

The Welfare State in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The modern welfare state, which was created in the long economic expansion of the post-World War II era, funded benefits that provided income security across the life course. In the 1970s, the era of welfare state expansion slowed due to rising deficits and fiscal strains associated with population aging. In recent decades benefit reductions have become commonplace. Theories designed to explain the formation of welfare state include the logic of industrialism, power resource theory, and the theory of welfare state regimes. Feminist critics challenged theorists to consider how welfare benefits influence gender inequality within regime types. In recent years, research has focused on three key issues. The first is to identify variations in welfare state attitudes across nations and among individuals within nations. The second is to consider the causes and consequences of activation policies that focus less on direct cash transfers and more on a combination of incentives and punishments to encourage work effort. Finally, the third is to expand the definition of the welfare state to include the private provision of goods and services as well as education.

INTRODUCTION

The modern welfare state was created in the long economic expansion of the post-World War II era, as rising productivity and economic growth made it possible for governments to fund an array of benefits that provided a modicum of income security across the life course. The era of welfare state expansion slowed in the 1970s, as nations everywhere faced rising deficits and growing awareness of the fiscal strains population aging placed on pensions, health care and other social welfare programs. Although expenditures continued to rise in the 1980s, they rose at a slower rate than in earlier decades and then leveled off in the 1990s. In recent years benefit cuts have become commonplace.

Rising public budgets have not been the only challenge facing all western, capitalist nations. The social insurance systems created in the post-World War

II period were designed to protect workers against the loss of income in old age and presumed that the typical household consisted of a male breadwinner and a dependent spouse. In this model, married women were primarily responsible for caring for children and other family members and were largely excluded from the labor market. Women did receive benefits from the relatively generous social insurance programs, but they were subordinated to their husbands. In public pensions, in particular, benefits were granted to widows and spouses on the basis of their husbands' earnings history and presumed that the women who received them were not employed outside the home. In the less generous social assistance programs, women had to submit to demeaning means tests to prove their eligibility.

Although widow and spouse benefits did improve women's income security in old age, the dramatic rise in women's education and labor force participation has made them something of an anachronism. Working women not only require protection against the loss of a spouse; they also need benefits that support their multiple familial responsibilities and resultant intermittent employment patterns. In addition, rising divorce rates and increasing numbers of out-of-wedlock births and single parent household have generated new needs. By the 1980s, then, it had become clear that the welfare states designed for an industrial economy and the male breadwinner family type that accompanied it needed retooling for service-oriented economies where dual-earner and female-headed households were becoming the norm. Thus, gender relations and family forms have become central to welfare state restructuring in the contemporary period in ways that they were not during the age of expansion.

Race and immigration patterns are also changing how welfare states function and how they are funded in the face of concerns that increasing ethnic heterogeneity will lead to lower levels of welfare state support. Among the changes that have occurred as increases in immigration, a larger scope of responsibility for international organizations such as the European Union, and an emerging global civil society. This has increased the need for research on race and ethnicity in an international context.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Contemporary studies of the modern welfare state came of age in the 1970s, following more than two decades of accelerated expansion. Both the scale and diversity among the welfare states of the industrialized nations created a scholarly agenda based on two questions: How could these developments be explained and what were their consequences?

LOGIC OF INDUSTRIALISM

In the 1970s and 1980s welfare state research focused on common trends, a line of inquiry influenced by Harold Wilensky's (1975) book, *The Welfare State and Equality*, which argued for the salience of impersonal economic forces associated with industrialization. According to the "logic of industrialism" theory, industrialization creates new demands for public spending as systems of social support based on kinship and the patrimonial traditions of agrarian societies are eroded. Growing dependence on wage labor makes those with little or no labor to sell vulnerable to being unemployed and falling into poverty. As a result, the state takes on an expanded role to maintain the labor force and achieve coordination and consensus in a complex, urban society.

