

A mixed bag from Paul Ryan

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Ordinarily, when Paul Ryan puts something out about poverty and social spending, the response is predictable and polarized. The senior House Republican and 2012 vice presidential nominee likes Ayn Rand and small government and [racially coded criticism](#). We know what box to put him in.

Not this time. Left-leaning reactions to [Ryan's new poverty plan](#) have been markedly diverse. Some have just [written it off](#) as so much [political posturing](#) by someone there's [no reason to trust](#). Others have [taken it seriously](#) and found [a lot](#) to [like](#). Still others have [taken it seriously](#) and [gone the other way](#).

I for one don't think it's especially helpful to simply dismiss this as cynical politics or some sort of bait and switch. As Ryan points out, [he's wearing a different hat here than when he's speaking in his capacity as House Budget chair](#). It's fair to ask which hat more closely resembles the one he might wear as, say, the next Republican president. It's a lot less fair to assume we know the answer already.

After all, whatever you think of Ryan's specific policy ideas, there's no question that he's been an often lonely voice in his party—and at times, in Washington generally—when it comes to talking directly about poverty at all. Recently, Ryan's been [studying the issue closely](#). It's worth taking seriously the possibility that he's learned some things that have changed some of his views. And it's worth taking seriously that Ryan the policy wonk is just as real as Ryan the ambitious young politician.

Indeed, the plan includes some solid anti-poverty policy: an expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit. Support for an existing proposal to relax mandatory minimums. A notable lack of direct cuts to social spending.

Critics have focused on Ryan's proposal to require "life plans" for poor Americans receiving government services under the new "opportunity grants" he wants to give states in place of some traditional federal programs. Yes, such a requirement would be invasive and [paternalistic](#) (a criticism that has [come from corners of the right](#) as

well).

At least as troubling are [the opportunity grants themselves](#). They're block grants, which means they pass federal money onto states and give them pretty broad control over how specifically to spend it. This might mean that states can target the money more efficiently and sensitively, as many conservatives argue. [It also might mean](#) that states will choose to let some of this money replace existing funds they were already spending on the poor, and/or to move the money around to the detriment of the poor. And unlike a federal entitlement program, a block-granted state program will have a hard time responding to an economic downturn by spending more, which helps struggling people and a struggling economy alike.

In short, opportunity grants do a good job decentralizing the *how* of social programs and the good they do but [leave a lot of questions as to just how much good they'll do](#) in the long run. As always, I think [the latter question's a lot more important than the former](#).

This weekend, David Gregory asked Ryan why people should trust the states to take care of the poor—especially given that so many of them have recently blocked a Medicaid expansion that would cost them very little. It's not encouraging that Ryan [didn't have much of an answer for this](#).

Still, from a big-picture view Ryan's plan is a pretty positive development in the national conversation on poverty. It presents actual conservative program ideas worthy of serious discussion, rather than just trying to undo liberal ones in favor of some vague assurance that the private sector will step up in their place. Sure, Ryan's plan might be well poised to offer him and his party some electoral help. But that alone isn't a reason to dismiss it.