CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, welfare was in chronic crisis in Wisconsin, as in much of America. “Welfare” here means the controversial aid program for needy families once called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and now named Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The welfare rolls in Wisconsin reached 100,000 families and 300,000 people in 1986—in a population of only 5 million. The state, like the nation, had struggled with rising welfare dependency since the 1960s, and no solution seemed in sight.

But in little more than a decade, the situation was transformed. The Badger State became home to the most radical welfare reform in the nation. Welfare in its traditional form was virtually abolished. The vast majority of recipients were driven off the rolls, mostly into jobs, while those who remain must work at some level to get any cash aid. At the same time, unprecedented new benefits were offered to the entire low-income working population. This revolution transformed the welfare state and the lives of many former recipients, mostly for good.

I ask two questions in this book. First, what did Wisconsin do? I show in some detail how the Wisconsin reform developed. Starting in 1986, the state instituted a series of experimental programs in welfare. Most of them stiffened requirements that adult recipients work in return for aid. The changes culminated in the radical Wisconsin Works (W-2), a new aid system implemented in 1997. The effects of the reforms seem remarkably positive. Not only did dependency plummet, but work levels among low-income adults soared while poverty fell. Many former recipients remain poor, but incomes are rising.

After a generation of defeatism about uplifting the inner city, Wisconsin exemplifies a new and more promising antipoverty policy. The solution to poverty is no longer seen as doing more or less for the poor, the traditional debate among liberals and conservatives. Rather, it requires restructuring welfare so as to promote recovery from poverty. That means supporting families and helping needy adults work and stay in school. But it also requires clearer expectations that recipients function in minimal ways in return for support. In Wisconsin, we see for the first time, and on a large scale, what such a policy means in practice.

Wisconsin is also a showcase for an innovative style of programming that I call paternalism. The state not only makes greater demands on its
recipients. It supervises them closely to make sure that they fulfill those expectations, as well as claim benefits they qualify for. Paternalism combines benefits with demands, help with hassle. Alongside conduct requirements, this intense administrative style is a promising trend in social policy. It became a theme in Wisconsin in several areas of social policy besides welfare.

My second and more important question is: How did Wisconsin accomplish this? The simple answer is: good government. The Wisconsin reform is the achievement of legislators and administrators who were unusually able and conscientious by national standards. Welfare reform is a test for government. Elected leaders must agree on what demands will be made of the poor in return for support, questions that have bitterly divided politicians in the past. And then officials must create complex arrangements so that families are aided while, at the same time, parents are induced into work programs and given the child care and other services they need to work. To do this well was a triumph for government. Thus, ironically, a reform that most would call conservative finally enlarges our sense of what antipoverty policy might achieve.

The Wisconsin story makes clear how dependent successful social reform is on strong institutions. I will show that, not only this state, but others with good-government traditions have led welfare reform across the country. Their success is inspiring, but also cautionary. Only some states perform at this level. Wisconsin finally directs our attention beyond welfare to the capacity of the American regime.

**Why Wisconsin?**

Of course, successful welfare reform is hardly confined to Wisconsin. The welfare rolls fell nationwide starting in 1994. The fall was accelerated by the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996. Drafted by the conservative Republicans who took control of Congress in 1994, PRWORA was the most radical welfare reform ever enacted in Washington. Besides changing AFDC into TANF, it capped federal funding for state welfare programs, limited most families to five years on the rolls, and sharply raised the share of welfare parents who were expected to work. Coupled with superb economic conditions and expanded wage and child care subsidies, welfare reform drove the national caseload down by 60 percent through June 2002. Virtually all states shared in that progress.

In Wisconsin, however, both the what and the how were still special. First, the state’s reform was unusually thoroughgoing. Most states have simply added stronger work requirements and incentives to a welfare sys-
tem that, in other respects, changed little. Wisconsin totally redesigned family aid from the ground up. W-2 is, by common consent, the most innovative aid system in the nation. It demands immediate work with uncommon severity, but it also promotes work with its lavish support benefits, and it has other special features.

