

# US SOCIAL POLICY IN COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: Concepts, Images, Arguments, and Research Strategies

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■ **Abstract** In this article we review theory and comparative and historical research on US social policy. We discuss first the conceptual frameworks used to think about social policy, the changing images of American social policy implied by these different frameworks, and the questions they raise. From there we examine the arguments offered to answer questions about US social policy as well as the research strategies and evidence used to appraise the arguments. We address work that situates US social policy in comparative perspective as well as work that examines the development of American social policy historically or across states. Although many lines of argumentation have some empirical support, we find that some lines of political and institutional analyses provide the best supported answers to the questions and the greatest potential for wide usage in comparative and historical studies. We conclude that scholars would do well not to treat American social policy as so exceptional as to require separate images, explanations, and approaches. We suggest promising new lines of empirical inquiry prompted by new conceptualizations of social policy and other developments in this literature.

## INTRODUCTION

When scholars discuss welfare states or social policy, they typically refer to the efforts of states to address economic insecurity and inequality due to risks to regular income. Modern social policy and other social services have transformed the character of states. Many states, including the American one, now devote themselves mainly to the maintenance of incomes, the treating of the ill, and the provision of services to citizens rather than the traditional pursuits of warfare and coercive control over subject populations. In short, they have become welfare states.

Comparative and historical scholarship suggests that the US state and social policy has been transformed reluctantly and partially, often treating American social policy as aberrant. Comparative scholars want to know why American social

insurance programs were relatively late in coming and patchy in character as compared to those of Western Europe, why the United States spends less on social policy, why the United States resembles the residual “liberal” welfare state type, or why US social policy has undergone relatively severe retrenchment over the last two decades. US historical scholars ask why the United States developed the mix of policies that it did, focusing often on the 1930s and 1960s, when gains were made. Other scholars address differences in social policy across US states, which vary widely on programs in which they share governmental authority. Often the American-centered investigations appraise different sets of explanatory arguments, as if US social policy developments were so exceptional that they required their own explanations. (For reviews of comparative research, see Skocpol & Amenta 1986, Quadagno 1987, Piven & Cloward 1993; specific arguments, Shalev 1983, Esping-Andersen & van Kersbergen 1992, Burstein 1998, Thelen 1999; specific aspects of US social policy, Howard 1999, Manza 2000; feminist research, Gordon 1990, Orloff 1996, Haney 2000).

In reviewing the comparative and historical literature on American social policy, we find that treating US social policy as so exceptional is unwarranted. US policy is not always and has not always been backward relative to other rich capitalist countries. This is true even in respect to the standard conceptualization of social policy, and a more nuanced US image is coming into view as scholars develop new conceptualizations. Partly for that reason, the most fruitful lines of research are those in which scholars develop or appraise arguments that can be applied in different settings, rather than trying to focus solely on exceptionalism. Comparative scholars do best when their arguments are constructed in such a way as to be able to address the development of US social policy over time, instead of treating the American case as forever a residual category. Scholars focused on US developments are most compelling when they devise or assess arguments that are not conceptualized so narrowly as to have few implications for other settings. In the most telling research, scholars situate developments in US social policy in cross-national and historical contexts, employ claims that have implications comparatively, across states, and over time, and appraise these claims through analyses of historical sequences or against the experiences of similarly situated countries or states. Lines of research combining portable argumentation and cross-national and historical perspective are likely to be the most productive ones in the future, as scholars develop new conceptualizations and images of social policy and devise new questions about it.

## CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF SOCIAL POLICY AND IMAGES OF US SOCIAL POLICY

Modern social policy is usually understood as state programs and services that address economic inequality resulting from risks to income and are bureaucratically administered to specified groups of citizens in specified circumstances. In

conceptualizing modern social policy in this way (Hecló 1974), scholars placed social insurance programs at the center of social policy (Flora & Heidenheimer 1981), with means-tested social assistance and social service programs taking a secondary role. In comparing across countries, states, and over time, scholars have often addressed the amounts expended on these programs and services as a percentage of national income or product, an operationalization known as spending effort (Wilensky 1975), and the timing of adoption of major programs and their development (Flora & Alber 1981). According to this conceptualization, the image of American social policy is one of stinginess and backwardness. The United States has spent less effort on social policy than major capitalist democracies in the postwar era. In 1993, according to OECD statistics on “social security” efforts, for instance, only Japan and Australia spent less than the United States among 17 long-standing members (Castles 1998a:151; see also Huber & Stephens 2000a). Of the five major social insurance programs, America had adopted only workmen’s compensation before 1935, late among industrialized countries (Collier & Messick 1975, Hicks et al 1995). Old-age and unemployment insurance were added in 1935, but health insurance was added only for the aged in 1965, along with health benefits for the poor, and family allowances were never adopted (Weir et al 1988).

