” were excluded from the analysis. On average, 5% to 10% were missing from most questions. Each opinion item was also recoded so that every low value reflects a liberal viewpoint and every high value is a conservative one. For instance, one question of my survey reads, “Do you strongly support, support, or strongly oppose federally funded programs that provide poor children with free lunches and nutritional guidance?” In this question, agreeing strongly (1) represents a liberal standpoint, while disagreeing strongly (5) is the most conservative response available. Another question reads, “Do you

agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Welfare mothers could earn enough money to get off public assistance if they only tried hard enough". In this case, strongly agreeing with the statement (1) is a conservative viewpoint. Therefore, the response variables were reverse coded so that strongly disagreeing becomes the lowest score (1), and strongly agreeing receives the highest score (5). This procedure was employed for every question on my survey.

In order to measure how the different films affect opinions on the wide variety of topics covered in my survey, I built several scales which combined questions that covered the same topics. I tested sets of dependent variables in order to tap into the possible reactions to the effects of the films. The first set of analyses concerns welfare policy opinion. Because there are subcategories within policies, opinions of general welfare spending, spending on policies regarding mothers, and those that involved solely children were made into separate scales. Furthermore, I measured racial resentment attitudes using the standard racial resentment scale (Kinder & Sanders 1996).

The first scale built measures opinion of welfare policies involving children. Three questions were summed. Each measures opinion on various child welfare programs and policies. First, subjects were asked, "Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Needy children should receive welfare support even if their parents are not eligible for public assistance". Next, subjects were asked, "Do you strongly support, support, or strongly oppose welfare support for families with children under the age of 18?" Finally, subjects were asked, "Do you strongly support, support, or strongly oppose federally funded

programs that provide poor children with free lunches and nutritional guidance?”. These items produced a moderately reliable scale (Cronbach’s Alpha = .66).

The next scale measures opinion of support for programs directly supporting welfare mothers. The two questions used to build the scale read, “How strongly do you support a program that provides prenatal and postpartum health care for adolescent mothers?” and “How strongly do you support substance abuse programs for mothers receiving welfare money?” These items produced a moderately reliable scale (Cronbach’s Alpha = .64).

In order to measure general support for spending on social welfare programs, I combined two questions. One asks about increasing spending on child welfare programs, and one about increasing spending on social welfare programs such as health care, social security, and unemployment benefits (See questions 29 and 36 in Appendix). These items produced a modestly reliable scale (Cronbach’s Alpha = .59).

Next I built a scale measuring racial resentment (Kinder & Sanders 1996) combining 4 questions (See questions 14-17 in Appendix). The first question asks about blacks receiving special favors in comparison to Irish, Italians, Jews, and other minority groups. The next question talks about slavery and discrimination making it difficult for blacks to work their way up from the lower class. The third question asks if blacks get less than they deserve, and the fourth question compares the work ethic of blacks to whites. A moderately reliable scale was produced (Cronbach’s Alpha = .63).

Finally, in order to measure general attitudes towards welfare, I grouped together questions referring to the different results and purposes of welfare support (See questions 23 through 28 in Appendix). However, the scale was highly unreliable and

continued to appear unreliable as I tried to create subcategories amongst the questions. Therefore, I examined differences between the experimental conditions on individual items from this group and ended up testing opinion on the general purpose of welfare in relationship to which film the respondent viewed.

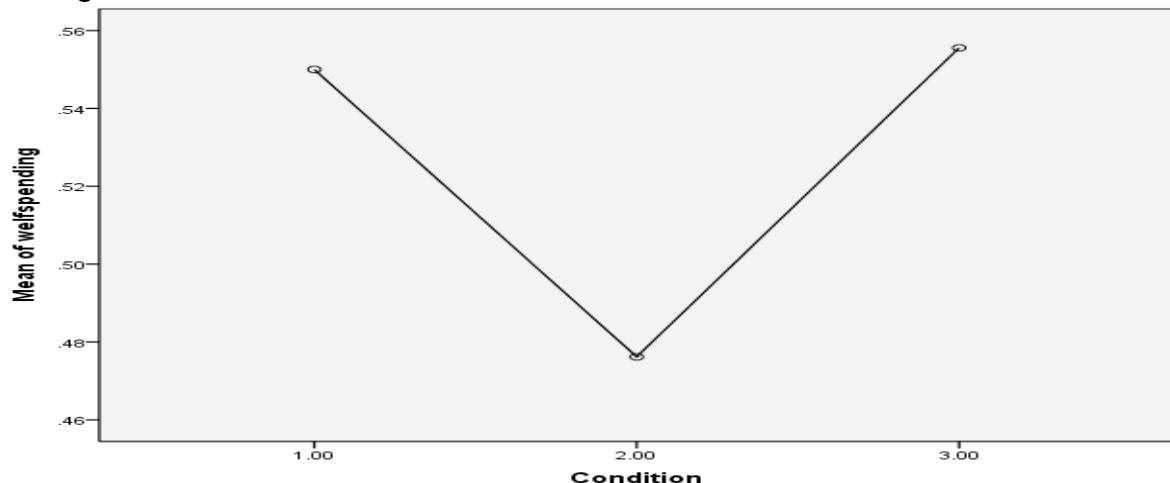
RESULTS

This study sought to test three main hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 predicts that negative films portrayals of welfare mothers will adversely affect public opinion of welfare and child welfare policies. This hypothesis can be broken up into three different parts, with Part A focusing on general support on welfare, Part B, focusing on support for welfare mothers, and Part C, centering on support for welfare children.

