

Winning Edge #52 – Welfare Reform Still Wins

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In the summer of 1996, President Bill Clinton faced a challenge. Actually, he faced many, but one of the biggest was welfare reform.

Back in 1992, Clinton ran as a new kind of Democrat. One campaign ad narrated:

“There is a new generation of democrats, Bill Clinton and Al Gore, and they don’t think the way the old Democratic Party did. They have called for an end to welfare as we know it. So welfare can be a second chance, not a way of life.” [Source](#)

But by 1996, Clinton was locked in a reelection campaign and fighting publicly and behind closed doors with Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott. He had already vetoed two welfare reform bills. And while he didn’t like the third one much better, he signed it.

Privately, Clinton wasn’t thrilled with the deal. Three people in his administration quit in protest. According to insiders, he called it “a decent welfare bill wrapped in a sack of s***.” Still, he understood the political reality: The public wanted reform, and he couldn’t afford to keep saying no.

Thirty years later, welfare reform remains wildly popular.

A new poll by Communication Concepts, conducted May 31 to June 3, surveyed over 620 Pennsylvanians. The results were clear: Voters still back commonsense welfare reform.

Pennsylvanians want welfare to be a springboard—not a hammock.

Big majorities support work requirements, time limits, tighter eligibility, and more investment in job placement programs.

Voter-backed welfare reforms

- **Put in the Work:** 78% say able-bodied adults must work, job-hunt, or train to keep benefits. Only 17% disagree.

- **Clock Is Ticking:** 64% support restoring time limits on cash assistance; 26% oppose.
- **More Welfare-to-Work:** 82% support expanding job training and placement; just 11% oppose.
- **Protect the Safety Net:** 77% support stricter eligibility checks; 16% disagree.
- **Work Beats Deadlines:** When forced to choose, 58% prioritize work rules over stand-alone time limits (25%).

How to talk about reforms

- *“Work should be part of the deal.”*
If someone is able-bodied and doesn't have dependents, voters expect them to work, look for a job, or train as a requirement for receiving benefits. That's seen as fair and reasonable.
- *“Welfare was never meant to be forever.”*
Time limits are a popular way to help people get back on their feet—without creating long-term dependency.
- *“Let's expand what works.”*
Voters aren't just calling for cuts. They want more investment in job training and placement programs that help people move forward.
- *“Protecting welfare for those who need it.”*
There's strong support for tougher eligibility checks to prevent fraud and ensure help goes to those who truly need it.

Bottom Line:

Welfare reform works politically and practically. It's compassionate, popular, and focused on rewarding effort.