Over the past decade scholars have conceptualized social policy more holistically, with Esping-Andersen’s (1990) “welfare state regimes” notably addressing social policy’s influence on labor-market relations. According to this scheme, the “social democratic” regime is best for workers and is based on the principles of universalism and “decommodification.” The latter term means that workers are freed from inequality based on being wholly reliant on labor markets for income. The second-best, “conservative corporatist” regime is also universal but does not smooth status distinctions between groups and upholds the traditional family. The “liberal-type” welfare regime is designed to make labor markets run smoothly—at the expense of people by forcing them to take what these markets offer. In the liberal type, public social policy has a small presence and a large means-tested component, and it is augmented by private control over social policy areas elsewhere often handled by the state (see also Castles & Mitchell 1993). According to regime models, postwar American policy is deemed to approximate the liberal type, because of its relatively low expenditures, its large share of private benefits for retirement and health, and its relatively large component of means-tested expenditures.

These understandings of social policy have come into question, however. One set of challenges involves considering state programs other than the major social insurance programs and allied assistance programs that address modern societal risks to employment, income, and economic security (Weir et al 1988). Scholars have considered, among others, education (Heidenheimer 1981, Katznelson & Weir 1985, de Swaan 1988), taxation policy (Steinmo 1993; Howard 1997, Myles & Pierson 1997), veterans’ benefits (Skocpol 1992), housing policy (Castles 1998b, Conley 2000), economic policy (Weir 1992, Leicht & Jenkins 1998), and work programs (Amenta 1998). Other scholars argue that social relations in the modern

capitalist and democratic world produce perils to income beyond the standard ones and programs to address them, such as drug policies (Benoit 2000), anti-discrimination policies (Burstein 1985, Orloff 1996, Skrentny 1996, Bonastia 2000), abortion policies (Halfmann 1999), and imprisonment policies (Western & Beckett 1999).

Works that address a wider view of social policy have altered the standard images of and stories about American social policy and provide new empirical puzzles to solve. As Skocpol (1992) has shown, veterans' benefits for the Civil War provided retirement and disability benefits for a significant segment of the northern population in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These Civil War pensions were often more generous than old-age insurance for industrial workers in Germany and means-tested old-age pensions in Britain. In addition, the United States was also briefly a leader in modern social spending policy in the 1930s (Amenta 1998). Spending for relief programs, especially government-provided work programs (Amenta et al 1998), resulted in US social spending efforts rising from less than one half of a percentage point of GNP in 1929 to more than six percent in 1939, ahead of other capitalist countries. Research also suggests that the distinction between "social security" and "welfare" was not intended or an initial result of 1930s legislation (Derthick 1979, Amenta 1998, Tynes 1996), but developed over time and may be overstated (Howard 1999). The United States has also been a leader in taxation expenditures for social purposes (Steinmo 1993, Howard 1997), though it has not made comparatively great strides in tax relief for the working poor (Myles & Pierson 1997). The United States is also among the leaders in home ownership, although research has not indicated how much this is due to housing policy (Castles 1998b, Conley 2000). And the United States has traditionally been a leader in public education policy (Heidenheimer 1981), a policy that applies more to equality of opportunity than of incomes, and such US spending efforts have slowed in recent decades (Castles 1998a).

Research on social policy and gender inequality has also provided new conceptualizations of social policy and corresponding new images of US policy (reviews in Orloff 1996, Haney 2000). Orloff (1993b) adopts Esping-Andersen's types, but transforms them by adding new dimensions, including the ability to establish an autonomous household and access to paid labor, because commodifying women often promotes their financial autonomy from men (see also O'Connor 1993). Within the liberal type, America is not always laggard and has shown some commitment to gender equality, particularly in occupational integration and protection from sexual assault and harassment (O'Connor et al. 1999). By contrast Sainsbury (1996) replaces Esping-Andersen's types with two based on unequal gender relations—the breadwinner and individual models (see also Lewis 1992, Fraser 1994). Sainsbury (1996) finds that women who lived in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom where claims were based on need and marital status fare less well than in countries with other bases for claims. Conservative corporatist countries are often closer to the breadwinner model, however, with benefits transferred primarily to the head of household. In the Netherlands,

for example, wives making less money than their husbands are ineligible for unemployment benefits (Sainsbury 1996). Historically speaking, Skocpol (1992) shows that although many US social policy proposals failed in the first decades of the twentieth century, some successes were in a “maternalist” direction.

Other scholars focus specifically on the process of retrenchment of social policy, bids to cut back social policy that were common in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Mishra 1990). Pierson (1994) distinguishes between programmatic retrenchment—the cutting back of programs—and systemic retrenchment—institutional reforms that weaken the state’s revenue base and pro-welfare state interest groups. He argues that the United States suffered more from systemic than programmatic retrenchment in the 1980s. Huber & Stephens (2000b, 2001) find that in most cases retrenchment efforts served only to reduce the rate of growth of social policy expenditures (cf. Clayton & Pontusson 1998). Pierson (2000b) suggests that scholars analyze changes along new dimensions. Among liberal welfare states, where recommodification or the dismantling of worker protections has been the most visible goal, the United States stands as an intermediate case between the severe retrenchment of New Zealand and the United Kingdom and the “compensated restructuring” in Australia and Canada.

## THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS AND RESEARCH ON US SOCIAL POLICY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

To explain the differences across countries in social policy, scholars have put forward many theoretical arguments, sometimes couched as theories of public policy and sometimes as theories of the state. Three main arguments currently dominate thinking about comparative social policy. The most empirically successful of these arguments, however, have little to say about the development of American public policy, as they tend to focus on causes that are absent or negligible in the American setting. And so they need to be revised at least in part to make sense of positive developments in American social policy and great variations in policy across states.

### Modernization and Economic Development

One important argument focuses on economic development and the changing needs of populations as they industrialize (Wilensky 1975). Based in Durkheimian and modernization theoretical traditions, the argument is that economic development brings the need for extensive social policy for a number of reasons. More people work for wages or salaries and thus rely on incomes. But risks to incomes increase notably as the population ages, leaving older workers unnecessary and placing burdens on increasingly nuclear families. Industrialization also provides economic means to pay for social policy. According to this argument, as industrialization proceeds all countries have reason and means to adopt modern social programs,

especially social insurance, and increase their spending for them, more or less regardless of political conditions.

When operationalized by the level of economic development and similar measures, this argument does well to explain differences between the social policies of the richest and poorest countries, and the richest and poorest states (see review in Skocpol & Amenta 1986). It is true as well that countries have converged on similar social programs (Stinchcombe 1985) that can be considered modern. It also seems possible that modified aspects of the industrialization thesis, such as the degree to which women work in the labor force, may influence the character of social policy (Huber & Stephens 2000a). All the same, the modernization argument has not done well in explaining great differences in the adoption of major social insurance programs among richer countries (Collier & Messick 1975, Hicks et al 1995). And although some economic measures have remained important in regression models, they do not mainly explain differences in spending efforts among capitalist democracies in the postwar period (Hicks & Misra 1993, Huber et al 1993, Pampel 1994). Yet another limitation on this line of thinking is that countries vary greatly in the degree to which they rely on social insurance programs (Esping-Andersen 1990). From this perspective, the United States is an anomaly in that it has been a relatively rich country that has lagged in social spending efforts. Also, this line of argumentation does not help to explain differences among states with different social policies, but at largely similar economic levels, and the uneven development of US social policy over time.

### **Social Democratic and Partisanship Models, Catholic Parties, and Political Coalitions**

Another major line of argumentation holds that democratic political action influences social policy most after a certain level of economic development is reached. One set of explanations holds that partisan politics and political action most strongly influence the fate of social policy. Of these arguments the most prominent is the social democratic or power resources model (Stephens 1979, Korpi 1983), rooted in Marx's theory of class struggle. It holds that class divisions are fought out at the political level, with differences in the form and structure of their political organizations influencing who wins out in public policy. The social democratic thesis holds specifically that social democratic parties tied to strong and centralized labor movements provide the greatest impetus to the adoption and expansion of redistributive social policy and services (see reviews in Shalev 1983, Esping-Andersen & van Kersbergen 1992). This thesis has been amended slightly by others who focus on the discouraging effects on social policy of unified right-wing parties (Castles & Mair 1984) or the moderating influence of center parties on social policy (Hicks & Swank 1992). An additional line of argumentation somewhat more on Weberian lines holds that Christian democratic parties promote social spending of most standard sorts, but not state employment, many social services, or education. A further set of theoretical claims focuses on the policy

impact of coalitions of worker organizations with wider groups of political actors, including farmer's organizations and movements (Esping-Andersen 1990, Sanders 1999) and expert advocacy organizations and civic associations (Orloff 1993a).

The social democratic thesis has done very well in helping to explain differences among capitalist democracies since World War II (see review in Huber et al 1993, Huber & Stephens 2000a). There is also a rough alignment between social democratic rule and Christian democratic rule and the social democratic and conservative corporatist regime types. However, specific analyses of retrenchment show a pronounced decline in partisan effects with the exception of public social service employment (Huber & Stephens 2000b). More important, the argument has failed to explain the adoption of social policy in the years before the war, as social democratic parties rarely gained power during this period and most adoptions came during the other types of political regimes (Orloff & Skocpol 1984, cf. Hicks 1999). The arguments about coalitions have greater plausibility in this period, though Esping-Andersen (1990) does not engage in the kind of historical study needed to appraise his arguments. In addition, it is not clear why such coalitions would emerge in some places and times and not others.