Hypothesis 1a: General Support of Welfare

In order to test Hypothesis 1a, whether viewing the films affected one's opinion of general welfare support, a one-way Anova was run on the scale built to test opinion on welfare spending. The means for each of the three conditions are presented in Figure 1. The results move in the direction that I predicted: Those viewing *Precious* (mean=.48) and *8 Mile* (mean= .55) reported lower levels of support for spending on welfare compared to those who viewed *The Shawshank Redemption* (mean= .56). However, these differences were substantively small and statistically insignificant ($F(2)=3.16$, $p=.49$).

Figure 1 The interaction between the film viewed and opinion about welfare spending.

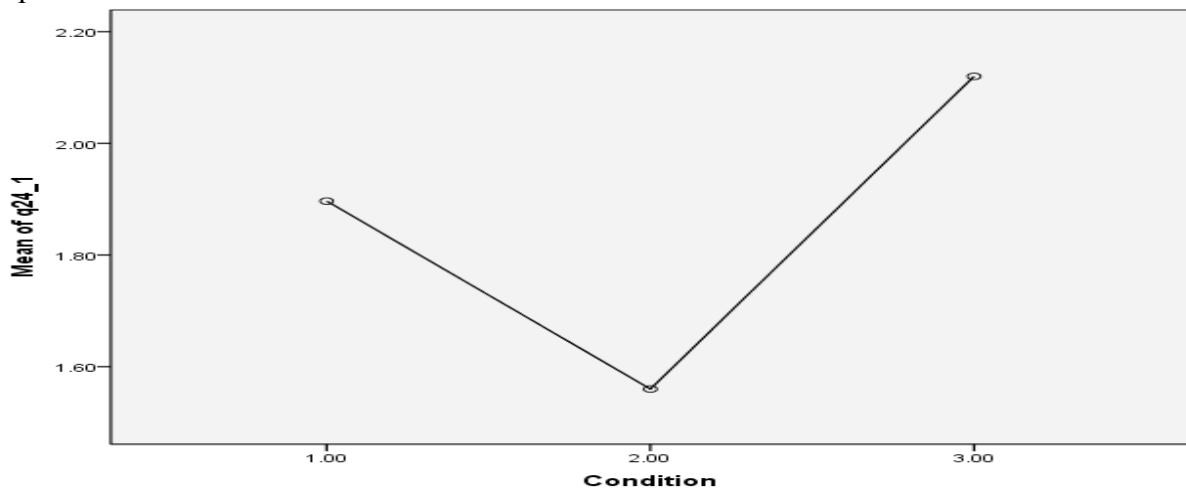


Key: Condition 1 = 8 mile, Condition 2 = Precious, Condition 3 = The Shawshank Redemption.

Furthermore, in testing Hypothesis 1a, one-way Anovas were performed on a variety of questions relating to general opinion of the purposes of welfare (see questions 23 through 28 in Appendix). These questions test if people see welfare as having both a negative and positive outcome. In testing if welfare serves a negative purpose, they ask whether people believe welfare to be a means for people to work less, if it encourages young women to have babies before marriage, and if it discourages young women who get pregnant from marrying the father of the child. In testing if welfare serves a beneficial purpose, it asks if welfare help to keep people's marriage together in times of financial problems, if it helps to prevent hunger and starvation, and if it helps people get on their feet when facing financial and emotional obstacles. I asked these questions in order to determine whether after viewing the films, people found welfare to have a beneficial and productive purpose, thus an overall positive view on welfare, or to have a negative and abusive purpose, thus resulting in a negative overall view of the existence of the welfare system.

Results so far suggest that the films had little impact on general opinions about welfare spending or on beliefs about its impact. However, a significant effect of the films did appear for one question in this section. Subjects were asked if “Welfare helps people to get on their feet when facing difficult situations such as unemployment, a divorce, or a death in the family.” See Figure 2, which contains the mean responses to this item for each condition. The group who viewed the control film reported the highest mean agreement for this item (mean=.56). Those who saw 8 Mile reported somewhat lower agreement (mean=.55). Those who saw Precious returned the lowest scores on this item (mean=.48). The anova for these comparisons returned a statistically significant result ($F(2)=3.00$, $p= .000$). In other words, viewing *Precious* or *8 Mile* suppressed the sense that welfare could provide important benefits to recipients compared to those in the control condition.

Figure 2 The impact of the films on opinion about whether welfare serves a beneficial purpose.

