Making the Most of a Case Study: Theories of the Welfare State and the American Experience

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ABSTRACT

Although the reputation of case studies has recently been on the rise in social science, they face a number of analytical obstacles. The questions asked in case studies are often thought to have little value for advancing theory. Moreover, case-based explanations are often considered suspect. The "identification" problem means that alternatives cannot be fully appraised. Finally, few believe that the findings of case studies have theoretical implications that go beyond the case. This paper suggests five ways to minimize the problems of case studies through comparative strategies tied to theory: (1) to use theoretical ideal types and predictions to select and frame a problem for explanation; (2) to divide the outcome to be explained into parts that can be compared; (3) to map the historical trajectories of outcomes in order to appraise theoretical expectations in detail; (4) to explore "most similar system" comparisons, cases alike in many ways, but different in the outcome to be explained; (5) to amass relatively large-N data sets across subunits of the case. The paper explores these strategies through theories of public spending and the American experience of public social provision.

IN SOCIAL SCIENCE, the standing of the case study has grown. In the past, the case study was seen as playing a limited role. As Arend Lijphart (1971) saw it, at the one end of the scientific endeavor, case studies could yield hypotheses. At the other end, they could restrain theories that had generalized too far; if the case confounded theoretical expectations, the theory required modification. Somewhere in the middle, a case might support a theory, adding a minor empirical success to its credit. Recently, Charles Ragin (1987) has argued that researchers choose variable-oriented strategies or case-based ones. Variable-oriented strategies test theories, probing relationships between variables. Case-based ones compare carefully selected cases and focus on historical specificity and complexity. They have the advantages of treating cases as wholes and dealing with conjunctural causation. In this view, even single-case analyses can be implicitly comparative. The implication that the methodologies were balanced in advantages and disadvantages was a step up in status for case studies.

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A Case Study: the welfare state and the American experience

All the same, this does not diminish the drawbacks of studying one case. Often it is difficult to persuade others that the case poses interesting theoretical problems. When this hindrance is overcome, blocking the way is the problem of "identification." Analyzing one case or a few cases means an inability to treat alternatives fairly. The case researcher must satisfy the academic audience that an explanation is more than a plausible hypothesis and that alternatives are unfounded; this problem is magnified if one's case is well known. For historical social scientists, it gets worse when the research question strays into the realm of the counter-factual. Moreover, if an explanation is accepted, a case researcher may have difficulty convincing the professionally skeptical that the results have implications for other cases or even for the same case in other periods. Those who see unique benefits in the case study draw the line here: individual cases do not admit of enough variation to warrant generalizations to other countries (Smelser 1976). One cannot generalize from a case study (Campbell and Stanley 1966).

The typical responses to this predicament tend to inhibit dialogue among social scientists. To dodge such problems, the case researcher can sometimes rally rhetorical or narrative skill. Failing that, the case researcher often resorts to declarations of a superior knowledge. After all, the investigator has undoubtedly performed fieldwork or inspected documents or analyzed research, etc., that critics have not. Yet this is the academic equivalent of leaning back and folding one's arms across one's chest. If such a stance can silence critics, it often does not convince them. At best, the study may be praised as a source of insights. Or the "finding" of the work may be cited, but otherwise ignored. At bottom, the study may be mined as raw data.

To avoid this standoff, studies of one case can combine case- and variable-oriented strategies in ways that respect the integrity of the case and examine relationships between variables. To combine these strategies requires a thorough engagement with theoretical perspectives, which can guide research to overcome the problems of case studies. Specifically, I want to examine and advocate five ways to strengthen historical case studies. I take examples from studies, mainly collaborations, of American public spending policies on which I have worked (Amenta, Clemens, Olsen, Parikh, and Skocpol 1987; Amenta and Skocpol 1988; Amenta and Carruthers 1988; Amenta and Skocpol 1989; Amenta 1989). The five strategies, comparative in the widest sense of the term, are not exhaustive and are not altogether novel (see Key 1949). Yet using them can aid a case study to sharpen and advance theories, as well as to evaluate them in ways that others might find compelling.

The first is to use ideal types and theories, in this case theories of public social provision, to select and frame a problem for explanation. These comparisons of theoretical ideal types and predictions with the historical trajectory of the case may suggest paradoxes. For the case may veer greatly from the collective experience of others or may confound the predictions of theories. Typically the problems to be explained (here, legislative developments in public social spending) are not easily converted into quantities. Worse, in

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historical studies questions are sometimes counter-factual (why no “welfare state” in America?). The second way to strengthen the case study is to break up the outcome into parts that can be compared (the fate of old-age insurance versus unemployment insurance). It is analytically useful if there is some divergence among these outcomes. A third way to manipulate case materials is to break them into smaller bits, by detailing the historical trajectory of the outcome (the ups and downs of American public social provision during the Great Depression and Second World War). Alternatively, one can analyze outcomes in small number of carefully chosen sub-units (e.g., states of the Union). Once these analytic maps are drawn, one can use them to appraise theories in detail, comparing the trajectories of the outcomes with theoretical expectations, rejecting or modifying them. The fourth way is to explore “most similar system” comparisons, cases similar in a number of potentially explanatory ways, but different in the outcome to be explained (the trajectory of public spending in Great Britain during the depression and war). Finally, one can amass large-N data sets across sub-units (this time, all U.S. states) to attempt to cross-examine findings from the larger enterprise and to give a more extensive hearing to alternatives. The results of the historical project promote the search for indicators that fit their conceptual referents. In minimizing the problems of case-based research, one can lessen the drawbacks of quantitative work.