Second, the consequences of reform in Wisconsin seem unusually favorable. Like no other urban state, Wisconsin virtually destroyed traditional welfare. Figure 1.1 contrasts trends in the Wisconsin and national caseloads during 1980–2001. The decline in Wisconsin began unusually early—in 1986—and the state avoided almost entirely the sharp run-up in recipients that hit most of the country between 1989 and 1994. In the average state, that jump was a startling 34 percent, an increase that helped put welfare reform on the national agenda, leading to PRWORA. In Wisconsin, the caseload fell almost continually from 1986, and by 2001, the decrease was around 80 percent from 1986, with fewer than 10,000 families remaining on W-2 cash benefits. One might imagine that Wisconsin merely reversed a level of dependency that was high for the nation. Figure 1.2 plots trends in the percent of population on AFDC/TANF in Wisconsin and nationally. It is true that Wisconsin rose well above the national norm in the 1980s—but by 2001 it was well below.

Table 1.1 shows how much each state and the District of Columbia reduced the number of recipients on their rolls between 1994, when the national caseload peaked, and 2001. At 82 percent, Wisconsin comes behind only Wyoming and Idaho and well ahead of other urban states paying high benefits. Even in Milwaukee, a heavily nonwhite and depressed city, traditional family welfare almost disappeared. The table also understates Wisconsin’s achievement. By 1994, the state had already driven its more employable recipients off the rolls—yet after that it still managed almost the greatest caseload fall in the country.

Another, perhaps better measure of change is how fully a state required work for the recipients remaining on welfare. Table 1.2 ranks the states by the percentage of their recipients who satisfied TANF’s work participation standards in fiscal 2000. Those rules required that adults be active in work activities (defined to mean largely actual work, but permitting some training) for at least thirty hours a week. Again, Wisconsin ranks almost first in the country, ahead of all other urban states. This despite the fact that, due to its extreme caseload deflation, its remaining recipients were probably among the less employable in the country.

The Wisconsin reform also excels by a still more important measure—the effects on former recipients and the society. Nationwide, research on adults who have left welfare finds the effects to be largely positive. Three-fifths or more of the leavers are working, and although some are not, there is little evidence of hardship. Work levels among the poor are
Figure 1.1. Trends in Wisconsin and national AFDC/TANF caseloads. (Source: U.S. Administration for Children and Families)

Figure 1.2. Percent of population on AFDC/TANF, Wisconsin and the nation. (Sources: U.S. Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Bureau of the Census)
Table 1.1
States Ranked by Percent Reduction in AFDC/TANF Caseloads (in persons), 1994–2001

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<th>State</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<td>National average</td>
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<td>Idaho</td>
<td>−90.3</td>
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<td>−60.7</td>
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<td>Wisconsin</td>
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<td>Maine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>−77.2</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>−58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>Michigan</td>
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<td>Utah</td>
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<td>−33.1</td>
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Source: Data from the U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

 sharply higher, and poverty rates are falling, albeit more slowly. The effects on families and children also appear largely favorable. The recipients Wisconsin expects to work might be more disadvantaged than elsewhere, yet the proportions of leavers who are working and getting by are similar to those in other states. And work levels among poor parents on and off welfare are unusually high. Like no other state, Wisconsin has moved poor families not only off welfare but into jobs.

These achievements brought Wisconsin extraordinary publicity. By the early 1990s, the innovations in the Badger State, and its ability to reduce the rolls when they were rising elsewhere, drew national attention. Jason DeParle of the New York Times chronicled the Wisconsin reform for a national audience, while other journalists wrote it up for their own states.
Officials from around the country and from foreign countries flocked to the state to see for themselves, as did an army of researchers. And from publicity sprang influence. As the principal leader of the reform, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson became a national power broker on welfare. Without Wisconsin’s example, PRWORA would have been less radical.

### The Manner of the Reform

The *how* of the Wisconsin reform, however, is as important as the *what*. The American public has expressed rising cynicism about government since the 1960s. A leading reason was the inability of government to solve
chronic national problems, among them entrenched poverty and dependency. Impatience with the liberal social programs of the 1960s and 1970s helped drive the nation’s politics to the right, but Republicans initially had little more success dealing with poverty than did Democrats. And of all social programs, welfare was the most unpopular.