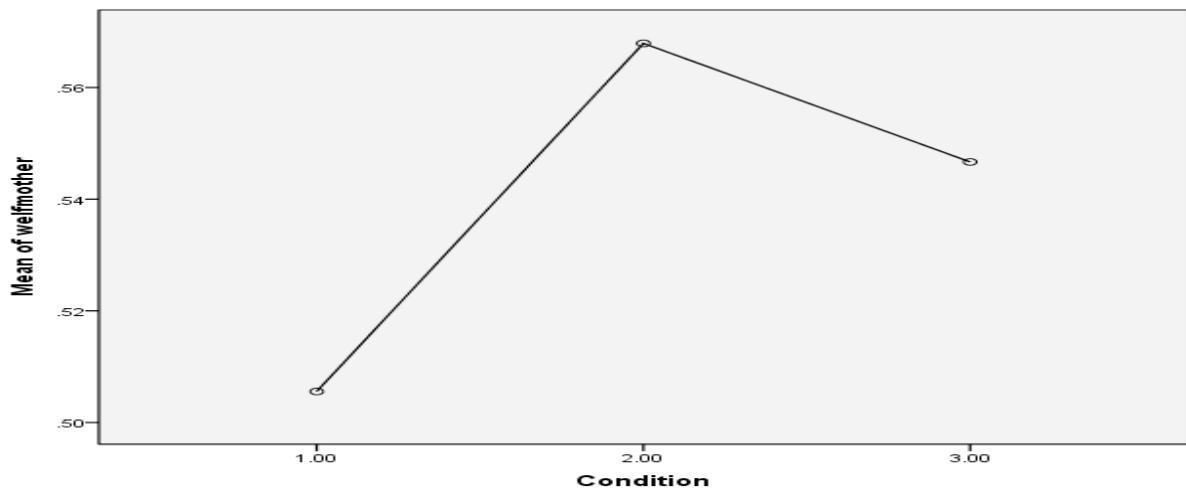


Key: Condition 1 = 8 mile, Condition 2 = Precious, Condition 3 = The Shawshank Redemption.

Hypothesis 1b: Policies Supporting Welfare Mothers

Next I tested the impact of exposure to the films on opinions about welfare policies designed to assist mothers in poverty. Figure 3 displays the means for this test. A one-way Anova was run on the scale built to test opinion on policies supporting welfare mothers. The results do not move in the direction predicted: the group who viewed *8 Mile* (mean = .51) reported the lowest levels of support for policies supporting welfare movies, while support was highest among the group who viewed *Precious* (mean=.57). The control group fell in between the two test groups in their support of welfare mothers (mean=.55). However, these differences were statistically insignificant ($F(2) = .904$, $p=.409$).

Figure 3 The effect of viewing a film and opinion on welfare policies supporting welfare mothers.

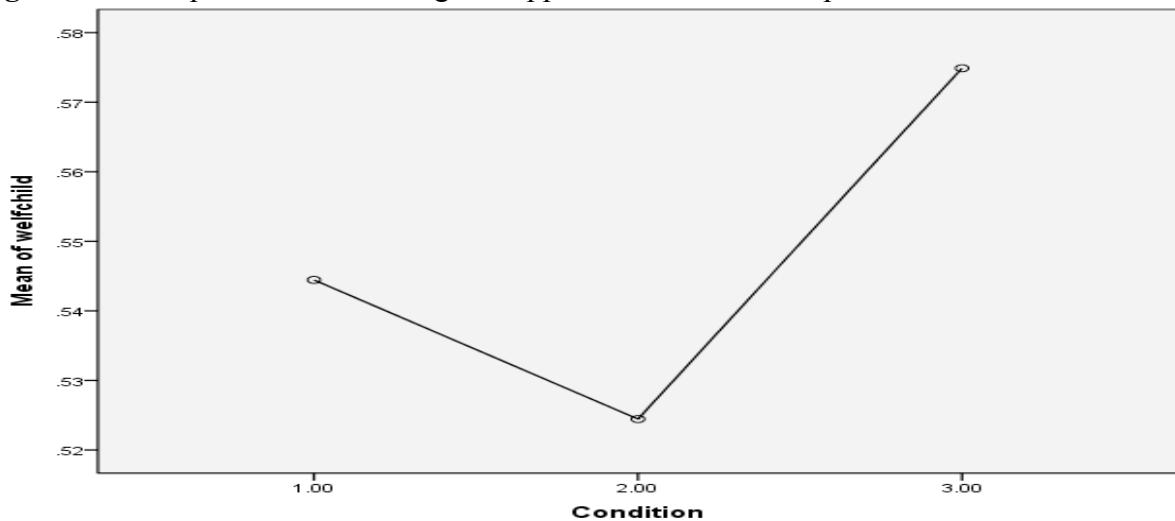


Key: Condition 1= 8 mile, Condition 2=Precious, Condition 3= The Shawshank Redemption.