POWER RESOURCE THEORY

Yet if the logic of industrialism was an inexorable historical force, then why had welfare states developed in such different ways and apparently reached their peak strikingly different levels of spending? Increasingly, scholars began to consider how the factors that resulted in diversity among welfare states. In a series of influential articles, Korpi and his colleagues (Korpi & Palme, 1998) developed what came to be known as *power resource theory*. They argued that democracy made it possible for the masses to combine against the elites and use the state to claim a larger share of the social surplus. However, this struggle was biased in favor of the propertied simply because electoral constituencies are large and elections costly. For workers the compensating power resource was their numbers, which could only be effective if they organized into unions and political parties. Thus, although the formal institutions of democracy, including universal suffrage and free and competitive elections are important, what matters equally is what the mass electorate does with the franchise.

Power resource theory became the dominant paradigm in the field and provided the benchmark against which other theories would be tested. More important, it initiated a program of both quantitative and historical-comparative research to test the thesis that major differences in welfare state spending and entitlements among the capitalist democracies could be explained by the relative success of labor parties, aligned with strong trade unions.

WELFARE STATE REGIMES

A second stream of research was concerned with grouping nations into categories based on their strategies for organizing benefits. In his path-breaking

book, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Gosta Esping-Andersen (1990) argued that the welfare states of the affluent capitalist democracies could be distinguished not only in terms of their relative spending, but also more fundamentally, by their institutional logic for assigning welfare functions to the state, the market, and the family. He identified three distinct welfare state regimes: liberal, conservative, and social democratic.

In liberal welfare states, citizens are constituted primarily as individual market actors. Rather than providing direct cash transfers, liberal welfare states favor subsidies for private benefits. Basic security schemes are more likely to be means-tested and social insurance benefits modest. The main exemplars of liberal welfare states are Great Britain, Canada, and the United States.

The second regime type is termed *conservative*, or more recently, *Christian Democratic*, depending on the characteristics emphasized. This regime type is less concerned with market efficiency than with rights and privileges differentiated on the basis of class and status. In conservative regimes social rights are extensive, and there is only a marginal role for private welfare arrangements. These countries are also strongly influenced by Catholic doctrine, which emphasizes local community, the church, and the family as the locus of social welfare. While social spending in conservative nations is higher than in the liberal welfare states, the emphasis is on income transfers sufficient to cover the needs of the male-breadwinner family type. Services that facilitate women's employment such as child care are modest. The main exemplars of conservative regimes are found in the continental European countries, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain.

The third regime type, called *social democratic*, is found mainly in Scandinavia. Social democratic welfare states are characterized by extensive social rights and a marginal role for private welfare. Benefits are universalistic and emphasize equality of citizenship rather than preservation of status differences. Social democratic nations recognize women's right to a place in the labor market, and welfare states tend to be service intensive as well as transfer intensive. In this regard, the welfare state is both a major source of employment for women and a provider of other services that allow them to work outside the home. Thus, both social democratic and conservative welfare states spend generously on social protection but do so in fundamentally different ways.

A core premise of regime theory is that the welfare state is not only produced by conflicts between classes, but also it is "in its own right, a system of stratification. It is an active force in the ordering of social relations" (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 23). Universal programs have greater support than targeted programs, because they build broad solidarities across class, gender, and racial boundaries. As a result, benefits are difficult

to cut because they create policy feedbacks in the form of institutional structures and self-interested beneficiaries who are likely to favor current spending levels and additional spending in the future (Lynch & Myrskylä, 2009).

Esping-Andersen's typology has been subject to considerable criticism for oversimplifying the complexities within regime types. Many researchers have tested this typology using other economic or political variables with moderate success. Most suggest adding a fourth regime to capture additional national differences. Yet, the key insight that welfare states differ fundamentally in the allocation of functions among states, markets, and families has proven to be remarkably robust.

GENDER

The insight that the welfare state is a system of stratification has led to numerous studies that sought to elucidate how welfare states altered existing distributional relations. Feminist theorists, in particular, have been especially critical of Esping-Andersen for ignoring the gendered aspects of welfare regimes. In response, they have conducted comparative studies of how various welfare strategies affect gender equality (O'Conner, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999).