In the US setting, arguments about partisanship have had more mixed results. The social democratic model is not strictly applicable, given America's lack of a centralized labor movement and a social democratic party; also inapplicable are arguments about Christian parties. More applicable is the argument about unified right-wing parties, but that does little to explain advances in social policy. A coalition among workers and policy officials may have been necessary to gains in the United States, but not sufficient. Partisanship arguments suggest that advances in US social policy, to the extent they would happen, would result from the taking of power by the Democrats after its turn to the left in the 1930s. The Democratic party, however, has been greatly divided among its pro-social policy and anti-social policy wings, and Democratic rule has only sometimes resulted in gains at the national level (Amenta 1998) and in states of the Union (Amenta & Poulsen 1996, Brown 1995, Soule & Zylan 1997). The research suggests that only really large Democratic majorities at the national level have led to gains and that Democratic rule at the state level leads to social spending gains only in structurally conducive situations or where the party's base of support was along cleavages dating from the New Deal. That said, these partisan situations have not been able to explain the nature and character of these policy gains.

### **Institutional Theory: Polity Structure, Domestic Bureaucracies, Policy Feedbacks**

The other main argument to explain empirical patterns in social policy has been institutional. Based in the tradition of Weber and Tocqueville, institutional theory holds that the structure of political institutions and organizations strongly influence the possibilities of social policy (reviews in Immergut 1998, Thelen 1999). Specifically, institutional arguments hold that the adoption and expansion of social

spending policies is encouraged by centralized political institutions and states with greater bureaucratic and financial capacities and frustrated by fragmented political institutions and incapable states. Institutional arguments also claim that the initial structure of social policies influences or has “feedback” on their fate.

Following Tocqueville, many social scientists argue that the centralization of the polity promotes social policy and fragmentation hinders it because the latter facilitates the ability of opponents to deflect social policy initiatives. These claims have received some support in cross-national studies of overall spending across capitalist democracies (Huber et al 1993) as well as small-N studies explaining differences in the development of social policy and taxation policy (Immergut 1992, Steinmo 1993, Maoini 1998). This argument holds that the checks and balances in US government and its historically weak executive institutions limit what is possible in social policy. The US polity is fragmented in ways more multifaceted than that found in other democracies (Huntington 1968). Political authority in the United States has never been horizontally or vertically integrated. At the national level of government, the United States has a presidential and nonparliamentary system that allows intramural conflict. Members of Congress from the same party can defect from the president’s legislative program without risking loss of office and can initiate competing programs. There are two legislative bodies, and legislators represent geographical districts, not parties. Any laws that make it through this maze can be declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court. A strong candidate to explain the general backwardness of US social policy and difficulties in adopting new social programs, this argument refers to an unchanging, systemic aspect of the US polity, however, and thus cannot easily explain changes in US social policy. Nor can this argument help to explain long-standing differences in social policy among states of the Union—whose polities are each similarly fragmented. Research has not yet sorted out which of these forms of fragmentation matter most and how with regard to social policy-making.

A second argument concerns state bureaucracies. Skocpol (1985, 1992) argues that state bureaucracies are potentially capable of autonomous action. In democratic and capitalist societies, states can be considered autonomous when they create strategies of action independently of capitalists and organized business groups, political parties, interest groups, movement organizations, and public opinion. Autonomy in turn depends on money, which states have gained through dependable modern taxes on sales, payrolls, and incomes (Steinmo 1993; see also Carruthers 1994), and a civil service not captured by political or social groups through selection or prospective employment. According to this argument, state autonomy in social spending bureaucracies aids the development of modern public spending programs. Scholars have also focused on organizational and intellectual capabilities in policymaking agencies (Hecló 1974, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1996).

Historical research has indicated that the structure and abilities of bureaucracies are important in various aspects of social policymaking. Skocpol (1980) argues that limited state capacities can rule out certain lines of action, showing that because of limited abilities to plan public works programs the United States could not

turn dramatically to them to fight the Great Depression. Orloff (1993a) argues that the general public may refuse to support social spending programs if the agencies administering them are not staffed professionally and finds that US old-age policy was slowed by this. In a comparison across programs, Amenta (1998) finds that having a national social bureaucracy was an important determinant of an issue reaching the policy agenda of the social security legislation and that the purview of the agencies influenced the proposals. Nevertheless, agencies themselves were not powerful enough to get their proposals passed. Skrentny (1996, 1998) argues that despite many obstacles US employment bureaucracies developed affirmative action to fulfill agency objectives after a case-by-case approach to employment discrimination proved ineffective. State capacities of different sorts have been found to spur social policy across states of the Union (Amenta & Poulsen 1996, Cauthen & Amenta 1996, Howard 1999) as well as in cross-national studies (Hicks & Misra 1993), though this argument is often difficult to quantify because of the lack of readily available comparative data.

