

## Short Takes with Carolyn Barnes Transcript

Deondra Rose:

From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means Short Takes: brief conversations to further explore topics raised in the podcast. We're creating this bonus content for each episode in Season 5. I'm Deondra Rose, Director of Research for Polis, the Center for Politics at Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy. Today I'm talking with my colleague Carolyn Barnes about something surprising, how daycare can help parents become actively engaged citizens. Hi Carolyn. Thanks so much for being with us today.

Carolyn Barnes:

I'm glad to be here.

Deondra Rose:

So Carolyn, we're doing this interview remotely because of coronavirus, this pandemic that we're all grappling with has caused not only a healthcare crisis, but an economic one. From your research and from your own lived experience, do you have concerns about the impact that this will have on low income families?

Carolyn Barnes:

Wow. I have a lot of concerns. I worry about children and I worry about job loss and the record number of families that are applying for unemployment. There's not enough information about how to access benefits in general. We know that from research, that it's really challenging to know if you're eligible for programs and to navigate those systems. But because of increased demand given this pandemic, for assistance programs, I worry that that problem is going to be exacerbated and it's going to become more confusing for families that need help.

Carolyn Barnes:

And I'm also worried that bureaucracies and bureaucrats who are already strapped for time and resources may not be able to keep up with those demands. And we might see a lot of families that are falling through the cracks and aren't getting assistance. Now I know that there's some legislation that's supposed to expand assistance, giving states the power to waive work requirements and to expand eligibility requirements and to innovate on how they intake applications. But it's yet to be seen how that's going to play out. And will the state be limber and adapt or will we maintain the status quo and leave a lot of families behind?

Deondra Rose:

So your book is entitled State of Empowerment: low income families and the new welfare state. Can you tell us a little bit about what you mean by new welfare state?

Carolyn Barnes:

I guess in the past 20 years, a lot of social policy scholars have talked about the dismantling of cash assistance since welfare reform. So during the Clinton era, he and the Republican Congress dramatically changed the nature of cash assistance in America. So in the sixties and seventies and eighties you could apply for cash assistance if you were out of work and if you had children and you could get a generous cash benefit that would meet your household needs.

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Carolyn Barnes:

So we don't have a generous cash assistance program anymore. Now we have sort of a welfare to work program, or a job training program that offers temporary cash assistance while helping folks find work. And since then, since we don't have cash anymore, we've developed a new set of programs that are designed to support work. So those work supports are the new welfare state that I'm referring to. And it includes job training, which has always been around, but received more resources and more promotion, post welfare reform, and childcare. So we see afterschool programs emerge that are federally funded and we see out of school time programs that emerge that are federally funded and all of this is designed to help low income parents go to work.

Deondra Rose:

So Carolyn, in your research you found that there are many ways to deliver government services that can build people up rather than keeping them feeling like their voices don't matter. What's the easiest change that local or federal governments can make in order to see less disempowerment and more positive outcome? Like more political engagement?

Carolyn Barnes:

I think what I've learned in interviewing bureaucrats across a range of programs is they do what they're required to do. There is a way to create a set of incentives that encourage bureaucrats to develop supportive, caring relationships with their clients. As it stands, very few programs require that.

Carolyn Barnes:

So if we were able to incentivize that kind of behavior in other programs, bureaucrats would do it in part because they're held accountable for their performance on the job. So right now with SNAP and Medicaid, the bureaucrats I've interviewed really emphasize efficiency and accuracy because those are the benchmarks that matter. That's how they're evaluated as workers. So if we added efficiency, accuracy and supportive customer service, we might see better program experiences with programs like SNAP and Medicaid, those larger programs.

Deondra Rose:

So Carolyn, the literature on political participation has long showed that those who have lower income are significantly less likely to engage in civic and political activity. So why is this the case?

Carolyn Barnes:

People don't vote because they can't, they don't want to, or they haven't been asked. I guess that's the summary of all of the political participation literature, right? I think that that's the case for a lot of low income citizens. They're not recruited into forms of political activity. They don't have the time to become educated about particular issues and candidates or they might lack the skills to advocate for themselves and the things that matter to them, or they might just be totally turned off by politics. So along those sort of measures, capacity, interest and recruitment, low-income citizens are typically left out. So we would expect folks to not engage politically.

Deondra Rose:

So to tag on an additional question on the significance of your findings for democracy, your research shows that social policy can actually contribute to a reversal of this trend, working to increase the

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probability that low income families will participate in politics. So given that programs like this daycare policy can actually increase political engagement, would you say that law makers have a responsibility to actually build social policies using this empowerment frame?

Carolyn Barnes:

I think so, but it depends on who you ask. I'm an egalitarian, I'm for political inclusion. I'm for all parts of the American electorate being represented in elections and represented in political processes. I think that we've got to reduce political inequality. We know that the very wealthy are running this country and creating policies that are to the detriment of the most vulnerable and the disadvantaged. And we also know that it's in our country's best interest to have equitable democratic processes that generate policies that are helping the vulnerable, that are helping low income families and low income children.

Deondra Rose:

So Carolyn, this episode starts off with your own story, which helps us set the stage for how you came to study poverty in public policy in the first place. As somebody who has personally experienced what it's like to live in poverty, you bring a perspective and a certain type of expertise that many researchers in this area may not have. So in that respect, your research would qualify as what some scholars in the Academy referred to as Me Studies, the investigation of issues that are closely tied to a researcher's own identity or otherwise play a really prominent role in their own life. So from your perspective, Carolyn, what are the benefits of doing this type of "Me Studies" research?

Carolyn Barnes:

A lot of my favorite scholars that write and teach about poverty and inequality are white men. And in reading their accounts and learning from their studies, I had so many questions. And I realized that they were really new questions I could explore, knowing how from my family's experience, how we navigated safety net programs. And they're just some questions that you don't even know to ask unless you're close to the ground and unless you've had those experiences. So I think it's been a real strength for me because it enables me to talk to both agencies and bureaucrats and recipients in ways that I don't think I could without having firsthand experience.

Deondra Rose:

What do you think that people who do not live in poverty need to understand about those who do?

Carolyn Barnes:

So middle-class folks that are interested in this work or affluent folks that want to know how to help, they assume that parents want something different for their kids than they want for their children, which I always find so surprising. These parents want what you want for your kids, which is opportunity. You want the best for your children. And I think there's this assumption that low income parents don't know what's best for their kids. Low income parents don't have a clue on how to invest in the development of their kids. And we've got to figure out a way to teach them.

Carolyn Barnes:

And that's just not the case. I've encountered more proactive, loving, wonderful, warm families that are far below the poverty line, and moms that are doing their absolute best and going the extra mile for their children. And then there's this exceptionalizing thing that happens. If one person makes it out of poverty, then what's the problem, right? Why do we need to have supports for families? Why do we

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need to expend resources in helping families? And I think both undermine the voice of low income parents to define their own needs.

Carolyn Barnes:

I wish that well-meaning folks would quit othering and quit exceptionalizing and pass the mic to a mom or dad who knows what it's like, a mom or a dad who has experienced challenges, and who can clearly and effectively articulate what they need.

Deondra Rose:

Well, State of Empowerment: low income families and the new welfare state. Carolyn, I cannot wait to read your book. Congratulations.

Carolyn Barnes:

Thank you.

Deondra Rose:

Thank you so much for joining us today. To our listeners, thank you for joining me also for Ways and Means: Short Takes. Carolyn Barnes is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Political Science. This season of Ways and Means podcast is brought to you by Polis, the Center for Politics here at Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy. Until next time, I'm Deondra Rose, Professor of Public Policy and Director of Research for Polis. See you then.