Making the most of a case study means undertaking the tasks that area specialists have always done, but doing them in ways to confront and advance theory—and more so than merely generating hypotheses or providing crude tests. What follows is a tale of a sociologist who lost himself in the history of his own country, the United States, but who tried to resist going native. If social science was frequently out of sight, lost in a tangle of historical detail, it was never out of mind. I do not mean to claim success for the venture, or even to suggest that it is completed. I also do not want to imply that I was alone. But to save space, I will make it seem more direct than the confused odyssey it has been. The purpose is to explore ways to prevent case studies from being praised and simultaneously ignored.

Using Ideal Types and Theories To Expose the Distinctive and Paradoxical

American Public Spending Policies in History. When one hears of U.S. public spending policies, the word “exceptionalism” often follows. And “exceptionalism” is often euphemism, for what is meant is “weak” or “underdeveloped.” Most believe that American policies were slow in getting started, leading to low levels of spending that persist to this day. Indeed, America has an incomplete system of social insurance, without health insurance or family allowances. U.S. social spending as a percentage of income (or spending “effort,” as it is known in the literature) is low relative to other rich countries. At the beginning of the 1980s, American social spending (OECD 1985, p. 21) and taxation receipts (OECD 1981, p. 11) ranked 14th
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of the 18 long-standing OECD countries. The standard analytical puzzle is to
explain what accounts for this enduring pattern.
Yet by contrasting the American case over time with the experience of
European industrial democracies, other things stand out: notably the erratic
pattern in the history of American public policies. According to Peter Flora
and Jens Alber’s (1981) influential model based on Western Europe, the social
insurance policies advanced haltingly, but in a series of progressive phases.
From the late 19th century through the early 20th century there was a period
of experimentation, as different countries tested different schemes. The next
phase, occurring between the wars, saw the consolidation of the attempts of
the previous period. Soon after the Second World War most countries completed
a system of social insurance, enacting programs against four main types of
risk. In the postwar period, there was steady growth in coverage and expendi-
tures. The model includes only social insurance, but the history of U.S.
public social spending departs dramatically from it.
The history of American public policies exhibited an uneven pattern that
can be divided into four somewhat different periods. Two of these were notable
because of American leadership in public spending. In the late 19th-century,
the American policies included a primitive old-age pensions system and public
employment program. Civil War veterans’ benefits served the function of
fighting old-age poverty, and these pensions surpassed in generosity and
coverage the modern European public old-age spending programs designed for
that purpose (Skocpol, Sutton, Orloff, Amenta, and Carruthers 1987). U.S.
governmental bureaucracies were run as if large public employment programs.
These policies, however, were seen by middle-class American reformers as cor-
rupion and as obstacles to placing policies on a modern basis, as defined by
European innovations. In the second phase, running from 1900 to 1930, many
of these initial policies were undermined, but not replaced with modern public
spending policies, as the United States fell behind other rich nations. The
period from 1930 through 1950, however, witnessed the heroic period of
American public spending, as America was once again a leader. America fell
behind again in the amply documented postwar period.
One period stood out in bold relief: the New Deal and World War II
period. To researchers used to seeing the United States at the bottom of OECD
public-expenditure charts, it may come as a shock that the various programs of
the New Deal put America at the head of nations. Yet in terms of overall
social spending “efforts” this was the case, as is shown in Table 1. There the
major Western countries are compared in the period before the outbreak of the
Second World War. In 1938, the United States was devoting more than six
percent of its GNP and almost 30 percent of its government spending to social
insurance and assistance. Both of these percentages compared favorably to
those of other rich nations; notably, the share of the U.S. economic product
devoted to social spending was greater than that of Germany and Sweden, two
countries which also broke with fiscal orthodoxy in the depression. The
American effort was also greater than that of the United Kingdom, which
began the depression with the world's most elaborated system of social spending. National employment policies accounted for the bulk of America's social spending. Yet America soon fell behind other rich democracies.

Table 1

"Social Security" Efforts, Selected Countries, 1938

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of GDP</th>
<th>Percentage of Government Spending</th>
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<tr>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>GERMANY</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>18.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td>5.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRANCE*</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>11.9</td>
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<td>SWEDEN</td>
<td>3.15</td>
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<td>NETHERLANDS*</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>10.2</td>
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<td>ITALY*</td>
<td>1.80</td>
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Note.—"Social Security" includes fiscal efforts expended on social insurance and social assistance programs. The figures for Germany are for 1935. The figures for the United States are for fiscal year 1939 and are divided by the gross national product for that year.

* Figures are based on central government expenditures for social security and public health policies.

The long overview of history revealed something else important about the American case: that national government control over public spending policies has mattered greatly. For national control had been bound up with the issues of generosity and spending effort—and thus with American "exceptionalism" in public spending. Although America nowadays ranks low among industrialized nations in spending, when one considers national programs the results are different. The key U.S. national spending program is for the aged, and American spending for "pensions" ranks in the middle of OECD group (OECD 1984). The lack of disadvantage in American old-age pensions is also indicated by the "replacement rate," the degree to which public spending replaces before-retirement income. On this score, the United States ranks higher than the United Kingdom and Canada among others (Myles 1988). Moreover, in the two eras when America was a social spending leader it was because of national policies. In the late-19th century, America was a leader in social spending efforts, with the Civil War disability pension system protecting a large segment of the public against the risk of losing income from age and its infirmities. During the depression, when America regained spending leadership, the response was centered on a nationally controlled public employment program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA).
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Kohl, Kraus, Pfenning, 391, 402, 405, 408, 412, 2e Census 1975, pp. 224, 163.

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**U.S. Social Spending at the End of the 1940s**

If one follows theories of the development of public spending policies, one would expect the two decades spanning from 1930 to 1950 to have generated a nationally controlled and completed set of American social spending policies. To juxtapose this failure with the literature on the development of "welfare states" is to uncover a number of theoretical paradoxes. This can be seen when the American experience in depression and war is compared with the expectations of three major perspectives. One is concerned with economic and geopolitical crises, a second with partisan politics and the strength of labor movements, and a third with the state.