Scholars have also argued in a similar way that social policies make their own politics through their initial character and engender specific policy feedbacks (Skocpol 1992). These scholars thus argue that the process of social spending policy is path-dependent. The initial form a program assumes may influence its political future by determining whether groups will mobilize around it in support. In comparing the fates of different American programs, for example, Lowi (1972) finds that distributive programs engender greater interest group support than do redistributive programs, including most social spending, because the latter impose costs on specific people (see also Wilensky 1981). More generally, programs whose recipients are confined to the poor tend to gain little support (Weir et al 1988). Pierson (1994) argues further that mature programs have lock-in effects that counter bids to cut them. Dividing welfare states into Esping-Andersen's types helps to explain cross-national differences in retrenchment efforts (Pierson 2000b; see also Swank 2001).

All the same, policy feedback arguments have not always received empirical support. For instance, the corruption in Civil War pensions from the nineteenth century did not prevent tremendous social spending in the Depression era, and a lack of public employment programs then did not prevent the construction of extensive ones. Groups sometimes form in support of programs, sometimes not. Those groups that supported the adoption of mothers' pensions programs in 1910, for instance, had lost interest in them by 1930 (Cauthen & Amenta 1996). Moreover, need-based programs can have generous standards and be politically popular, as they were during the New Deal (Amenta 1998). There were competing policy legacies in housing bureaucracies and in education and employment civil rights bureaucracies when the Civil Rights Act of 1968 called for fighting housing discrimination (Bonastia 2000). We now know more about the nature of policy feedback arguments (Pierson 2000a, Mahoney 2000), and scholars making these promising claims need to provide more specific expectations linking aspects of policy to the processes that influence their fate.

## AMERICA-CENTERED THEORY AND RESEARCH

The literature on social policy in America has employed the arguments above but has often gone in its own direction and developed its own theoretical arguments. This is partly because analyses of US social policy were undertaken before most of the breakthroughs in comparative research in the last generation (review in Howard 1999), but also because cross-national arguments often do not have many implications for American social policy. The economic arguments employed in comparative research do not help much in explaining developments in US social policy, partly because with its high income and relatively low spending the United States is an anomaly and partly because developments in US social spending have not followed historically along with economic growth. The political theories invoke actors that are not present in the American scene, such as social democratic or Christian democratic political parties. The institutional arguments highlight the influence of political structures, such as a centralized polity or strong domestic bureaucracies that are more characteristic of some European states than of the American one. These arguments provide not only pessimistic expectations, but little leverage to explain the types of gains that have been made and the great variations across time and space in a century in which the American state, too, became a welfare state. The alternative American arguments typically specify forces behind policy changes that seem to stimulate social policy in the US setting, but sometimes they try to explain American exceptionalism in social policy.

### Race and US Social Policy

In recent years, many scholars have examined the role of race in the incomplete development of American social policies (Quadagno 1990, 1994, Lieberman 1998, Skocpol 1995, Davies & Derthick 1997, Brown 1999, Alston & Ferrie 1999). Lieberman (1998) argues, for instance, that race inhibited the development of a strong and centralized welfare state in America. Other scholars argue similarly and specifically that the Roosevelt administration bowed to political pressure from southern members of Congress to alter old-age insurance and unemployment compensation to exclude agricultural and domestic workers, effectively denying most African-Americans these benefits (Quadagno 1994, L Gordon 1994). Davies & Derthick (1997) maintain that there are plausible reasons other than race for the specific shape of the Social Security Act, notably that every other nation initially excluded domestic and agricultural workers from social insurance coverage and that members of Congress might have opposed public assistance legislation because poorer states sought to maximize their gains from the program, and because of animosity toward central administrators and practical difficulties in creating national standards. More generally, Skocpol (1995) cautions against analyses that point to racial division as an overarching explanation for the belated US welfare state and the stigmatization of policies directed at the poor.

Other analyses have examined the interplay between race and social policy in employment policy (Weir 1992) and the War on Poverty (Quadagno 1994). A growing body of work attempts to understand the unusual set of circumstances that resulted in the development of affirmative action policies in employment (Skrentny 1996, 1998, Pedriana & Stryker 1997, Sugrue 1998). Other work explains why various policies meant to address racial inequalities in employment, education, and housing differ markedly in their approaches and strength (Bonastia 2000). Although these arguments need to be worked out further, especially with regard to cross-national implications, this work on race and social policy offers interesting empirical challenges to previous perspectives.

## Social Movements and Interest Groups

Partly because of a lack of centralized labor unions and a social democratic political party, an American version of the power resources thesis has focused on social movements and some interest groups as serving as something like functional equivalents to social democratic parties. Piven & Cloward (1977) argue that mass turbulence by poor people's movements in times of electoral instability would produce social spending concessions. Skocpol (1992) argues more generally that widespread federated interests, whether movements or interest groups, are likely to be most successful in America's fragmented polity. The list of potentially effective groups has included among others—the unemployed (Piven & Cloward 1977), women's organizations (Skocpol et al 1993, Clemens 1997), farmers (Sanders 1999), and the aged (Amenta et al 1992, 1999).

