

The States Matter

“Welfare Reform: The Institutional Dimension” by Lawrence M. Mead, in *Focus* (special issue, 2002), 1180 Observatory Dr., 3412 Social Science Bldg., Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wis. 53706.

When the 1996 welfare reform law turned over to the states much of the responsibility for figuring out how to assist the needy and get them into jobs, it was only to be expected that the states would vary in how well they did. Among states closely studied so far, Mead, a professor of politics at New York University, sees a larger pattern, reflecting the states’ diverse political cultures.

Political scientist Daniel Elazar offered a useful picture of those cultures in his 1966 book *American Federalism: A View from the States*. In predominantly “moralistic” states, there was a high-minded emphasis on the public interest and strong government. “This culture prevailed in northern New England, the upper Midwest, and parts of the West and Northwest.” In predominantly “individualistic” states, in the Mid-Atlantic states and the lower Midwest, government was viewed as an instrument for “advancing the private interests of groups and citizens,” with policy determined through compromise. In “traditionalistic” states, found mainly in the South and Southwest, “government played a more limited role, chiefly to defend society against fundamental changes.”

Recent studies of welfare reform in the states roughly bear out Elazar’s analysis, Mead contends. He puts eight—Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Kansas, Utah, Oregon, Washington, and Tennessee—in the high-achieving, generally “moralistic,” category. All took “more or less” the same approach. Wisconsin, whose reform efforts

began in the mid-1980s, led the way. Democratic legislators in the Badger State gave up the notion of welfare as an entitlement based on need alone, Mead notes, while Republicans agreed to “massive expansions of the bureaucracy and [child care and other] support services.” The full-blown “Wisconsin Works” program “combines the most severe work tests [for receiving aid] in the nation with unusually generous support services for the entire working poor population. The combination has driven the cash welfare rolls down by about 90 percent and work levels up from already high levels”—to 65 percent in 1998.

In New York and five other generally “individualistic” states—California, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Ohio—changes were made to comply with federal requirements, but consensus was lacking for “fundamental” reform.

Six “traditionalistic” southern states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas—never before “had to frame a serious welfare policy.” They simply kept benefit levels low. Since 1996 they have begun—but only slowly—to encourage work within welfare.

Though the states’ diverse political cultures have deep roots in the ethnic and religious characteristics of their original settlers, Mead, like Elazar before him, believes that the “moralistic” approach is favored in the long run, thanks to rising education levels and other factors. Among those other factors today: welfare reform itself.

Share the Wealth!

“America’s Lost Egalitarian Tradition” by Sean Wilentz, in *Daedalus* (Winter 2002), Norton’s Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Equality in America comes in many flavors—equality of opportunity, equality of races, equality of sexes, to name just three. But one variety seldom mentioned these

days is equality of wealth, laments Wilentz, a historian at Princeton University.

When the nation was founded, Americans disagreed about many things,