One reason to expect greater achievements than were realized is that this period witnessed two world crises. Many claim that the Great Depression spurred American policies for economic security (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1977). Along with Germany among large industrial nations, the United States suffered the greatest from the Great Depression (Bernstein 1987), with unemployment reaching an unprecedented one quarter of the labor force by 1933. With their counterparts in Germany and Sweden, American policy-makers broke with economic orthodoxy and experimented with Keynesian techniques (Gourevitch 1986). Although the U.S. experiment meant increased social spending, it also meant rejecting the policies of its past. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, he quickly cut pensions for veterans with non-service-related disabilities. The administration was concerned with employment, but not at the expense of upgrading the civil service. New Deal policies instead centered on work and relief programs for all Americans bearing the social costs of capitalist crisis. The New Deal not only pushed U.S. public social provision into the modern world—but did so down a social-democratic path.

Many thought that the war would give the last two Roosevelt administrations the opportunity to finish what the first two started. This war ended in what soon became known as the welfare state in America's ally, Great Britain. As noted, Flora and Alber (1971) call the immediate postwar period the "completion" phase of the welfare state; by this time nearly all Western European countries had adopted the four major social insurance programs. The Second World War required the greatest mobilization of the American citizenry since the Civil War. Following Richard Titmuss's (1958) well known hypothesis—total war as stimulant of social policy—one might have expected U.S. national spending policies to follow.

What is more, U.S. domestic politics seemed to favor the creation of a complete, national set of social spending policies. The government was dominated by a president, Roosevelt, who was elected four consecutive times and who appealed to the electorate with an Economic Bill of Rights. A Democratic party that had encouraged and allied with the labor movement organized every Congress but one in the two decades. In comparative research on the postwar period, a prolonged period of excluding the political right from the government is expected to greatly increase public spending (Castles 1982).
And organized labor, whose strength is often considered key to policy innovations (see Shalev 1983), came into its own in America. U.S. labor made great advances both during the New Deal years of the depression and the war, growing from 6.8 percent of the labor force in 1930 to 23.6 percent in 1946 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, p. 178).

Finally, the period marked the building of the American state, and as Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol (1984) have argued, the state can strongly influence public spending. The autonomy of the state, its ability to plan lines of action without regard to the desires of societal actors, depends on loyal civil-service employees and on fiscal strength, the extent and variety of taxes (Skocpol 1985). Federal government employees rose from 379,559 in 1929 to 2,110,001 in 1947. National government expenditures jumped from 2.3 percent of the gross national product (GNP) in 1929 to 17.0 in 1946 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, p. 1102; U.S. Council of Economic Advisors 1980, pp. 203, 288), a permanent change, signifying the fiscal eclipse of state and local governments. When discussing the autonomy of the state in liberal democracies, researchers focus on administrators of social spending programs (e.g., Heclo 1974). The powers of this new American state expanded in ways conducive to the extension of social spending. In 1939, the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB) was restructured and placed into the Executive Office of the president. The Social Security Board, created in 1935, was also planning policy innovations by the late 1930s. The national public employment and works programs were incorporated into the Federal Works Agency.

The severity of depression and war, the rule of a left-center political party and the exclusion of the right, the strength of organized labor, the growth in state capacities—all of these pointed toward national fiscal and administrative control of American social spending policies. So why did U.S. public spending not become nationalized and comprehensive? To rephrase Werner Sombart’s question: Why was there no “welfare state” in the United States? A question with intrinsic interest posed a theoretical paradox.

The use of ideal types and previous theories helped to locate pivotal periods in American history and suggested paradoxes. The American historical trajectory of public spending policies diverged from the ideal type of public policies in advanced capitalist democracies, because America jumped ahead and then fell behind others—twice. Historically, the periods of leadership were bound up with national spending programs. I focused on the second zigzag, mainly because of the opportunity it presented for American policies to lead others in the postwar world, a possibility that failed. Moreover, the New Deal and war periods defied expectations based on theories of public spending. If theories of economic crises, political party strength or the strength of labor, and the state were to be explain policy development, they would require at least some modification. Juxtaposing previous research and theories clarifies what is distinctive about a case and what begs explanation.
Exercising Questions Not Easily Converted Into Quantities

Although a few numbers could show the importance of New Deal period, to address the question "why no welfare state?" it was not enough to merely inspect overall spending. What required explanation were developments in the policies implied by the term "welfare state." Specifically, it seemed crucial to understand the reasons behind national spending policies, because these were the ones that the historical record suggested were behind the American break-throughs of the late 19th century and the New Deal. This presented problems, because analyzing the development of policies is more complicated than analyzing ups and downs in expenditures for them.

Each spending program involves at least three dimensions of state activity (Rose 1984). Legislation must be enacted to make commitments to spend. Bureaucracies and government employees must be set in place to administer the legislation. There must be money appropriated for spending programs. Most studies are concerned solely with the last issue. The amount of spending, either per person, or, more typically, as a percentage of national income, is often used to determine a nation's "social security effort" or "output" (Wilensky 1975). Theories are then invoked to explain relative spending. Very frequently, however, these "efforts" are a result of external economic events or demographic changes having little to do with the intent of policies. Demographic or economic changes increase or decrease the size of the group eligible for benefits, and spending automatically follows. Yet social spending policies remain the same. I placed the emphasis on the key legislation creating and expanding social spending programs and taxation schedules and their bureaucratic infrastructure. It is during these bursts of legislation that long-term commitments are made to categories of people benefiting from spending programs. To be sure, policies and programs involve all three components—legislation, bureaucracy, and funding. Yet most programs become well grounded in this sense within a few years of the enactment of the initial legislation specifying beneficiaries of programs and subjects of taxation. What causes initial legislative enactments seemed a question with a higher political and analytical priority.