Into this disconsolate scene, the Wisconsin success blew like a fresh wind. Here we see a popular government, in response to the public will, truly facing up to welfare and mastering it, at least in part. The governor and earnest legislators focused on solutions, downplaying partisanship. They quickly settled on a work-based approach, followed it for some years, then boldly enacted a completely new system. They delegated the details to talented administrators who implemented the new programs masterfully, if not without error. They even saved money in the process.

To see how unusual Wisconsin is, we have only to look elsewhere. All states claim to have reformed welfare, but in many, there is less real change than meets the eye. While the caseload fall is substantial everywhere, few of the more urban, Northern states rank high in table 1.1. That reflects in part their deep divisions about how to change welfare. On the other hand, few southern states rank high in table 1.2. They are willing and able to restrict aid, but as yet lack the bureaucratic capacity to build work into welfare. Only a handful of states have been able to enforce work in welfare seriously without stumbling. Of these, Wisconsin is the most remarkable. It has actually done what other states talk about.

It has recently been fashionable in political science to assume that behavior in politics is driven by self-interest. But often in politics, people act out of moral convictions or loyalty to the community, even though doing so does not serve their own interest in any material sense. Such behavior was conspicuous during welfare reform in Wisconsin:

- Governor Tommy Thompson and Democratic opponents in the legislature abandoned long-held positions in order to craft reforms that are simultaneously big-government and demanding toward the recipients. Only a minority of either party dissented.
- The move to abolish traditional welfare was led by a black Democrat representing inner-city Milwaukee. His own constituents pressed him to do this. Reform never became a race issue.
- Community groups, although reflexively liberal in the past, accepted the end of entitlement and confined their criticism to details.
- Business groups supported reform by launching experimental reform programs of their own.
- Some counties forged their own welfare reform programs without waiting for the state government in Madison, and some of these became models for the state.
• Counties competed to host various Thompson experiments in welfare reform, despite the political dangers and the trouble of changing their administrative routines.
• Welfare staffs throughout the state implemented statewide reforms diligently, even though the reduction in the caseload would ultimately cost some of them their jobs.
• The recipients endured a revolution in their lives. The vast majority left welfare and shouldered more responsibility for themselves with considerable resourcefulness and little complaint.

To explain conduct like this, some appeal to virtue is simply unavoidable. This fact alone compels our admiration.

I do not deny that self-interest also operated. Given the forceful public will to change welfare, legislators of both parties, and administrators, had every incentive to support reform. Nor were altruistic motives lacking in less gifted states. I say only that the reform process in Wisconsin was high-minded relative to the norm in American politics. That quality helped policymakers avoid divisions and other problems that prevented change elsewhere.

AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

Most scholars understand social programs in economic terms. Welfare is seen as a source of income, training programs as a source of human capital. Instead, this book takes an institutional approach. I view programs more as authority structures that do or do not govern the society. Mostly, welfare reform is not about changing the economic scale of welfare or enriching the skills of recipients. Much more, it means attaching requirements for good behavior to existing benefits. Authority is even more important if programs have the paternalistic character that they developed in Wisconsin, where case managers closely oversee clients.

I investigate not only program structures but the government institutions standing behind them. Other scholars ask whether social programs are sufficient to overcome poverty. I ask whether government is even able to enact and administer such programs. To do so, politicians must resolve sensitive issues about personal responsibility that earlier they delegated to social workers. Administrators must implement complicated programs. They also must do so in an era when public service is less admired than it was before 1960. In the last generation, government has lost prestige compared to the private sector. There is a widespread desire that it be “reinvented” on a business model. That demand shaped welfare reform even in big-government Wisconsin.
This focus on institutions is unusual in poverty studies, but fruitful. Most experts who study poverty attribute it to social factors such as the labor market or the family structure of the poor. They call for doing more to help the poor, but their research says little about government itself. A focus on social barriers is plausible for groups that were working already or are not expected to. Their constraints often are economic. Higher wages and benefits have indeed reduced poverty among working families and the elderly and disabled since the 1960s. Most of the working-aged poor, however, lack all steady employment. That fact is not explained well by social or economic conditions; a culture of poverty and permissive public policies appears to matter more.