Although there is agreement that social movements have had some influence on American social policy, the extent and nature of the effects are still contested. Demonstrating a causal chain between specific social movements and specific policy outcomes has often been difficult (see reviews in Skocpol & Amenta 1986, Giugni 1998), partly because political theories to explain social movements often are similar to those that explain social policy (Amenta et al 1992). Research in this vein has often used individual states as cases and has been able to control for a number of factors that might cause both social movements and social spending outcomes. This research often finds that the effects of the movements are mediated by political (Fording 1997) and institutional factors (Amenta et al 1992, 1994, 1999). This line of argumentation has been considered at the cross-national level (Hicks & Misra 1993), but beyond strike activity it is difficult to do so in a systematic way because of a lack of data on social movements and their activities.

## Capitalists and the Development of Social Policy

Rooted in the theoretical traditions of Marx and C. Wright Mills, other social scientists have argued for the causal role of individual capitalists, capitalist organizations, and factions of capitalists in the making of American social policy. These claims have produced vigorous contention about the role of US capitalists in policy-making, especially during the 1930s (see review in Manza 2000:301–3).

Most participants tend to agree at least that a sizeable fraction of capitalists—ultra conservatives (Domhoff 1990, 1996) or small businessmen (Quadagno 1984)—in the American setting have vigorously opposed the development of social policy in the United States, with this fraction perhaps being more powerful than similar ones in other countries (Vogel 1989), that business associations have often fought social policy (Orloff & Parker 1990, Amenta & Parikh 1991), and that businessmen tend to have more negative views of social policy than the US public as a whole (Amenta 1998). There also seems to be agreement that in important instances business organizations and representatives have been able to reduce benefits in social policy proposals (Amenta 1998, Swenson 1996) that were eventually adopted. There is greater disagreement on whether businessmen have generally formulated or devised the character of social policy breakthroughs when they happen in the US setting and whether some groups of far-sighted businessmen generally provide or did provide key support for social policy breakthroughs.

Sometimes, however, the arguments degenerate into unifying debates about whether state officials are always autonomous, whether businessmen always dominate in (American) politics or who “really” influenced whom in some specific instance. Those who argue that businessmen decisively influenced the content of US social insurance proposals need to contend with the fact that by the 1930s, when the US adopted two social insurance programs, there was already great cross-national experience with and knowledge of these programs. More important, scholars who argue that businessmen have a stimulant role in public policy need to devise more systematic explanations for variations in public policy across time and place and research designs to appraise these arguments. One option might be to make explanatory links between variations in the way that businesses are organized, in the structure of business political organizations, or in the lines of political action taken by them to specific policy outcomes. Vogel (1989), for instance, maps out historically when business influence was at its strongest or weakest across recent American history, and argues that the state of the economy helps to account for these differences. Comparative work addressing the political action of capitalists along the lines of that done for workers (Swenson *nd*) seems promising and likely to alter the standard line from the social democratic model that capitalists uniformly oppose social policy (cf. Huber & Stephens 2001). Berkowitz & McQuaid’s (1992 [1984]) argument that welfare capitalists were influential because the models that they developed in the private sector filled a void created by America’s underdeveloped bureaucracy might be developed cross-nationally and over time. The reciprocal influence of the private and public social policy (Dobbin 1992, Shalev 1996) is also worth studying further. It seems possible that the presence of private policies influences the political predispositions of different groups of capitalists.

## The Role of Public Opinion

A more recent line of thinking employed to explain American social policy suggests that organized interests do not directly matter in democracies. Burstein (1998)

argues that public opinion instead mainly determines social policy outcomes, particularly when the public's level of concern is high; by ignoring public opinion scholars may overestimate the impact of parties, interest groups, and movements (Burstein & Eaton 2000; see also Page & Shapiro 1983). Burstein's (1985) study of equal employment opportunity legislation finds that congressional support for EEO legislation was a function of public opinion. In a comparison of the creation of the American Medicare system and the British National Health Service, Jacobs (1993) finds that the public socially constructs the conditions for public policies and creates the conditions for politicians to overcome interest group competition. Stimson et al (1995) find that policy responsiveness varies across branches of the US government but that government generally responds to public opinion through rational anticipation of elections and compositional change due to electoral outcomes (see also Erikson et al 1993). This research suggests that if the public is decisive about a specific issue that is narrowly understood, politicians seem highly likely to heed these views.