And so if the term welfare state were stretched to mean a national commitment to a comprehensive and coherent set of policies to address the major risks of advanced capitalist societies, the United States did not achieve one after the war. For by the end of the immediate postwar period few nationalizing social spending programs of any type were in place in America. This was the case in both programmatic and fiscal terms. In the power-sharing, or "federal," social spending programs of the Social Security Act, the states and localities were in charge of crucial decisions concerning levels of benefits, eligibility, and administration. These power-sharing programs included the social insurance program unemployment compensation and the means-tested programs old-age pensions, medical services, and aid to dependent children. There were also the dramatic fiscal achievements of the national government.
during the depression and the even more dramatic ones during the war. Yet in contrast to the predictions of theories of the influence of crisis (e.g., Peacock and Wiseman 1961), states and localities still had a large say in the make-up of social policies.

The policy framework had other weaknesses. The failure of bids to construct national health and sickness insurance was fundamental. Perhaps as important was the destruction of national public employment programs. The American polity had been concerned throughout its history with employment policies, and the Roosevelt administration fought the depression mainly through the direct employment of the WPA and related programs. Yet employment programs, the strongest national policy response to the depression, did not survive the war. Moreover, what is often portrayed as the greatest policy success of the depression also required closer scrutiny. National old-age insurance was begun in 1935, and it is often and misleadingly portrayed as firmly established from that date (e.g., Lubove 1968). But the early history of this program was checkered, and it became secure only in 1950. That year the old-age and survivors’ insurance program was made nearly universal, and in the next year the number of the program’s beneficiaries overtook the number of beneficiaries of state-level old-age pensions, a program with strong public support (Altmyer 1966). The question was narrowed: Why did the United States leave the period with a social spending system of indifferent authority and incoherent structure, without programmatic or fiscal centralization?

These questions posed difficulties, because the focus was legislative developments in specific policies, rather than overall spending. But studying policies did not rule out other analytical opportunities. For one could compare the developmental trajectories of different social spending programs during the period. At the crudest level, it added more cases. More than that, the comparisons helped to retrieve the question from the realm of the counter-factual. The question could be phrased: why did some programs, such as old-age spending and national employment, become nationalized at different times, while others did not? The juxtapositions between programs could afford purchase for an explanation of why some programs became nationalized and others did not. The historical patterns of old-age insurance and public employment—national programs—could be compared to patterns in power-sharing programs, such as unemployment compensation and aid to dependent children. This comparison could help address the larger question of why public social provision did not become nationalized overall.

**Focusing On Detailed Over-Time Comparisons For Explanatory Purposes**

To answer questions about policy developments, one strategy was more crucial than others: analyzing the developments within the United States across time. This strategy could indicate the most favorable conditions for gains in national social policies and taxation. As noted, the American social spending policies were well developed during the late 19th century and the
amatic ones during the war. Yet the influence of crisis (e.g., Peacock had a large say in the make-up of social programs) was fundamental. Perhaps as much as the social discipline programs. The early history of employment programs during the Great Depression largely reflects the depression mainly by PA and related programs. Yet the social discipline response to the depression is often portrayed as the greatest public scrutiny. National old-age security and unemployment programs (see 1968). But the early history of unemployment is secure only in 1950. That year the program was nearly universal, and in the 1960s, programs with strong public support narrowed. Why did the United States, a system of indifferent authority, become nationalized or fiscal centralized? Because the focus was legislative in overall spending. But studying opportunities. For one, could compare social spending programs during the Great Depression. More than that, however, the realm of the counter-factual. Some programs, such as old-age security, were nationalized at different times, but few programs could afford programs that became nationalized and of old-age insurance and public social services compared to patterns in policy-making and aid to dependents as the larger question of why public ed overall.

**Comparisons For Explanatory Purposes**

Dependents, one strategy was more appealing within the United States the most favorable conditions for some. As noted, the American social insurance system during the late 19th century and the 1930s. At different times during the two decades at hand, social spending and taxation policies had better political chances.

This called for a detailed time-line of policy-making events—indicating when national policies were enacted and made institutional, as well as power-sharing ones. Centralized and comprehensive policies were not impossible in the American setting during the two decades of depression and war. In two policy areas, old-age insurance and public employment, nationalized reforms were enacted, and, later, so was a nationalizing change in the structure of the income tax. Also, if these policies were successfully amended, this was important to note as well. On the negative analytical side, some policies were dismantled. The critical analytical tasks centered on determining the conditions under which social spending and taxation policies came into existence or went out of existence, with an additional focus on the characteristics of these policies, especially whether they were comprehensive and national in character. This was similar to explaining the timing of adoption and contents of unemployment compensation legislation across five American states (Amenta et al. 1987).

This analytical history was based mainly on national social spending and taxation proposals and policies, looking at the two decades from the vantage point of national New Deal reformers (Amenta 1989, chap. 2). Although I divided the decade more or less in accordance with most historical accounts of the New Deal—first, second, late New Deals, war period, etc.—my account differed from conventional histories of reform in how the periods were characterized. The alternate scheme was concerned with the major spending and taxing policies rather than reform in a general sense, or the overall political successes of the Roosevelt administration, as they appeared to contemporaries. Here reform was defined strictly as nationalizing advances in spending and taxation policies. When the politics and policies of the Roosevelt administration were examined from this angle, the second New Deal and the immediate postwar period were not the only interesting phases and possibly not the most momentous ones. This analytical history not only served purposes of description, but was the first step in determining why policy innovations appeared when they did and why they took the forms that they did.