To overcome this sort of poverty requires helping people but also changing lifestyle. That is a task for politics and administration, and these are the forces driving change. In Wisconsin, reform built up the authority structure surrounding welfare far more than it altered benefits. Work enforcement was principally responsible for driving the rolls down, although the economy and new benefits also helped. As reform succeeded, discussion shifted away from background conditions and toward institutions. There was less and less talk about a lack of opportunity and more and more about reshaping programs to promote work. Mostly, government held the solution to welfare in its own hands.

While other states have not transformed welfare in the same manner, most of the changes they have made are also governmental. Work requirements are being implemented with a speed that belies the idea that public agencies cannot change. States and localities are also reorganizing social service programs, combining welfare with employment and other agencies in novel ways. To date, welfare reform has principally been an exercise in statecraft.

This might suggest that political scientists like myself have a better chance to understand reform than do economists. But in political science, past research is of scarcely more help. We have convincing studies of the political movements that sometimes give rise to new social programs. We have useful models of how demands for programs come onto the political agenda, so that government acts on them. We have a literature about policy innovation at the state level, and about the implementation of policy. But there is little about administrative statecraft—the translation of politics into policy and routines that work on the ground. I know of no research that follows social policy innovation from initial proposals and politics all the way through implementation and effects, as I do here. Nor do I know of earlier research that connects welfare policy, not only to implementation, but to the general capacity of government.

Further, political science research on public policy takes little interest in the merits of policy per se. There is a salutary focus on institutional
process, but only that. The question is why a certain policy was enacted and administered as it was, but not whether it was good or bad. Just as poverty researchers tend to tell government what to do while ignoring it, most political scientists study government without telling it what to do. Government is first of all the servant of the society. Political participation can be an edifying experience, prized by political theorists. But for most people, government’s purpose is to solve public problems that they cannot handle themselves. So political science must take policy analysis seriously. Ask first what government should do to solve some important problem, such as poverty. Then discuss the institutional constraints that impede realizing that policy ideal. In political science, to link policy argument to political analysis like this is rare. But this is the sort of reasoning that policymakers themselves do. Only if students of government sit in the same seat can political science recover its heritage as the master science.

In my earlier books, much in this spirit, I advocated work requirements as a strategy for welfare reform. I also pointed to the political and administrative obstacles, and I doubted whether government could in fact enforce work. In Wisconsin, however, a government actually has enforced work in welfare. Our problem is to explain success rather than failure. But as I note later in the book, limits on government capability still confine what many states can achieve.

Sources

Most of the research now going on about welfare reform focuses narrowly on social conditions. The dominant question is whether the poor have been helped or hurt by the revolution flowing from PRWORA. Some of this inquiry focuses on Wisconsin; I draw on it heavily in chapter 10 and elsewhere.

For the bow of reform, I have much less to go on. Most of the literature on welfare work programs consists of evaluations of their effects, mostly by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. These studies were essential to establishing work requirements as a feasible approach to reform. But they say little about the political and administrative processes that create effective programs, or fail to do so. There are also studies of welfare politics, but they focus mainly on public opinion or on reform at the national level. Many of these studies cover only one stage in the reform story, or are out of date. There is some prior research on the politics and administration of welfare reform at the state and local level. These projects generated most of the case studies that I use to compare Wisconsin to other states. But these inquiries are much more limited than what I offer here for Wisconsin.
Within Wisconsin itself, there is considerable research on the effects of reform. But past writing about the politics and administration of change is surprisingly limited, given the state’s prominence. It is confined to one important journal article, several book chapters, and a Ph.D. dissertation. I have drawn gratefully on all, but my account is based mostly on original sources. I relied heavily on interviews with state policymakers, government documents, and data from state programs. Here in brief is how I assembled the study; later chapters go into more detail.

For the politics of reform, I gleaned an initial impression from the secondary sources, then talked to senior state administrators in 1994–95; in 1997–98 I interviewed a score of leading policymakers in the bureaucracy, the state legislature, and community groups. I also had research assistants review journalism about welfare reform in state newspapers for the period 1985–99. The interview respondents were people whom the other sources indicated were key players in welfare decisions from 1985 through the implementation of W-2. I asked them what had happened during the reform struggles and why the outcome was so consensual.