Hypothesis 1c: Support for Child Welfare Policies

In order to test this Hypothesis, whether the films affected support for child welfare policies, a one-way Anova was run on the scale built to test opinion on child welfare policies. The means for each of the three conditions are presented in Figure 4. The results move in the direction predicted: Those viewing *Precious* (mean=.52) and *8 Mile* (mean=.54), reported lower levels of support for child welfare policies compared to those who viewed the control film (mean=.57). These differences were, however, substantively small and statistically insignificant ($F(2)=.398$, $p=.673$).

Figure 4 The impact of film viewing on support for child welfare policies.



Key: Condition 1 = 8 mile, Condition 2 = Precious, Condition 3 = The Shawshank Redemption.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that films containing African American portrayals will boost opposition to welfare and will also lead to higher levels of racial resentment compared to similar portrayals of Caucasian mothers receiving welfare. I will examine

the impact of these films on welfare policy support in general and attitudes about African Americans in particular.

Hypothesis 2a Relative to the control group, exposure to Precious will depress support for welfare more than 8 Mile

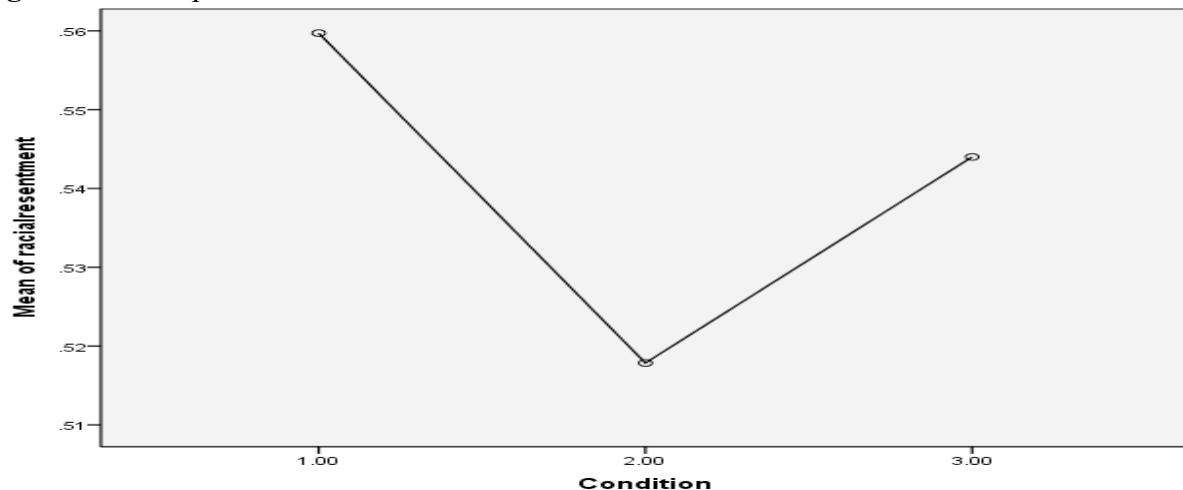
In order to test Hypothesis 2a, the means of the tests run above (the impact of the films viewed and general welfare support, purpose of the welfare system, support for welfare mothers, and support for welfare children) are examined. I compared the means of the group that viewed *Precious* to the one that viewed *8 Mile* in relationship to general welfare support, opinion about whether welfare serves a beneficial purpose, support for policies involving mothers, and those involving children. In three of the four cases, the overall Anova results were statistically insignificant. However, after viewing *Precious*, respondents were less likely to view welfare as a means for people to overcome obstacles, and therefore were more skeptical on the benefits that the welfare system can provide, than after viewing *8 Mile*. However, the difference between the *Precious* 8 and *Mile* conditions were not statistically significant.

Furthermore, for the tests involving general welfare support, opinion on the purpose of welfare, and welfare support for children, the means follow in the direction that I predicted (See Figures 1, 2, and 3). However, these films seemed to have the opposite effect on support for policies to assist poor mothers. Viewers were more likely to support policies involving welfare mothers after viewing *Precious* than after viewing *8 Mile* (See Figure 2). The effect was statistically insignificant ($F(2)= .582$, $p< .561$).

Hypothesis 2b Exposure to film representations of black welfare mothers will exacerbate negative racial attitudes relative to depictions of white welfare mothers.

In order to test Hypothesis 2b, I ran a one-way Anova on the scale built to measure racial resentment. See Figure 5 for plotted mean values. Here, the results moved in the direction opposite of my predictions: racial resentment was higher in the group that saw *8 Mile* (mean= .56) than in the group that viewed *Precious* (mean= .52). This difference was not statistically significant ($F(2)= .582$, $p<.561$).

Figure 5 The impact of film on racial resentment.



Key: Condition 1 = *8 mile*, Condition 2 = *Precious*, Condition 3 = *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Hypothesis 3 tests whether the effects of the film portrayals are larger for some groups than others. I predicted that those who were more sympathetic to welfare policies to begin with- Jews and liberals, for example- might react less to these film depictions than those with more critical pre-exposure opinions. Therefore, I compared the responses of Jews and non-Jews and of liberals and conservatives in each scale by running one-way Anovas. Hypothesis 3 can be divided into two parts: Part A measures whether the impact

of these films are larger for non-Jews than Jews, and Part B measures whether the impact is larger for conservatives than non-conservatives.