Briefly, the pattern was this: the first period, the recovery years, ran from 1930 to 1935, including the late Hoover years and so-called first New Deal. These years were dominated by short-lived experiments, as they are often characterized, but some spending policies from this period had long-term effects. The second period, the second New Deal, usually considered the breakthrough period, ran from 1935 to 1937. But this period was not as reform-minded, with respect to national taxation and spending policies, as it is often portrayed. During the recovery years and the second New Deal, the connection between taxation and social spending policy was close. The third period, the late New Deal, is typically viewed as a period of stalemate between the president and Congress. As far as taxing and spending were concerned, the stalemate story, however, is only half right: social policy gains were possible,
but taxation increases became difficult for the administration to achieve, and soon they were undesirable. Moreover, it was only during the late New Deal that state planning for permanent nationalizing reforms began. It was more useful to split the war period in two. The fourth period, from 1940 through 1942, encompassed the early war years and the income taxation breakthroughs of the national state. At this time developments reversed themselves; taxation policy was augmented, proposed social spending policy innovations were put on hold. The fifth period, from the end of 1942 through 1944, might be called the middle war years. This period warranted specific attention because it saw the rollback of the New Deal policy agenda, with the demise of public employment programs and the National Resources Planning Board. The final period included the immediate postwar years until 1950. It resulted in some spending gains—the amendments of 1950—but also in the crystallization of an uneven system of social spending.

This time-line provided the first opportunity to appraise theories. Examining theoretical expectations, perspective by perspective, in light of historical evidence is similar to examining bivariate statistical relationships. One can ascertain whether the evidence is consistent with the expectations of perspectives. Preliminary and inexact though this procedure is, it has one advantage over quantitative time-series research: it allows one to explore the mechanisms implicated in theories. The detail required to investigate such workings is rarely available in large data sets. By using this techniques it was possible to cast doubt on theoretical contenders as a sources of nationalizing change in public spending. For instance, the trajectory of labor unionization and protest did not correspond closely with the developmental trajectories of public spending policies—labor gained in war as well as in depression.

Other explanations had partial support that commanded further examination. Using a technique resembling Mill’s indirect method of differences, I developed a middle-range model. It incorporated theoretical elements prominent in cross-national studies of social policies—state political institutions, political party systems, and economic and geopolitical crises—to explain the rhythms in and characteristics of social spending programs. This model centered on the interactions between developments in the state and in political parties. In its briefest form, it comes down to this: a combination of national state planning capacities in social policy issue areas and a left-center political coalition is necessary to bring nationalized social spending policies; together they are sufficient. These conditions came together only in two policy areas. The structure of state institutions and political parties influence the likelihood of these favorable conjunctures. Yet relatively inauspicious structural conditions do not prevent these conjunctures. Crises play a less prominent role. In the short run, crises help to set the policy agenda. Depending on the nature of the crisis, some risks jump to higher levels of priority, while others become less prominent. Crises also discredit and weaken political coalitions and state institutions that suffer them and typically take the blame for them.
The statist aspect of the explanation relied mainly on the structure and the staffing of state institutions. Loyal officials, who do not see themselves as acting for an economic or political class, are necessary. Although a strong executive helps to promote modern social spending policies, the overall power of the state is too general a way to deal with the problem. It requires a focus on the state's planning and implementation capacities in specific policy spending policies. State institutions with these planning capacities can speed designing of and planning for spending programs, and they often work for their passage. But more important, the specific type of planning and implementation capacities and how they are distributed across state institutions influence the type and character of programs that come into existence. Previous state policy capacities explained which types of policies were created in different policy areas. Comparing spending policies, one can show that previous state capacities determined what direction improvements would take. The most basic evidence for this concerned the spread of social policy capacities across the areas of government. Such competence was relatively well developed at the sub-national level of government at the beginning of the 1930s. In contrast, comprehensive planning at the national level did not begin in earnest until the late 1930s.

The second half of the explanation concerned the influence of political party coalitions in the passing of spending policies. In this part of the model, a widening of the so-called social democratic model, a left-center political coalition passes social spending plans that generally do not originate with it. This claim resonates with the quantitative finding that left-wing parties have increased postwar spending. Yet the American case is complex, as far as spending political coalitions are concerned. There were structural impediments to coalition formation. American parties do not have the discipline of parliamentary parties and are not as distinctive on class ideologies as parties in Europe. It was possible, however, to generate a left-center political coalition in America, as can be seen by unpacking the idea of party rule. There are at least three dimensions to party rule: the party's partisan orientation, whether and how long it is in power, and its cohesiveness. For an American party, a left-wing orientation was defined as an alliance between the party and an ascendant organized labor movement and other left-wing forces, a right-wing orientation an alliance between the party and organizations of capitalists, without countervailing influences. To rule meant to control the presidency and Congress. Cohesiveness was the trickiest part because the electoral fates of members of a U.S. party are not tied to their voting together. In America all three conditions hold when a labor-supported Democrat is president and when urban and labor Democrats control Congress—Democratic congressmen from urban districts or from districts with high concentrations of workers. This definition excludes rural and most southern Democrats, who tended to oppose social spending.
This majority of labor and urban Democrats forms a sort of functional equivalent to having a social-democratic party in power. This strong form of a pro-spending coalition appeared only once in the 20 years from 1930 to 1950, from after the elections of 1934 to those of 1938. But moderately strong pro-spending coalitions were put into power at other times. Less effective, but still strong coalitions were in power in 1933-34, again in 1939-40, and, in the immediate postwar period, 1949-50. By this measure, the most anti-spending coalitions were in power from 1943-44 and 1947-48.

However, the two conditions—national state planning and a left-wing political coalition—never happened simultaneously. The strongest left-wing political coalitions were in power during 1935 to 1939. Although there are implementation capacities in certain policy areas, planning capacities at the national level did not emerge until the late 1930s and comprehensive plans for social spending reform were not generated until the beginning of the war. There was a fundamental break between the two main causes.