For the administrative side of the story, I relied chiefly on government documents. The most important program was the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS). A national program, JOBS was the primary welfare work structure in Wisconsin from the late 1980s up through the implementation of the more radical reforms in the mid–1990s. I interviewed about this and other programs in Madison and in ten counties around the state. These visits were mostly in 1994–95, followed by further visits to Milwaukee in 1995 and 1999. I asked officials running welfare and JOBS how they processed clients, what welfare work policies they associated with good JOBS performance, and why caseloads had fallen.

I then tested this input using program data for JOBS. The results indicated that the counties generally did treat their clients in the ways they claimed to do. I also built statistical models that related the policies and other features of the counties to their performance in JOBS, as measured by the program’s own indicators. The results showed that counties that stressed high participation and actual work over training placed more people in jobs, but these policies had less effect on the quality of jobs. Later I did similar analyses relating county JOBS policies and other factors to caseload changes. Again, the more demanding counties had the most caseload decline.

I also compared Wisconsin to other states. Several analyses show that the connection of good government to successful welfare reform is seen nationwide, not just in the Badger State. I used the case studies of TANF development mentioned above to show that good-government states like Wisconsin were able to enact and implement new welfare policies more
smoothly than states of other traditions. I also built models of caseload change across the states, parallel to the county-based analysis just mentioned. These traced variations in caseload change in the periods 1989–94 and 1994–98 to the welfare policies and other features of the states. In the first period, caseloads rose in most states, while in the second they fell. I found that states like Wisconsin that had demanding JOBS and child support policies typically had less caseload increase, or more decline. I also linked these policies, in turn, to the governmental features of the states. The states with good-government traditions like Wisconsin were the most able to fuse generous benefits with strong work requirements. That is the combination that seems to work best and that the public supports.

In the cross-state comparisons and elsewhere in the book, I use a scheme of state political cultures developed by Daniel Elazar to characterize and measure what good government means. Wisconsin is one of a number of “moralistic” states where policymaking tends to be focused on problem-solving rather than partisanship, and public administration is strong. With some exceptions, these moralistic states emerge as the most effective welfare reformers.

Finally, my research assistants and I studied Wisconsin’s past to discover the deeper springs of its competence. These include the state’s early settlement, its leadership of the Progressive movement, and its tradition of leadership in national social policy. All those antecedents prepared the state to show leadership again in the current era. We also researched the history of federal attempts to promote capable welfare administration.

Throughout the research, I benefited from close ties to Wisconsin. I first encountered the state in 1987, through a visiting appointment at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I immediately became involved in the early stages of Tommy Thompson’s welfare reform efforts. Along with other experts from the university, I advised Kenosha County on its own local welfare reform, which turned out to be a model for the state. I continued to advise the state welfare department on research and policy issues. These contacts explain the wealth of program data, public documents, interviews, and other inside information that I use to tell the Wisconsin story. Few scholars of social policy have had such entrée.

I recognize that such close involvement poses dangers to objectivity. While I do think well of the Wisconsin reform and the regime behind it, I have tested my presumptions. The evidence for Wisconsin’s success is strong, and success is clearly tied to governmental quality. I also make clear several reservations about the state’s performance: Its early reform programs were casually planned, W-2’s initial design was too severe, and its implementation was troubled. Welfare reform was a testing challenge, even for Wisconsin.
THE MEANING OF SUCCESS

To show that Wisconsin succeeded because of good government, I have to show that reform was in fact a success. Whether it was depends in part on one’s goals. I adopt as the chief aim of reform raising work levels among the adult recipients. Most poor adults, on and off welfare, work irregularly if at all. To cause them to work more steadily in available jobs is the best thing one can do to relieve family poverty, although improving low-skilled wages and benefits is also needed. Raising work levels is the chief goal that Wisconsin and other states have set.