High rates of female labor force participation in European countries have been fostered by an activist state and the adoption of family policies that encourage work. Such efforts have inspired alternative typologies based on the extent to which welfare policies are used to encourage a male breadwinner model or promote female labor force participation.

Throughout most of Europe, female educational attainment now exceeds that of males, and in many countries rates of female labor force participation, even among mothers with young children, has soared. Beginning in the late 1960s, Sweden consciously moved toward a dual-breadwinner nation by introducing separate taxation, generous parental leaves, universal, state-run day care and policies to encourage greater involvement of fathers in child-rearing. Sweden also expanded the definition of work to allow pension credits to be earned for child-rearing as well as for military service, spells of illness, unemployment, and disability (Anderson, Blomqvist, & Immergut, 2008). France also has an array of services and subsidies to support dual earner families. This trend is not universal, however, for the Netherlands upholds the male breadwinner model and encourages mothers to stay home with young children (Morgan, 2006). Similarly, Britain created an allowance for unpaid care work for infirm dependents in the 1970s, but married women were ineligible for this benefit, because care-giving was considered part of their normal duties (Lewis, 1998).

model would reduce the financial instability of state-run pension programs, increase economic growth, and improve retirement income for the elderly.

Although few European countries pursued this model, the World Bank had a much larger impact in Latin America. For countries in desperate need of economic stability after years of political unrest, government corruption, and financial mismanagement, the World Bank model seemed to offer an attractive solution. As an incentive, developing countries were promised large loans for restructuring purposes (Brooks, 1994). Over the next decade, 81 countries including 15 countries in Latin America adopted the model (Quadagno, Kail, & Sheka, 2011). These reformed pension schemes fall into one of three categories. The substitutive scheme completely replaces the public benefit with a new private system. The parallel scheme allows private and public systems to compete with each other. Finally, in the mixed scheme everyone is eligible for a flat pension while contributors to private accounts receive an extra, supplementary benefit (Arza, 2008). As privatization has redrawn the boundaries between the state and the market, the question is whether the private sector can provide protection against life course risks more effectively than the government.

RACE AND IMMIGRATION

Cross-national variations in race and ethnicity have also become increasingly important in welfare state structures and spending patterns. Race has long been recognized as critical in understanding the development of the American welfare state. Negative racial attitudes are one of the primary reasons that the welfare state in the United States developed in so slowly and provided less generous benefits than its European counterparts (Quadagno, 1994). Further, race continues to influence support for the welfare state in the United States, because whites are less likely to support policies that they see as primarily benefiting minorities (Skocpol, 1991).

Recently, several researchers have posited that racial and ethnic heterogeneity may also affect attitudes toward welfare state support in an international context. Comparatively, race is used to describe a wide range of concepts, including country of origin, primary language, skin tone, ancestry, sociocultural group, and so on. Some studies find that in some nations increasing rates of immigration and greater ethnic diversity in Europe are starting to erode support for generous benefits (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004). Specifically, they suggest that immigration is having a negative effect on welfare state support and that eventually politicians will use ethnic divisions as a way to cut popular benefits. Researchers already see evidence of this effect in some countries where several candidates who promised to decrease redistribution and enact strict immigration laws have been elected (Alesina &

Glaeser, 2004). Alternatively, Larsen (2008) argues that ethnic homogeneity in European countries does not increase welfare policy support, and therefore, other factors, not ethnic diversity, affect welfare state support.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WELFARE STATE

The theory that welfare states are systems of stratification that reorder social relations initially referred to distributional consequences in regard to economic inequality. More recently, attention has been focused on the relationship between the welfare state and attitudes. Attitudes are a key factor in the process of democratization, because a stable democracy depends on the relationship between the performance of political institutions and how citizens feel about those institutions. Further, attitudes toward social programs can help explain the overall welfare state structure as well as patterns of change. A transformation in how policies are viewed can dramatically alter policy outcomes by activating new interest groups, fragmenting the existing configuration of support or limiting the potential options for change. Struggles over social policy thus become struggles over information.