Other studies suggest that public opinion formation is a complex process and the process by which politicians gain and understand that information is also complex, with uncertain effects on policy. Opinion and policies are often coupled loosely, as numerous policies can be compatible with a particular opinion, and there is often a disjuncture between citizens' specific policy preferences and more general, abstract values (Weir 1992). Public opinion is often vaguely formed on many issues and can change rapidly. Work on policies involving affirmative action has shown that public opinion can shift substantially according to the wording of questions (see Schuman et al 1997; see also Kahneman et al 1982). What is more, politicians can lead public opinion and often interpret public opinion differently and systematically along party or ideological lines (Grogan 1994). Politicians also have various ways of concealing their actions to avoid electoral fallout from public opinion (Pierson 1994). It may be sensible for politicians in many instances to vote with their financial backers rather than with public opinion. One study finds that public opinion is consistent with welfare policy only half the time (Monroe 1998). Also, it is not clear that US politicians had the means to ascertain public opinion in the formative years of social policy in the 1930s or paid much attention to it when they did (Amenta et al 1994). To achieve its promise this line of thinking needs to address more fully the connections between the actions of organized groups, political leaders, public opinion, and policy-making.

### Patronage-Oriented Political Parties

Another candidate to explain the relative underdevelopment of American social policy is the dominance of patronage-oriented political parties: hierarchical organizations that seek to win elections and maintain their organizations through individualized benefits to party workers and other supporters (see Mayhew 1986:19–20, Banfield & Wilson 1963, Shefter 1994, Katznelson 1981). The leaders of such patronage-oriented parties are concerned with the survival of the organization,

which depends in turn on contesting and winning elections, using the spoils of office to reward party workers and contributors. Mayhew (1986:292–94) claims that patronage-oriented parties avoid programmatic social policy because they find professional bureaucracies threatening: the kind of person attracted to patronage parties is unlikely to want to build programs; pro-spending groups like the labor movement cannot easily exercise influence in them; and these parties promote issue-less politics and a political culture of pessimism about government. Leaders of patronage-oriented parties have other important motives to oppose modern social spending programs (Amenta 1998: ch. 1). Social spending programs rarely provide the often remunerative opportunities provided by soliciting contracts for public business. Automatic social spending, moreover, potentially drains resources from programs that might be deployed in an individualistic way and implies higher taxes, reducing the ability of politicians to lower taxes in a selective way for contributors. Finally, patronage-oriented political parties have reason to discourage social movements seeking to promote modern social spending policies. Shefter (1994) has argued that because democratic practices preceded state bureaucracies in America, political parties, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, oriented themselves toward patronage.

This line of argument has been borne out in some American research. In a study of the formative decades of US taxation policy at the state level, Mayhew (1986) finds that a measure of “traditional party organization” significantly lowers taxation efforts. Amenta & Poulsen (1996) find similarly that the measure reduces the generosity of means-tested assistance programs under the Social Security Act. Amenta & Halfmann (2000) find that patronage-oriented parties provided more support for social programs characterized by greater discretion in the provision of benefits. Although the arguments refer to long-standing aspects of political parties and probably cannot account for changes over time, these arguments seem applicable in broadly comparative research. Shefter (1994) argues that the US political party system resembled Italy’s and stood in contrast to the programmatic parties of Germany, with the British party system somewhere in between. It seems worth attempting to assess this argument systematically outside the US context.

## Democratic Polities and Practices

Another line of explanation derived from American research concerns the nature and the degree to which a polity is democratized. Based on the early arguments of Key (1949), who studied the polities of the US South, it has been argued that a central obstacle to social spending policy is an underdemocratized polity—in which political leaders are chosen by way of elections, but in which there are great restrictions on political participation, political assembly and discussion, voting, and choices among leadership groups (Dahl 1971). In an underdemocratized political system, there is little electoral reason for politicians to promote policies to aid the less well off, according to the argument, and politicians will do more to seek the support of those in privileged economic positions—whose preferences generally stand opposed to social spending (Amenta 1998: ch. 1). Also, pro-spending mass

movements have less reason and ability to organize themselves in an underdemocratized polity and are more likely to be repressed.

Most of the evidence for this argument has concerned the timing of adoption of policies and the formative years of policy-making. Flora & Alber (1981), for instance, find that the extension of the suffrage encouraged program adoptions between 1880 and 1920 in European parliamentary democracies, and Schneider (1982) finds that per capita votes in national elections encouraged earlier adoptions of all types of programs in 18 Western nations between 1919 and 1975. Amenta & Poulsen (1996) find that a measure tapping the ability to vote strongly influenced the initial construction of social programs at the US state level in the 1930s, and thus it likely had a profound effect on their development in the postwar period. Amenta & Halfmann (2000) find that a similar measure had a strong impact on the voting records of senators on the issue of generosity of wages for work programs in the same era.