Hypothesis 3a *Negative depictions of welfare mothers in film will reduce support for welfare policy more among non-Jews than among Jews.*

In order to test Hypothesis 3a, one-way Anovas were performed between the Jewish and non-Jewish members of each group watching the three different films and each scale used to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. In regards to Hypothesis 1a, whether viewing the films affect one's opinion of general welfare support, two separate one-way Anovas were performed, one between Jews and the scale testing general opinion of welfare support and one between non-Jews and this scale. The results move in the direction predicted but do not differ by group: Those viewing *Precious* and *8 Mile* reported lower levels of support for welfare compared to those who viewed *The Shawshank Redemption*. These differences were statistically significant for both groups.

In testing whether religious affiliation affected the results discovered regarding Hypothesis 1b, if the films viewed affect opinion on support for welfare mothers, one-way Anovas were run between Jews and non-Jews and the films viewed. The results again did not vary by religious group: Those that viewed the control film, whether they were Jewish or non-Jewish, still had opinions of welfare that fell in between the two test groups. Even so, the differences were substantively small and statistically insignificant.

When analyzing whether religious affiliation affected Hypothesis 1c, whether films affect support for child welfare policies, one-way Anovas were once again performed between Jews and non-Jews and the scale measuring support of child welfare policies. The results move in the direction predicted: Jews, and non-Jews who viewed the

control film support welfare policies involving children to a greater extent than those in either *8 Mile* or *Precious* viewing groups. However, the mean differences of each group are still so small that each interaction is statistically insignificant.

In order to see whether religious affiliation affects responses when testing Hypotheses 2a and 2b, whether an African American depiction of a welfare mother produces more adverse opinions on welfare than a similar Caucasian depiction, and if racial resentment is higher after viewing the African American depiction than after seeing the Caucasian one, the one-way Anovas performed on the above scales were analyzed. Once again, the only significant result was that seeing either film boosted the impression that there might be positive consequences of welfare. These results did not differ by religious group.

Hypothesis 3b *The negative impact of the films will be larger for conservatives than for liberals.*

In order to test Hypothesis 3a, one-way Anovas were performed between the liberal and conservative members of each group watching the three different films and each scale used to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. In regards to Hypothesis 1a, whether viewing the films affect one's opinion of general welfare support, two separate one-way Anovas were performed, one between liberals and the scale testing general opinion of welfare support and one between conservatives and this scale. The results move in the direction predicted: Those viewing *Precious* and *8 Mile* reported lower levels of support for welfare compared to those who viewed *The Shawshank Redemption*. However, the impact of the film did not differ by ideological group: The Anova was significant for both.

In testing whether ideology affected the results discovered regarding Hypothesis 1b, if the films viewed affect opinion on support for welfare mothers, one-way Anovas were run separately on liberals and conservatives. The direction that I had predicted my results to follow was not taken: Those that viewed the control film, whether they were liberal, or conservative still had opinions of welfare that fell in between the two test groups. As before, these differences were substantively small and statistically insignificant. Once again, these responses did not differ from the responses of the conditions as a whole.

When analyzing whether ideology affected Hypothesis 1c, whether films affect support for child welfare policies, one-way Anovas were once again performed between liberals and conservatives and the scale measuring support of child welfare policies. The results move in the direction predicted: liberals and conservatives who viewed the control film support welfare policies involving children to a greater extent than those in the test groups. However, the mean differences of each group are still so small that each interaction is statistically insignificant.

Chapter 3: Implications

DISCUSSION

This study tested three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 explored whether negative film portrayals of welfare mothers adversely affect public opinion on welfare and welfare policies regarding children. In general, I found few significant differences in reactions to welfare policies after exposure to either film depicting welfare mothers compared to the control. One significant difference emerged in opinions about the benefits of welfare policies to poor people. Here I found that both movies significantly reduced the recognition that poor people can benefit from welfare. Hypothesis 2 tested whether these negative portrayals had a larger depressive effect on opinion when the lead character was African American. The results did not conform to my predictions: Subjects in my study reacted quite similarly to these two movies.

The study's major finding regarding Hypothesis 1 was that negative film portrayals do not adversely affect public opinion of welfare and child welfare policies. In regards to Hypothesis 1a, significant results were discovered with respect to the impact of the films viewed and whether respondents felt that welfare positively benefits members of society facing obstacles. This finding suggests that after viewing a film with a negative depiction of a welfare mother, viewers are less likely to believe that welfare serves a positive benefit to those in need of it than viewers who watched the control film, a film completely unrelated to welfare. This finding contributes to existing literature as it shows that after viewing a negative portrayal of a welfare mother in film, one may be less inclined to support the existence of the welfare system by believing that it does not serve

beneficial purposes to members of society. However, given the fact that these films did not significant influence other attitudes about welfare, we should probably not make too much of this single finding. This question may have produced significant results due to something else about the films, aside from the negative portrayal of the welfare mother, such as another element of the narrative that differed across the films. Even so, because the groups were randomized and a significant result was produced between the responses of the three separate groups, it is likely that the film portrayals did contribute to why the members of each group voted in such a manner.