Attitudes in Welfare State Regimes. Many studies of public opinion have attempted to determine whether Esping-Andersen's (1990) regime typology can explain attitudinal variations across nations toward different programs and policies. This line of inquiry has proven fruitful in some cases but not in others. Jæger (2006) found mixed support for the thesis that regime type shaped attitudes. Svallfors (1997) also found that there was some relationship between regimes and attitudes. In his study, people had more favorable attitudes toward redistribution in social democratic countries than elsewhere. Other studies, however, have not found conclusive evidence that cross-national variations attitudes in welfare can be explained by regime type. The current consensus is that Esping-Andersen's typology can partially explain variations in attitudes across nations but that other factors also come into play.

Individual Variations in Attitudes. Although the first generation of research on attitudes toward welfare benefits emphasized variations across nations, a more recent focus has concerned individual differences within nations. One theory used to test differences in individuals' attitudes toward welfare state policies is the *embedded preferences/political ideology* approach. According to this perspective, attitudes toward the welfare state are influenced by basic value systems and by ideological predispositions, which help voters make

sense of complex policy options. More specifically, attitudes toward the welfare state are imbedded in values regarding the proper relationship between the individual, the state, and various institutions. In confirmation of this theory, some studies have found that a belief in social rights is a key predictor of welfare state support while others have found that party preferences influenced support for redistribution (Brooks & Manza, 2007).

An alternative to the political ideology approach to explain variations in attitudes is an economic approach. To the extent that some groups benefit more than others, welfare states create cleavages and conflict structures. This theory suggests that individual preferences for social programs can be influenced by the degree of social risk among those in need of public support (Busemeyer, Goerres & Weschle, 2009). In other words, people should be less likely to favor policies that cost them financially or where they feel their economic loss outweighs the social gains. Thus, policy attitudes should be based on perceived risk.

On confirmation of this thesis, Svallfors (1997) examined whether support for social programs was based on class and status. They found that those who either were beneficiaries or at risk of becoming beneficiaries of programs for the poor or the unemployed held more favorable attitudes, while more affluent respondents had less favorable attitudes. Similarly, Jæger (2006) found that income was negatively associated with support for redistribution, as did Cook and Barrett (1992), who found that the poor were more likely than higher income respondents to support public assistance benefits. By contrast, Pontusson and Rueda (2010) found that social class did influence welfare attitudes but not necessarily in the expected direction. In their study, the wealthiest respondents were least likely to support redistribution, but the poorest respondents were not necessarily the most supportive.

Other researchers have examined the effect of age on support for social programs. One study of Norway and Denmark found that age was not a determinant of attitudes toward health care or pension programs, although there was some age variation in attitudes for programs such as childcare and nursing homes (Anderson, 2002). Gender is also considered a measure that is related to self-interest. Women are more dependent on the welfare state due to their more precarious market position and are more likely to be employed in the administration of these benefits. Comparing gender attitudes in Norway, Germany, Australia, and the United States, Svallfors (2007) found that women universally were more positive toward government redistribution. Overall, attitude studies suggest that welfare states are not likely to converge any time soon if ever and that the public does not favor welfare state retrenchment.

ACTIVATION POLICIES

In the 1960s and 1970s, the discourse that surrounded income maintenance programs focused on the problem of poverty and the need for levels of support that afforded a decent standard of living. The objective of welfare benefits was to provide basic financial support at a level that kept people above the poverty line (an objective rarely met in some countries) and to allow the unemployed to survive without being forced to take the first low-wage job offered (Gilbert, 2002). During that period, it was almost universally accepted that social policies should provide “passive” income supports. As a result, many European nations facing high levels of unemployment in the 1980s created early exit “pathways.” They used their disability and public pension programs to allow older workers to leave the labor force, thus opening jobs for younger workers.