This argument stands as a strong candidate for explaining American exceptionalism in social policy. It helps to explain American spending in the late nineteenth century, when the United States was a leader in democratic practices, and American backwardness in the twentieth century, two thirds of which was characterized by restricted voting rights in a substantial part of the polity (Kousser 1974, Piven & Cloward 1989). It also does well in explaining some long-standing differences across states in social policy. The argument is highly structural, however, and the evidence is mixed regarding whether the less blatant obstructions to voting in the past 30 years have had as great an impact on the expansion and retrenchment of social policy (see Skocpol & Amenta 1986, Huber et al 1993).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: PROMISING LINES OF THINKING AND RESEARCH

Comparative and historical scholars have made great strides in studying the causes of US social policy, but there are many ways in which this thinking and research might be advanced, and we start by discussing conceptualizations of social policy. Although regime types are intriguing ways of conceptualizing social policy, they are not as flexible and useful as previous understandings. For instance, it is difficult to address the question of why the United States developed a liberal welfare state regime, because the model implies that it has always been liberal. It would be useful in historical research for scholars to devise conceptual categories falling somewhere between policy regimes and individual programs, perhaps based on concepts such as decommodification, commodification, and autonomy.

It may be useful to think of states holistically in different ways, however. Scholars studying the state have focused almost exclusively on social policy. It seems to be an assumption that as social policy predominates in state's budgets and administration that the punishing and disciplining aspects of states will diminish. This is not necessarily true, however. Recent US experience has indicated that increased social spending has gone along, not only with reduced military spending, but also

with increased efforts toward imprisonment. State conceptualizations and theories may need to address the character of entire states, not merely focusing on the aspects of the state that provide services and income protection from risks, while treating the rest as residual.

Divergences from the standard conception of social policy, especially those that address programs as social policy outside the traditional mode, are highly flexible, but offer challenges as well as opportunities. For instance, the point is well taken that scholars of social policy need to take into account tax expenditures for social purposes (Steinmo 1993, Howard 1997). It is not clear, however, how to classify some tax expenditures, many of which are probably not redistributive. Similarly, in considering home ownership policy as an alternative form of income maintenance and possibly economic redistribution (Castles 1998b, Conley 2000), scholars need to separate out what is due explicitly to state policy. From here, it should be possible to indicate how much these policies matter as compared to the standard transfer programs and services on issues such as the reduction of poverty. Perhaps most of all, the feminist conceptualizations of social policy have opened up many new opportunities for research and similar challenges. There is great benefit in probing policy outside the standard understanding of it, and these new understandings may help to deepen the concept. But in each case the relationship between these additional policies and social policy previously understood needs to be thought through and made clear.

On the theoretical side, the most promising lines of argumentation are those that are portable, with empirical implications for different settings. Scholars devising arguments to explain variation across nations in social policy would do well to think through the implications for variations in policy over time in the United States or across states of the Union. Similarly, those who have developed explanations from American policies alone should think through and elaborate implications cross-nationally or in other time periods. That said, scholars need to go beyond theoretical claims along the lines that one or another factor or process matters in every instance or that a previously unidentified feature of the American polity explains it all. We need neither the grand explanations of social policy of the sort that economic modernization theory provided, nor additional one-of-a-kind interpretations of American exceptionalism.

Although the theoretical perspectives have been arrayed above as if scholars were proponents of one or another theory alone, some of the more promising theorizing combines lines of argumentation, especially regarding institutional situations and the political actors that work within them (Skocpol 1992, Huber et al 1993, Hicks & Misra 1993, Amenta 1998). Comparative and historical work suggests more generally that some explanatory claims may be appropriate for different phases of welfare state development. Partisanship may have its greatest effect in the phases of adoption and consolidation; policy feedback effects, in the phases of expansion and retrenchment, and more systemic influences of the state likely have mediating effects all the way through. Path-dependent lines of argumentation also promise to advance these varieties of middle-range theorizing.

A number of research strategies seem promising for the future for the comparative and historical study of US social policy. Examining policy differences across the states of the Union for a number of policies related to the wider conceptualizations of social policy seem well worthwhile, especially to assess long-standing and new theoretical arguments. Relatively untapped sources of information, such as voting for social policy, also would be helpful in appraising arguments. Although there have been many good studies of individual programs, comparisons among social programs developed around the same time will help to hold relatively constant political situations, but can address why programs turned out differently than others. Also, studies would do well to go further and take full advantage of the possibilities of historical study by comparing the development of successful programs with ones that failed. These studies help to get around the biases of the tendency in the literature to study successful programs only. In each case historical scholars working mainly on the United States would do well to situate their claims in a cross-national perspective. This would go far in illuminating what is exceptional in US policies and what is not. And whenever possible scholars should appraise their claims against evidence in similar polities, whether countries or other states, as the best small-N studies do.

American social policy has come a long way in the last century, and the study of it has made great strides in the last generation. By exploiting the newer conceptualizations of social policy, extending theoretical arguments in ways that address US and cross-national developments, and employing imaginative and multifaceted research strategies, scholars can go further in an area that is likely to draw more and more attention.

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