However, with regards to support for welfare funding (Hypothesis 1a), support for welfare mothers (Hypothesis 1b) and support for welfare children (Hypothesis 1c), no large effects were discovered. Perhaps exposure to a single film, lasting under three hours, is insufficient for changing deeply rooted beliefs about the role of government in helping people out of poverty. If respondents held negative feelings for welfare that were intertwined in their long-established political beliefs, then it is unlikely that the viewing of a film will change these beliefs.

With respect to Hypothesis 2, whether the race of the welfare mother in these films mattered, no significant results were produced. The major finding was that the race of the welfare mother depicted does not affect whether one views welfare in a more negative manner. This is a surprising finding because it shows that unlike television and print media, opinion of welfare is not sensitive to racial cues. This can be explained through looking at the influence of news media in comparison to film. As explained by Gilliam (1999), news media are the primary source in shaping public opinion on welfare, for the public believes that the opinions stated in news media is what the public “ought”

to believe. In news media, welfare mothers are often depicted as African American, lazy, and taking advantage of tax payers, and therefore, the public tends to believe that this representation of the welfare mother is what they “ought” to believe is accurate. However, if this same representation is present in a film, viewers may feel less inclined to let these depictions affect their thoughts on welfare. Viewers might not interpret the film as a thought-provoking, politicized representation, as they might view television or print media to be. When one watches or reads the news, the intention of learning about an issue or understanding another perspective of an issue is usually present. When viewing film and immersing oneself in its entertainment culture, one may not have the same educational intentions.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 tested whether religious affiliation and ideology affected the impact that the films portrayals had upon respondents. The major finding in testing this hypothesis was that these moderating variables had no impact upon the effects of the films. The means were very similar for each religious and ideological group, and there were no significant differences in the pattern of results for each group. This is surprising, because it shows that the different groups do not react differently to the films. Therefore, other moderating variables, such as age, income level, partisanship, and education may impact welfare opinion more so than religious affiliation and ideology.

Because the majority of my results were null, it is implied that I failed to find support for my theory. While I did not produce large effects, I did contribute to existing literature by establishing that simply viewing a film one time may not change opinions of welfare and welfare regarding children in a significant way. This study established that this is the case whether the mother depicted is African American or Caucasian.

Furthermore, religious affiliation and ideology do not impact the effects that the film portrayals had upon viewers.

LIMITATIONS

The null findings in regards to the effect of the negative film portrayals upon welfare opinion should be considered in light of several factors. First, my sample size was small and quite homogenous. Due to the time commitment that my study required and the lack of financial incentive available to participants, the sample was comprised of only 89 people, all family and friends of the researcher. This sample was unrepresentative of the US population: the majority of respondents were college-aged, wealthy, Jewish, and Caucasian. If the sample size had been larger and more diverse, the results would have reflected the effect the film portrayals have upon a more representative sample of Americans.

Furthermore, the manipulation lacked precision. The differences in regards to narration, plot, dialogue, and character profiles in *Precious* and *8 Mile* made it impossible to isolate the race of the mother as the only reason why disparities exist in the results. Because the films did not tell the entirely same story, with solely the race of the mother differing, the degree to which I can claim that any differences I find in my results are due to the race of the welfare mother portrayed in the film is weakened.

In order for additional studies to have greater precision, films involving welfare mothers need to be created that are identical to one another aside from the race of the mother depicted. Furthermore, a larger and more diverse sample should be recruited, so that a more representative sample of the US population participates in the study, allowing

the researcher to claim that the study's results are reflective of American popular opinion of welfare.

Conclusion

There are three major findings to draw from this study: negative portrayals of welfare mothers do not adversely affect opinions on welfare and child welfare policies, and this is true regardless of whether the mother depicted is Caucasian or African American. Religious affiliation and ideology of the respondent do not impact these results. There is some evidence to suggest that negative depictions of welfare mothers makes respondents less inclined to see the positive way in which the welfare system can rescue welfare recipients from hardships. However, negative film portrayals do not largely affect one's opinions of welfare spending, support for welfare mothers, and support for welfare children. Furthermore, from these results I am unable to conclude that racial depictions have any powerful affect on welfare opinion.

If my findings are valid, then negative views of welfare that overwhelm American public opinion cannot be attributed to film. While much literature exists on print, news, and television's role in causing such adverse opinions to exist, the same cannot be said for film. This study, then, lends itself to important future research. If film does not contribute to the shaping of public opinion of welfare, and thus to the overpowering U.S. belief that the welfare system is both immoral and destructive, can this same result be found between film and other important and contentious policy debates in America, such as immigration or the right of homosexuals to marry? Furthermore, why do film depictions of welfare mothers elicit dissimilar responses and reactions to those found from viewing similar representations in print, television, and news media?