By the 1990s, many European countries had made significant progress in reducing structural unemployment, and attention shifted to a new strategy. From countries as diverse as Sweden and the United States, policies to activate the unemployed were adopted. These policies created new incentives coupled with strong pressures for people on welfare to find work. In practice, this meant eliminating unconditional, exclusively cash benefits to the unemployed and replacing them with measures designed to stimulate employment and other responsible behaviors, in other words, promoting an active society. People seeking benefits were required to participate in interviews, training programs, and other job searching activities. Some countries even privatized their public employment services.

In activation policies, a theoretical distinction can be drawn between *neo-statist* and *neoliberal* strategies. The neo-statist approach emphasizes positive incentives to seek employment rather than punitive measures like reducing benefits for those who do not comply with work requirements. It also aims to empower rather than control beneficiaries and favors training over “forced labor.” Examples of the neo-statist approach can be found in the Scandinavian countries. In contrast, the neoliberal approach relies more on economic sanctions, offers limited training, and applies coercive measures narrowly targeted on the unemployed.

The United States is the prototype of the neo-liberal strategy. This strategy is best exemplified by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. PRWORA replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a joint federal-state program for poor, mostly female-headed families, with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Under PROWRA, poor mothers are required to work in return for assistance and total federal lifetime TANF eligibility is limited to 5 years. In the first 6 years after PRWORA was enacted, dramatic changes occurred

in the employment patterns and financial security of welfare recipients. Welfare caseloads fell by 56%, the labor force participation rates of single mothers increased, and poverty rates declined (Acs & Loprest, 2007). Yet it would be premature to judge the law as a success, because the poorest fifth lost income in the post-PRWORA period (Garfinkel, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 2010).

Most theorists argue that the distinction between neo-statist and neoliberal approaches draws too sharp a line among the mix of carrots and sticks actually administrated (Gilbert, 2002). Instead, many nations that have adopted activation policies are aware of the need to combine economic with social considerations. This tendency toward mixed strategies exemplifies a global policy that has influenced many local markets around the world.

REDEFINING WELFARE STATES

A third trend in recent research is to expand the programs that are considered part of the welfare state. In *Wealth and Welfare States*, three prominent poverty researchers take a fresh look at debates about the origins and functions of welfare state. They note that, in most wealthy nations, social welfare expenditures make up 30–40% of the total value of goods and services produced. Given that welfare benefits consume such vast resources, they stress that it is important to understand what they contribute to overall well-being and whether the welfare state is a drag on the economy. Consistent with most comparative research, they first analyze social insurance expenditures and conclude that early expansions increased growth and more recent increases have not harmed it. Overall, the net effect of social insurance on growth is zero.

They also argue that an analysis focused only on social insurance excludes alternative mechanisms that nations use to achieve similar objectives and thus underestimates the full effect welfare states exert on economies. To remedy this problem, they add private employer benefits and tax expenditures, which are (less progressive) ways to achieve some of the same goals as direct spending. They also include education as part of the welfare state, which they justify on the basis of evidence showing that public education does as much or more than traditional benefits in promoting productivity and growth. By expanding the definition of the welfare state to include these other mechanisms for redistributing societal resources, they are able to assert that the welfare state's net contribution is positive.

CONCLUSION

The modern welfare state that emerged in the post-World War II era represented a break with the English Poor Law tradition that distinguished



between the deserving and undeserving poor and that set benefits according to the principle of less eligibility. Yet it is apparent that many of the principles developed hundreds of years ago still apply today. Most people are encouraged to work rather than to depend on welfare. Further, the attempt to separate the deserving from undeserving poor remains an important part of political debates concerning the distribution of welfare benefits. In order to apply these principles to the current era, it is important to understand the economic, political and demographic changes that took place in the Western democracies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is also important to recognize that many political movements have altered what was once considered the consensus on welfare policies. Although welfare states are currently facing similar challenges associated with fiscal crises, population aging, increasing racial and ethnic diversity, and the rising labor force participation of women, they are responding in diverse ways. These developments present interesting issues for researchers seeking to impose some order on a rapidly evolving social system.

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