How then did some American policies become nationalized, while most did not? Whether it was possible for policies to be nationalized depended on the whether state and local level experiments existed in specific policy areas when pro-social spending political coalitions were in power at the national level. It is worthwhile to consider the various combinations of state planning and implementation capacities and social spending policy political coalitions. Table 2 indicates six possible combinations of state capacities and political coalitions. The United States never reached the top left-hand corner of the chart, where national state capacities coincide with a strong political coalition. To trace roughly what happened from the 1930s to the 1950s, the movement was from the lower right-hand corner during the Hoover period, up to the middle right-hand side during the First New Deal, to the top right-hand corner, during the Second New Deal, from there to the middle left-hand side

| NATIONALE STATE PLANNING CAPACITIES FOR COLLECTIVE SPENDING AND TAXING POLICIES |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| STRONG                                    | WEAK                                        |
| STRENGTH OF PRO-SOCIAL SPENDING POLITICAL COALITION | |
| STRONG                                    | Creation of nationalized policies of a collective nature | National experiments, State- and locally controlled policies |
| MEDIUM                                    | Elaboration of national experiments in spending programs | Distributive benefits in collective spending programs |
| WEAK                                      | Far-reaching, but failed proposals for national reforms | Rolling back of collective spending policies |
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during the late New Deal, down to the bottom left-hand corner during the middle of the war, when the New Deal was rolled back.

According to the model, innovations are expected at specific times: when a left-center coalition dominates or when a similar coalition of moderate strength is aided by a crisis. But the existence of a strong spending coalition without national state capacities is a double-edged sword that cuts mainly against the creation of national policies. On the one hand, if state-level capacities and policies exist and corresponding national ones do not, a left-center coalition will enact legislation granting national financial support for state-level programs. State-level programs will become further entrenched, as more states enact legislation. This was the case for the programs encouraged by the Social Security Act. The strong coalition of 1935 led to national government support of programs (e.g., aid to dependent children, unemployment insurance) not controlled by the national government. These programs became obstacles for later New Deal reformers and also constituted the core of what became known as “welfare.”

On the other hand, spending coalitions can create national experiments in social spending. These national experiments tended to come in policy areas where there was previously little state-level activity, that is, where no states were implementing policies. As the depression progressed, for instance, states and localities were fiscally decimated and had ended public works and public employment programs, clearing the way for the national experimentation of the Civil Works Administration and later the WPA. Similarly, although some states had enacted old-age assistance programs, none had enacted old-age insurance and hence it was easier for the national government to experiment in this area. These national experiments did not require the strongest political coalition to improve upon them and to make them fully institutionalized national programs. The movement from the top right-hand box and the middle left-hand box allows for the creation of nationalized social policies. The experiment of the WPA was made more secure by the executive plan of 1939. The Social Security Act amendments of 1939 and 1950 shored up the experiment in old-age insurance begun in 1935.

To sum up, the initial task was to break up the case into more easily ana- lyzed bits, mainly by way of a time-line. A detailed comparison of American states might have served the same analytical purpose, although the question “why no welfare state in Illinois?” is perhaps not as compelling. The trajectories of alternative explanations could then be mapped against the time-line to check for correspondence. Explanations that veered off course could be abandoned, for now, and others could be taken further and fine-tuned where necessary. Theoretical mechanisms, so often ignored in quantitative research, could be examined. Combinations of causes—structural and conjunctural— could be pursued. The result was an explanation that built on, but modified theories current in the literature.
Using a Most-Similar Systems Comparison to Confirm and Sharpen Explanations

I found this argument convincing, but there was the nagging suspicion that others might not. After all, the model was not particularly elegant, and perhaps some contending explanations were ditched summarily. One way to assuage these feelings and add weight to the explanation was to see if other cases worked the same way, in particular by introducing a cross-national dimension. Following down the path of a previous study (Amenta and Skocpol 1988), I extended a comparison between the United States and Great Britain to include the depression as well as the war (Amenta 1989, chap. 5). The analysis takes the form described by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (1970) as a “most similar systems” comparison. For the two countries were similar in a number of ways, holding relatively constant a number of explanatory factors. Both were large capitalist democracies—and remained democracies in the depression. Both avoided invasion and were allied on the winning side of the Second World War. They shared cultural traditions.

This particular comparison was useful and instructive because of the opposite historical trajectories in the public spending policies of these two countries during the two decades. During the depression, America was an innovator in public spending policies, and the Roosevelt administration espoused a left-wing version of Keynesianism; Great Britain muddled through the depression, without creating or extending spending policies; it rejected deficit spending, Keynesian or otherwise. During the war period, the two crossed paths. Both countries began to plan for nationalizing changes in social spending policy. Sir William Beveridge’s Report or Social Insurance and Allied Services of December 1942 was answered by the National Resources Planning Board’s Security, Work, and Relief Policies, released in March 1943 and greeted as the “American Beveridge Plan.” If one were to predict going only by the experience of the depression, one would have expected the United States to remain the leader. Yet the opposite happened. Indeed, this particular comparison was important because it adds leverage to a counter-factual question. The big question of “why no welfare state” can be more directly addressed by comparing a case that did adopt one. Because of its postwar policy successes, the British case could inform an explanation of why U.S. social policies did not become similarly nationalized.

The model held up well, as I hope this brutal simplification will show. In Britain, there was little governmental planning for social policy extensions until the war. Although the national state was administratively stronger, what mattered more was the character of the state institutions. The leading executive bureaucracy was the Treasury, which obstructed planning for innovations in public spending. Significantly, the power of the Treasury was eclipsed during the war. Through the war-related Ministry of Reconstruction planning flourished. Plans for social insurance, health, and economic policies were blueprints for the postwar British welfare state.
To Confirm and Sharpen

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For the British case, because of the structure of political parties, it is straightforward to specify what constitutes a pro-social spending political coalition. Britain has a party devoted to working class interests with an organic connection to the trade union movement. Although the Trade Union Congress does not entirely correspond to the social democratic model, the Labour party fits into the category of a social democratic party. It has often been allied with the centrist Liberal party, which introduced the breakthrough public spending legislation of 1908-1912.

