

Scott Walker's yellow politics



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker takes the stage to address fellow Republicans at a dinner during the Republican National Committee's "Building on Success" winter meeting in San Diego, California January 15, 2015. (Earnie Grafton/Reuters)

By [Catherine Rampell](#) Opinion writer February 12, 2015

Scott Walker is right: It's time for more Americans to get comfortable peeing in cups. Our nation's fiscal health may depend on it.

I'm referring, of course, to taking a drug test as a condition for receiving government benefits. Walker, the Wisconsin governor and a likely 2016 Republican presidential contender, made this a [centerpiece](#) of his recently announced state budget.

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True, [results](#) from other states that have tried this strategy don't look particularly encouraging. In Tennessee, more than 16,000 applicants for public assistance were screened for drug use under a new state law; exactly 37 tested positive, or about 0.2 percent.

Likewise, when Florida began drug-testing applicants for cash assistance in 2011, just 108 of 4,086, or 2.6 percent, failed. (For comparison's sake, an estimated [8.6 percent](#) of adult Floridians use illegal drugs in a given month.) The cost to conduct Florida's testing was \$118,140, more than the state would have paid out in benefits to the people who failed the screening. And that does not include the \$400,000 [in legal bills](#) that the state has paid defending the law in court, only to see it struck down for [violating](#) the constitutional protection against unreasonable government searches.

None of this has stopped states from pursuing drug-testing mandates for welfare applicants, albeit using more careful wording to avoid the constitutionality concerns (though they may yet face their own legal challenges). [At](#)

[least 12 have passed such laws](#), and 12 others are considering them. In Wisconsin, Walker wants to test not just welfare applicants but also anyone applying for Medicaid, food stamps or unemployment insurance benefits.

Now, some people might say that these kinds of mandates are really about harassing and inconveniencing the poor, since there is [little evidence](#) that this population has high rates of illicit drug abuse. (Alcohol is actually the most common substance abused by the poor.) Others might say they're really about funneling public funds to well-connected [drug-testing companies](#). Or that our elected officials just want to score cheap political points, since no politician likes being branded as the sap who favors making it easier for drug addicts to suckle at the government teat.

Still others might contend that, whatever the motivation behind the proliferation of such laws in recent years, they are at the very least a gigantic waste of taxpayer money when you consider the costs of administering the tests.

Me? I think these policies are just poorly targeted.

If we really want to weed out undeserving, drug-addled recipients of public funds, and thereby improve the government's bottom line, we need to make like [Willie Sutton](#) and go where the money is: to the populations that receive the biggest public subsidies.

Spoiler alert: that's not welfare recipients.

At the federal level, we'll spend about \$700 billion this fiscal year on means-tested health insurance programs (such as Medicaid) and what the [Congressional Budget Office calls](#) "income security programs" (such as food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). By contrast, we'll spend twice that much on Medicare and Social Security alone. Surely if we start pulling all of the nation's elderly into our drug-testing dragnet, enough aging hippies will test positive for doobie use to disqualify them from benefits and save the country some major dough.

Veterans, college students, politicians, government contractors and plenty of other suspicious groups also receive sizable government funds. Let's round 'em up and make them pee in a cup, too.

But if we really want to take advantage of this innovative fiscal rebalancing strategy, the most fertile place to start may be among the many well-heeled beneficiaries of the country's [\\$1.4 trillion in tax expenditures](#) — the back-door spending that politicians do through the tax code. About half of this tax-side spending is [captured by the top 20 percent](#), which means that drug-testing people who want to claim tax breaks could produce a huge windfall.

Want to take that deduction for home mortgage interest? I'm sorry, sir, you'll have to submit a urine sample. Eyeing that carried-interest tax loophole? Here's a cup for you, too. (Those of us who have seen "The Wolf of Wall Street" know that big-time financiers can afford the really good drugs.) Same with charitable deductions, health insurance deductions and everything else on your thick, itemized 1040.

Sure, some Americans will complain that blanket drug-testing is an unreasonable violation of their Fourth Amendment rights. But as long as they're clean, they should have nothing to hide. Right?