Next, if negative film portrayals play little role in shaping child welfare policy opinion, then besides moderating factors, what does affect such opinions? Will other types of film portrayals or other film genres influence welfare opinion to a greater extent? Will there be a difference in effects if the portrayal depicted is a positive one rather than a negative one? Further research should continue to analyze whether it is solely television and print news media that shapes public opinion on needy children receiving welfare support, or if there is another factor that plays a part. Further research should also examine the effects of different film genres and portrayals upon welfare opinion.

It has been well established by Gilens (1999) that negative media representations of welfare recipients are a causal factor of adverse opinion of welfare in America. If this is the case, then why do the media allow these representatives to exist? If these representations are not intended to be malicious, which I do not believe they are, then shouldn't the media create more sympathetic images of welfare recipients in order to make these needy and already suffering mothers less detested by the public?

Furthermore, Bullock and Williams (2001) claim that images of welfare children are rarely depicted. Would an increase in sympathetic representations of welfare children positively impact opinion of child welfare policies? Further studies should explore why these negative media representations of welfare recipients are so commonplace, and if more sympathetic stories of welfare recipients would positively impact welfare opinion in America.

The media play a very powerful role within our society: they have the ability to impact the way in which Americans think, and thus the way in which they ultimately act. This power position is one that needs to be approached with the utmost caution and care.

In the case of the welfare system, the images the media produce will influence U.S. opinion of welfare, and thus how Americans vote on welfare policies. When the media produces unrepresentative and stereotypical images of welfare recipients, they are doing a disservice to the American people by disallowing them to develop educated opinions of the welfare system based upon realistic depictions of who is actually receiving welfare support. The livelihood of children and families receiving welfare depends upon whether or not Americans vote in favor of welfare policies. With the media in the position to impact this decision, it is their responsibility and obligation to allow society to be as informed as possible.

Appendix: Survey

Q1.

Condition 1: What city does the movie *8 Mile* take place in?

1. New York City
2. Los Angeles
3. Detroit
4. Newark

Condition 2: Who is the father of Precious's children?

1. Her brother
2. Her father
3. Her uncle
4. Her boyfriend

Condition 3: What is Andy accused of and put in jail for?

1. Robbing a bank
2. Murdering his wife and her lover
3. Committing fraud
4. Stealing a car

Q2.

Condition 1: What is Eminem's name in the movie *8 Mile*?

1. Rabbit
2. Freddie
3. George
4. Danny

Condition 2: Who does Precious live with?

1. Her sister
2. Her friend
3. Her mother
4. Her daughter

Condition 3: What does Andy collect in the jail yard?

1. Rocks
2. Cigarettes
3. Gum
4. Sticks

Q3.

What is the month, day and year of your birth?

Month

Day

Year
Refused

Q4.

What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?

1. Protestant
2. Catholic
3. Jewish
4. Other
5. No Religion
9. Refused

Q5.

If Christian: Which one of these words BEST describes your kind of Christianity: Fundamentalist, Evangelical, Charismatic or Spirit-Filled, Moderate to Liberal? Would you call yourself a born-again Christian, that is, have you personally had a conversion experience related to Jesus Christ?

1. Fundamentalist
2. Evangelical
3. Charismatic
4. Spirit-filled
5. Moderate
6. Liberal
7. Born-again
8. Personal conversion experience
9. Refused

Q6.

Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life these days, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional weddings, baptisms, or funerals?

1. Yes
2. No
8. Don't know
9. Refused

Q7.

What is your race? Indicate one or more races that you consider yourself to be.

1. White
2. Black or African American
3. American Indian or Alaska Native
4. Asian
5. Pacific Islander
6. Other:
9. Refused

Q8.

What is the highest degree that your mother and father earned?

Mother

1. Grade school or less (0-8 grades)
2. High school (12 grades or fewer, incl. non-college training if applicable)
3. Some college (13 grades or more but no degree)
4. College advanced degree

Father

1. Grade school or less (0-8 grades)
2. High school (12 grades or fewer, incl. non-college training if applicable)
3. Some college (13 grades or more but no degree)
4. College advanced degree

Q9.

What is the highest degree that you have earned?

1. Grade school or less (0-8 grades)
2. High school (12 grades or fewer, incl. non-college training if applicable)
3. Some college (13 grades or more but no degree)
4. College advanced degree

Q10.

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as [a Republican, a Democrat / a Democrat, a Republican], an Independent, or what?

1. Republican
2. Democrat
3. Independent
4. Other
5. Refused

Q11.

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. If there is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative (1 being extremely liberal and 7 being extremely conservative), where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

1. 1
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7
8. Havent thought much about this

Q12.

Do you lack health insurance coverage (for example, Medicare, Medicaid, Blue Cross, an HMO, etc.)?

1. Yes
2. No
8. Don't know
9. Refused

Q13.

In the long run, do you think that people who are immigrating to the United States today will make American society better, will make American society worse, or do you think that today's immigrants won't affect American society one way or another?