The public strongly endorses the work goal, as do most recipients. Heeding the voters, so do most politicians. Still, there are influential dissenters. On the right, they include antigovernment conservatives who oppose the whole idea of welfare. On the left, they include some liberal and Democrat politicians along with many community organizations and most academic experts on poverty. They would have preferred reform to focus on reducing poverty and inequality. They also wanted to promote work among the recipients, but they wanted to do it through new benefits, such as training or stronger work incentives, not by enforcing work as a condition of aid. In short, they defend entitlement, or the traditional idea that welfare should be given to families on the basis of need alone, with no questions asked about lifestyle. That is exactly the principle that reform in Wisconsin has rejected, as in most states.

It is also controversial to say that reform has satisfied the work goal, in Wisconsin or elsewhere. Some observers think the rise in work levels is chiefly due to good economic conditions. Or they think that a recession more serious than the recent one may land millions back on aid. I return to this dissent in my conclusion.

CONNECTING GOVERNMENT TO SUCCESS

Assuming that work is the goal, I also have to show that governmental quality contributed to successful reform, in both Wisconsin and the nation. This requires that I establish that Wisconsin already had a good government prior to reform, that this regime helped it enact policies thought to be effective, and that these policies in fact had good results. Table 1.3 summarizes these propositions.

“Wisconsin’s background” means the formative experiences that shaped the Wisconsin regime. “Governmental excellence” connotes a legislative process focused on problem-solving, rather than partisan rivalry, and strong public administration. These are the qualities that most people
mean by good government, and which are stressed in Elazar’s idea of the moralistic style. “Effective welfare policies” means policies that the best information at the time indicated could promote successful reform. Finally, “successful welfare reform” means programs that in fact had good consequences. Table 1.3 asserts that Wisconsin derived a good government from its past, used it to craft the best policies known at the time, and obtained good effects from them.

Importantly, all these terms are defined independently, not in terms of each other. “Wisconsin’s background” refers to historical events that occurred long before welfare reform. “Governmental excellence” refers to the high-minded and effective manner in which Wisconsin government operated during reform, as judged by myself and other close observers. I mean that Wisconsin was “high-minded” and “effective” relative to other states, a comparison that I make both judgmentally and in more rigorous ways. “Effective welfare policy” concerns the substance of policy; it means that the measures enacted were those that research at the time indicated would succeed. “Successful welfare reform” connotes that the programs actually did succeed, as determined by later research and evaluation.

How do I show these connections rigorously? If I merely inferred them post hoc in light of the Wisconsin story, the argument that good government promotes successful welfare reform would not be very persuasive. How could we be sure that this connection was even typical for Wisconsin, let alone other states? One cannot consult only an exemplar like Wisconsin in a period of triumph, where good government and policymaking success coincide, and infer that the one caused the other. We have to show that the association is sustained, and that it occurred in other states. We have to show, not only that governmental virtue produces success, but that governmental weakness does not. In short, we have to broaden the empirical basis of our inference.

One way I do that is by deriving my hypothesis in part from welfare reform prior to Wisconsin. I did not hit on good government as Wisconsin’s secret before my research began. But as soon as that hypothesis emerged, I realized that it made sense of much of the prior research on welfare reform, at either the national or state level. From the beginning

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<td>Governmental excellence → Effective welfare policies</td>
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<td>Effective welfare policies → Successful welfare reform</td>
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of the welfare issue in the 1960s, the chief impediment to reform had been deep political division about how to handle the problem. Should welfare be expanded or restricted? Should work be demanded or not? In Washington, those rifts frustrated all fundamental reform until PRWORA in 1996, despite the public’s forceful will to change. Much the same was true in many states, especially those with large urban caseloads.  

And the chief problem with welfare reform programs was their administrative demands. One can put welfare adults to work only if one pays them aid while also inducting them into work programs and providing child care and other support services. Implementation research made clear that localities that solved these problems placed more recipients in jobs, and reduced welfare, compared to those that did not. My own prior studies showed that the performance of these programs chiefly reflected the proportion of clients that participated in them and looked for work. That in turn depended on a program’s ability to assert a work demand and solve the logistical problems of actually moving clients into jobs.  

Governments that could do these things were good governments. Therefore, good government was the real solution to the reform problem.  

