

Other federal budget lines that don't address character

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Reading David Brooks sometimes makes me want to tear my newspaper to shreds, throw the shreds in the fireplace, and douse them in something that burns even faster. Of course, my fireplace is decorative and my newspaper's actually a laptop, so I control myself.

Brooks would approve. He likes self-control. For poor people especially, but presumably for the rest of us as well.

Like a lot of Brooks's more frustrating columns, [yesterday's isn't all bad](#). He implies support for policies creating quality preschools and affordable higher ed. That's great! Such policies have demonstrated success in helping people get out of poverty.

Ah, but liberal antipoverty programs are part of the problem!

Most Democratic antipoverty programs consist of transferring money, providing jobs or otherwise addressing the material deprivation of the poor. Most Republican antipoverty programs likewise consist of adjusting the economic incentives or regulatory barriers faced by the disadvantaged... Both orthodox progressive and conservative approaches treat individuals as if they were abstractions.

Well, [all government programs consist of transferring money from somewhere to somewhere else](#). Yes, "Democratic antipoverty programs" try to address the material deprivation of the poor, since being materially deprived is a pretty reasonable definition of "poor"; they do this through a combination of direct relief (e.g., food stamps) and longterm-focused investments (Pell grants, job training, etc.). Or as I like to call it, "treating individuals as if they were abstractions by assuming they all need to eat and make a living."

I'd maintain that in recent years at least, "Republican antipoverty programs" consist mostly of trying to undermine Democratic ones, but hey, [that may be changing](#). In

any case, what Brooks wants us to know is that *there's a third way*.

To wit: antipoverty policy should focus on character. “If you can’t help people become more resilient, conscientious or prudent,” says Brooks, “then all the cash transfers in the world will not produce permanent benefits.”

But do the poor have a particular need for someone from the government or anywhere else to help them become more resilient, conscientious, or prudent? Living in poverty has a way of forcing such an education all on its own. Not in every single case, of course—though I think we can agree that Americans *with* money don’t end up with uniformly high character, either.

Brooks does point to studies of children that find a correlation specifically between self-control and income level. “Poorer children grow up with more stress and more disruption,” he summarizes, “and these disadvantages produce effects on the brain... But these effects are reversible with the proper experiences.”

Maybe so, but they’re also *preventable* with the proper *not being poor*. Which is to say that nothing here amounts to the indictment of liberal antipoverty policy that Brooks seems to want it to be. Here’s how he opens:

Nearly every parent on earth operates on the assumption that character matters a lot to the life outcomes of their children. Nearly every government antipoverty program operates on the assumption that it doesn’t.

Yes, it’s almost like parents and the government play different roles in children’s lives! Government antipoverty programs help *a lot* of Americans in very tangible, concrete ways. The fact that they don’t help in every possible way doesn’t mean they “will not produce permanent benefits.” Often they do exactly that, despite their damnable failure to be the answer to every question.

And look, **poor people don’t have a corner on character shortcomings any more than they have one on government largesse**. So if we’re going to object to government policy that puts money in someone’s pockets without also addressing character, I can think of a few other candidates. Just for starters:

- We spend money [incentivizing white-collar workers to go on their employers’ health insurance](#), whether or not these workers exhibit good character at work.

- We [pay farmers to produce particular crops](#), sometimes to *not* produce them. Does this promote character?
- We [tax investment income way more lightly than labor income](#). Have the last few years shown the 1 percent to be uncommonly conscientious or prudent?

I linked above to [my earlier post about Paul Ryan's new poverty plan](#), which I think has some things to recommend it. But the plan's most straightforwardly bad idea is its paternalistic call for putting social program beneficiaries on "life plans." As Jamelle Bouie put it, "[America's poor need bigger checks, not a 'life plan.'](#)"

If we're indeed entering a time of more serious conservative engagement with poverty, both Ryan and Brooks will likely play big roles. One suggestion: stop starting from the assumption that while the rest of us have generally got it together, the poor are just a hot mess.