Labour was in a position to rule after the war, when the June 1945 elections brought a Labour majority of about 150 to Parliament. Parliamentary parties are disciplined, exerting strong control over the voting habits of its elected member. No members run from their home districts, as in the case of the United States, and nomination is by the party as a whole. Long-standing and loyal members are usually assigned to safer districts. For these reasons, backbenchers rally around the government’s policies once they are decided. In short, state planning during the war led to the devising of policies, which were put into effect afterwards by a Labour Party in a position to rule. How important were the existence of plans and capacities? Very important, I argued, for the spending plans did not underpin Labour’s campaign—compare the Beveridge-led Liberals—and no doubt Labour would have acted differently without the reconstruction planning. But the model fit, and why not let others argue the counter-factual for once?

In any case, an over-time comparison was available. The postwar situation contrasted sharply with the early depression years (1929-1931) when Labour was in power, ruling in a coalition with the Liberals. At this time, a largely left-center coalition was in power, but without planning capacities and detailed plans. The Treasury was the dominant force in state planning, with its discouragement of spending. There were no spending innovations, no breaks with economic orthodoxy. Labour settled for increases in unemployment insurance and was soon out of office. After the war, planning capacities and favorable political coalition coincided, and nationalizing reforms occurred.

In short, a cross-national comparison can lend support to findings based on the case alone, and it can cast doubt on alternatives. It is important, however, to find a comparative case that is similar according to a number of possible explanatory factors and that varies significantly along the outcomes to be explained. If one is addressing a counter-factual question, it helps to pick a comparative case that not only diverges in direction from one’s own case, but that succeeded where one’s own case did not. My dog may not have barked, but something riled the neighbor’s dog. It helps, too, if the other case is well documented and in a language that one can read. For these purposes a state of the Union with a strong spending system e.g., New York might have worked as well. Not only can such a comparison confirm previous results, but it can also help to refine the model. Typically, models based on historical case studies have too many moving parts and over-determine what
is to be explained. Here, the complexity of the British state institutions narrowed the definition of what constituted favorable planning capacities for public social provision.

**Large-N Across-Subunit Analyses**

Another approach is to drop to a lower level of analysis, in this case, examining states of the Union. This works well for testing social spending theories, because there are many states and they have had a voice in policies. By merging a variable-based method with a case-based one, the disadvantages of each can be curbed. One the one hand, a large-scale analysis of sub-units can undermine criticisms that a case study favors the researcher’s pet theories. Better, the strategy may help reorganize the unwieldy model often generated by case-based techniques. Analyzing many sub-units can also aid claims of generality for findings. On the other hand, tying the large-N analyses to the historical project can mean escaping problems of internal validity endemic in quantitative work. One can devise indicators that match theoretical referents and choose plausible historical cut-off points. Such evidence is best confined to the end of research, when it can be disciplined by case-based work. One can make a case study count, not merely by silencing critics with science, but in ways calculated to address the original questions.

Analyzing sub-units makes it possible to appraise more rigorously the theoretical implications from the first part. With relatively large numbers, one can reinstate arguments hastily dispatched. These analyses make it simple to test these theories and to oppose them to models developed in the historical section. In this case, indicators based on state and party measures could statistically engage measures employed in cross-national research: economic development, the percent aged, unionization, and the like. Students of comparative public spending often analyze rich capitalist democracies separately, for the causes of social spending in them may be different, and economic development explains outcomes only up to a point. This technique can be employed on American state-level data; by 1929, there were 20 states both industrialized and democratic (Amenta and Carruthers 1988). Testing models across these 20 in the 1930s is similar to testing them across Western European countries, as far as the number of units, and people, are concerned. Positive results for the state and party indicators, when controlling for other perspectives, can support the detailed historical analyses on the national level over time. Those crisis, party, and state indicators that performed badly called for their reexamination on the national level, with an eye toward removing inessential parts of the explanation.

This strategy may help order the importance of different parts of the model. Variable-based strategies tend to uncover structural or long-term causes; case-based methods tend to focus on conjunctural or short-term causes. In the example, the model was middle-range, centering on short-term effects: crises, state planning, and coalitions in power. Yet these short-term influences
were posited to be related to long-term ones. The chances of a spending political coalition coming to power was argued to be influenced by the party system, notably whether it was dominated by traditional patronage-based parties, a condition set in the late 19th century; planning capacities in the 1930s were related to progressive reforms of governmental institutions beginning at the turn of the century; the severity of the depression for a state was related to its economic development. The larger numbers can help ascertain how much the short-term conditions added to the structural ones.

These analyses may also add weight to claims of generality. If the sub-units are undergoing similar processes as the larger one and vary widely in outcomes and in potential explanatory ways, the results can speak to issues at the higher level (Lieberson 1985). In the American states, generosity in old-age pensions varied dramatically, similar to variation on the cross-national level. In 1939, the most benevolent state was paying pensions more than five times as large as the stingiest one, and among the industrial, democratic states, the ratio was two to one. If the variability in the outcome is similar to relevant comparisons, but the independent indicators vary along different lines, for instance, the lack of a social democratic party, the results may indicate alternative causal routes. If these results cannot be generalized to other cases, they will have implications for the case at a different point in time.

Just as important, bracing quantitative analyses with historical ones strengthens claims of internal validity, a weakness of quantitative work. After examining theories and previous research, the first research task of quantitative studies is to amass a data set—decisions are not necessarily based on a knowledge of the countries. The independent indicators may not fit theoretical concepts, and available dependent indicators are usually schematic. Moreover, quantitative work often oversteps historical boundaries; relationships between variables plausible for one period, may not be for another (Isaac and Griffin 1989).