A second way of broadening the inference is to show that the link between good government and success is sustained in Wisconsin over time. Where other accounts of the state cover mainly W-2, I cover reform well back into the 1980s. This allows me to show that the same governmental virtues appeared during the entire reform process. Throughout the struggle, Wisconsin’s policymakers focused principally on problem-solving, rather than partisan maneuver, and administrators were creative.  

The third, and most crucial, way of broadening the argument is to escape from the limitations of a case study. If I considered only one state, even over time, it would be difficult to prove a general connection between governmental excellence and reform success. There would be no way to obtain enough variation—the good as well as the bad—on the variables in Table 1.3. It is impossible as a practical matter for me to research other states in the same depth I do Wisconsin. I could not get permission to do it, let alone gather and analyze all the same information. Simply to know what all states are doing as they reform welfare is impossible. As Dick Nathan, a veteran intergovernmental scholar, remarked, “We can’t count all the sand in the sea.”  

However, I can exploit variation within the state. This I do by comparing the seventy-two Wisconsin counties, ten of which I visited and studied in some depth. The cross-county statistical analyses mentioned above establish that localities that instituted work requirements well achieved higher performance in JOBS than those that did not. They also had more caseload decline. These counties had stronger leadership than the others—politicians who supported change, and enterprising administrators
able to innovate. The more backward counties in terms of policy—especially Milwaukee—also had the worst institutional problems. The counties thus dramatized in microcosm the association of successful reform with strong government.

The other way to escape a case study is to compare Wisconsin to other states, to the extent feasible. Throughout the book, I compare Wisconsin informally to the many other states where I have had research or consulting experience, especially New York. Further, I make more rigorous comparisons by analyzing case studies of TANF implementation covering about half the states. I also use my national caseload change models, mentioned earlier, to associate successful welfare reform policies with governmental qualities across all the states. All these analyses show that good-government states in Elazar’s sense generally have excelled at welfare reform.

A LOOK AHEAD

Table 1.3 lists the chapters in which I especially address each of the book’s three key propositions. Most of the book focuses on the second proposition—the tendency of a good-government style to promote effective welfare policies. I lead the reader through what Wisconsin did, including the politics and the implementation of reform. Finally, I connect reform to good effects. I do all this once for the early stages of reform, then again for W-2.

Chapter 2 summarizes the Wisconsin reforms up until W-2, and chapter 3 covers the surprisingly bipartisan politics behind these changes. Chapter 4 covers the early implementation of work requirements in the state, chiefly through the JOBS program. This was the administrative foundation of the more demanding work policies to come. In chapter 5, I closely examine several counties to show the role of leading and lagging localities in shaping the state’s reform. This chapter also uses the first cross-county analysis to show that counties that were demanding about employment achieved the highest performance in JOBS, even controlling for other factors.

Chapter 6 returns to the legislative arena to describe the drafting of W-2 and its enactment. Again, we see a political process marked more by agreement about fundamentals than partisan combat. Chapter 7 describes the dramatic implementation of W-2, which included an adventurous “reinvention of government.” Chapter 8 discusses the paternalistic character of many of the state’s reform programs. Turning again to effects, chapter 9, on the dramatic decline in the welfare caseload, argues that this decline was more due to welfare reform than other factors, including the good
Introduction • 17

economy. Here appear several of the statistical analyses, comparing coun-
ties within Wisconsin and states nationwide. Chapter 10 summarizes re-
search on the effects of the later stages of reform, including surveys and
other analyses showing that the economic and social effects were largely
favorable. Chapter 8 contains some evaluation information as well.

As described earlier, Chapter 11 broadens the argument connecting suc-
cessful reform to good government from only Wisconsin to all the states.
Here is where I show, using both case studies and statistical analysis, that
the moralistic states as a group, not just Wisconsin, have been the leaders
of reform nationwide.

I postpone the historical origins of Wisconsin’s competence—the first
proposition—until chapter 12. I do this partly because the state’s origins
become interesting and important only if one first establishes that its per-
formance was indeed unusual. Much that I say here applies to the other
good-government states as well, which enter the picture in chapter 11.
Finally, chapter 13 addresses the national implications of Wisconsin. If
good government is essential to successful welfare reform, how may it be
promoted? I conclude that the nation’s civility, not its wealth, is its leading
resource against poverty.