1. Better
2. Worse
3. Won't affect
9. Refused

Q14.

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

1. Agree strongly
2. Agree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Disagree somewhat
5. Disagree strongly

Q15.

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

1. Agree strongly
2. Agree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Disagree somewhat
5. Disagree strongly

Q16.

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.

1. Agree strongly
2. Agree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree

4. Disagree somewhat
5. Disagree strongly

Q17.

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

1. Agree strongly
2. Agree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Disagree somewhat
5. Disagree strongly

Q18.

Some people say that because of past discrimination blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven't earned. What about your opinion-- are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?

1. For
2. Against
3. Don't know
4. Refused

Q19

Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination?

1. Favor
2. Oppose
3. Don't know
4. Refused

Q20.

This next question is about the percent of people's income that they should pay in taxes to the federal government. Which one of the following opinions best agrees with your view? You can just tell me the number of the opinion you choose. One: People who make more money should pay a larger percent of their income in taxes to the government than people who make less money. Two: people who make more money should pay a smaller percent of their income in taxes to the government than people who make less money. Three: the amount of money people make should not determine what percent of their income they pay in taxes.

1. One
2. Two
3. Three
4. Don't know
5. Refused

Q21.

Do you think that big companies should pay a LARGER percent of their profits in taxes than small businesses do, that big companies should pay a SMALLER percent of their profits in taxes than small businesses do, or that big companies and small businesses should pay the SAME percent of their profits in taxes?

1. Larger
2. Smaller
3. The same
8. Don't know
9. Refused

Q22.

During a typical week, how many days do you watch or read news on the Internet, not including sports?

1. 1
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7
8. Don't know
9. Refused

Q23.

Here are some opinions other people have expressed about welfare. For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with it.

- A. Makes people work less than they would if there wasn't a welfare system
1. Strongly agree
 2. Agree
 3. Strongly disagree
 8. No opinion
 9. No answer

Q24.

B. Helps people get on their feet when facing difficult situations such as unemployment, a divorce, or a death in the family

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Strongly disagree
8. No opinion
9. No answer

Q25

C. Encourage young women to have babies before marriage.

1. Strongly agree

- 2. Agree
- 3. Strongly disagree
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q26.

- A. Helps keep people's marriage together in times of financial problems
- 1. Strongly agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Strongly disagree
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q27.

- E. Helps to prevent hunger and starvation
- 1. Strongly agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Strongly disagree
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q28.

- F. Discourages young women who get pregnant from marrying the father of the child
- 1. Strongly agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Strongly disagree
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q29.

Should federal spending on CHILD WELFARE PROGRAMS be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?

- 1. Increased
- 2. Decreased
- 3. Kept the same
- 8. Don't know
- 9. Refused

Q30.

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Welfare mothers could earn enough money to get off public assistance if they only tried hard enough.

- 1. Agree strongly
- 2. Agree somewhat
- 3. Neither agree nor disagree
- 4. Disagree somewhat

- 5. Disagree strongly
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q31.

Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement? Needy children should receive welfare support even if their parents are not eligible for public assistance.

- 1. Agree strongly
- 2. Agree somewhat
- 3. Neither agree nor disagree
- 4. Disagree somewhat
- 5. Disagree strongly
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q32.

Do you strongly support, support, or strongly oppose welfare support for families with children under the age of 18?

- 1. Strongly support
- 2. Support
- 3. Strongly oppose
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q33.

Do you strongly support, support, or strongly oppose federally funded programs that provide poor children with free lunches and nutritional guidance?

- 1. Strongly support
- 2. Support
- 3. Strongly oppose
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q34.

How strongly do you support a program that provides prenatal and postpartum health care for adolescent mothers?

- 1. Strongly support
- 2. Support
- 3. Strongly oppose
- 8. No opinion
- 9. No answer

Q35.

How strongly do you support substance abuse programs for mothers receiving welfare money?

1. Strongly support
2. Support
3. Strongly oppose
8. No opinion
9. No answer

Q36.

If the government had to a choice between reducing taxes or spending more on social programs like health care, social security, and unemployment benefits, which do you think it should do?

1. Reduce taxes, even if this means spending less on social programs like health care, social security, and unemployment benefits
2. Spend more on social programs like health care, social security and unemployment benefits even if this means high taxes
8. Can't choose
9. No answer

Q37.

About what do you think your total income will be this year for yourself and your immediate family?

1. \$15,000-\$24,000
2. \$25,000-49,000
3. \$50,000-\$99,000
4. \$100,000-\$149,000
5. \$150,000-\$199,000
6. \$200,000-\$249,000
7. \$250,000 or above
8. No answer

Q38.

How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics?

1. Extremely interested
2. Very interested
3. Moderately interested
4. Slightly interested
5. Not interested at all
8. Don't know
9. Refused

Q39.

How closely do you pay attention to information about what's going on in government and politics?

1. Extremely closely
2. Very closely
3. Moderately closely
4. Slightly closely

- 5. Not closely at all
- 8. Don't know
- 9. Refused

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