To pursue the example, the historical analyses suggested more specific outcomes to explain than overall spending. These outcomes concerned in part the timing of adoption of new legislation for unemployment compensation, old-age pensions, and taxation innovations. Also, the research strategy called for investigating characteristics of legislation. In examining spending “efforts,” cross-national researchers only approximate the issue of “generosity,” which could be more closely modeled. In addition, the question of the nationalization of spending programs was important, but difficult to handle with state-level data. Yet there are analogies between national versus state-level control of policies and state-level control versus local control. One can construct measures of the relative degree of control.

On the explanatory side, too, the historical analysis called for departures from standard indicators on parties and state capacities. For the analysis did not indicate Democratic voting strength or control of government, as in other quantitative studies, but the strength of urban Democrats and Democratic rule in open, competitive party systems. Rural Democrats in one-party or patron-
age-dominated systems were not expected to encourage public spending programs. Also, the typical measures of state capacities—revenues, bureaucrats—were explored, but were not enough. Testing the model required measures concerning the construction and strength of the specific bureaucracies implementing public spending programs. In this case, the powers of administrators in safety and workmen’s compensation laws were examined, weighted by their tenure in office.

The historical research also suggested the time periods and end points to examine, avoiding a trap of much time-series research. Examining the timing of adoption of programs eliminates part of that problem. Yet the characteristics of programs pose a different question. All states reacted to the guidelines set by the Social Security Act by the end of the 1930s. In 1939, amendments changed the bases on which the national government would match spending for old-age pensions, among other programs. This incited a new round of state-level legislation. It was important to probe the initial reaction, to avoid confounding different contexts for legislative change.

In short, quantitative analysis on sub-units can aid historical case-based work, and vice versa. If the historical work has modified existing theories or has led to new hypotheses, the quantitative analyses can probe these. They can add support for an explanation, sharpen it, as well as cast doubt on alternatives. If the sub-units vary widely on important theoretical dimensions and in outcomes, one can make limited claims of generality. Most of all, tying quantitative analyses to historical ones can escape common internal-validity problems of quantitative work. Even historical researchers who eschew quantitative work, for reasons of training or esthetics, would do well to think about how arguments might be measured and modeled—if only to assess studies and to give potential critics something to do.

Conclusion

What began with a counter-factual question of historical interest ended with a discussion of testing the explanation with large numbers and quantitative techniques. This roundabout course was taken because the trail was scattered with a number of obstacles in the way of case researchers. These include first the hindrance of revealing the case’s theoretical relevance. There is the more inhibiting barrier of identification: demonstrating that one’s own explanation is more satisfactory than alternatives. There is the further impediment of establishing that the results have implications that go beyond the case. None of these is easily avoided.

To avoid them, I proposed five strategies to combine case-based and variable-oriented approaches, and to use comparisons in a general sense. To recapitulate: One can juxtapose the case with theories and findings in social science research. This sets off what is distinctive about the case and its theoretical relevance as well as historical interest. One can plot the historical course of the case over time. This makes it possible to see in which direction
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the evidence is running: one can appraise theories, especially with respect to
their mechanisms, and construct an explanatory model. One can also sub-
divide the question to be answered. This provides greater analytical leverage
on the question, and can be helpful when the question is counter-factual. One
can undertake limited cross-national comparisons without straying far from
one’s case. This provides a sterner test for the model and opportunities to fine-
tune it, and is probably necessary in the case of a counter-factual question.
Finally, one can examine sub-units. Other theories can get a second hearing,
and one can sort out the importance of long-term and short-term causal
arguments. Under the best circumstances, one can make general claims for
one’s argument.

Needless to say, each case is unique; some of these comparisons may be
appropriate, others not. Other qualifications are in order. Almost all of the
uses of the case study examined here relied on previous theoretical
developments and a well developed body of research. Without theories and
without established researched findings, it is difficult to use these methods of
bolstering a case study. In the example, the substantial theoretical and
empirical literature on public spending aided enormously in the process. It
follows that where these theories are less developed one’s attention to them
should increase in proportion. It also helps to have a case with a relatively long
history and with interesting sub-units. Though useless for some historical pur-
poses, the American experiment was well underway when the 19th-century
revolution in public spending began. It was relatively straightforward to trace
policy developments in the 20th century and to plot historical maps. Moreover,
the American states were serviceable for the same reasons that they were
poor vehicles for public spending policies: they have great autonomy and
therewith the ability to undermine national standards. It also helped that they
varied widely on social, economic, and political dimensions. Very few cases
provide such opportunities—all the more reason search out the possibilities.

Some of these techniques are more analytical than others. Comparing the
case with theoretical ideal types and with a most similar case does no injury
to the integrity of the case. Examining developments in a case over time trims
the outcome, if not the unit of analysis. Plotting developments in separate
policies over time means pruning closer. Dividing the case into many sub-
units, to run this metaphor into the ground, is on the order of uprooting and
then dicing. Are these separate operations? Do the procedures that do more
violence to the case aid in realizing the purposes that initiated the investiga-
tion? Or do they apply to entirely separate realms? To give the negative side
a sociological analogy: Do affirmative quantitative results give the researcher
false confidence that a larger question is being answered, in the same way that
success in worldly activity gave Weber’s Calvinist a sign of election, while
proof of salvation remained inescrutable? Do such results merely provide a psy-
chological boost to help one confront one’s colleagues as worldly success aided
the Calvinist in facing the neighbors? Is it impossible to synthesize case- and
variable-based methods?
I am arguing that it is not impossible and that the analogy is false. Even if there are distinctions between the types of method and their relative strengths, it is possible to combine the two in a way that is more like integration than annexation. And that way is by connecting both types to a larger question and connecting the question and the analysis of it to theories and research in the field. This unity of purpose is key and should inform all aspects of the analysis, whatever the form. Even if the reader refuses to believe that the two methods can be synthesized, as with the Calvinist and salvation, there are some practical advantages in acting otherwise. Approaching a case study from different directions can only strengthen it, and the same is true for adding historical sophistication to quantitative work.

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