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2 Four families of theories to understand welfare state change

Abstract: This chapter provides an overview of different theoretical approaches used to investigate welfare state change with a particular emphasis on cross-national analysis of Western Europe and North America. It distinguishes four families of theories based on the nature of the factors they consider – macro-structures, institutions, actors, individual preferences and attitudes – and the way their influence is conceptualised – as either the environment, filters and interactions, engine or micro-foundations of welfare states. By analysing developments over time, the chapter shows that we have witnessed to both an increased heterogeneity in the ways welfare state change is conceptualised and measured, and a growing integration of theoretical perspectives. In sum, theoretical advancement in this field has occurred less through the falsification and rejection of existing theories than through a process of integration, layering, refinement, and contextualisation whereby new theories have been used to complement and specify older ones and their field of applicability. This development has coincided with a shift away from grand theorising about the state and social conflict to greater emphasis on middle-range theories providing explanation for well-delimited instances of change concerning particular economic forms, periods, sectors or types of reforms.

Keywords: change, welfare state, social policy, macro, ideas, power, institutions, partisan politics, public opinion, political parties

2.1 Introduction

Explaining welfare state change is one of the big questions addressed by social policy scholars and is intimately connected to the development of the field of welfare state studies. How to conceptualise welfare state change is the object of ongoing discussions which span across such different issues as the level of the analysis (Bannink and Hoogenboom 2007; Ciccía 2017; Hinrichs 2000), the nature of change itself (Capano 2009; Green-Pedersen 2004) and the way to operationalise it (Clasen and Siegel 2007; Kühner 2007). The extent of disagreement is large and often encompasses even basic definitions. However, for reasons of space these debates cannot be reviewed here. For our purpose, welfare state change is broadly defined as any processes relating to the development, consolidation and restructuring of the way states protect individuals against a range of social risks that have come historically to be viewed as legitimate sources of entitlement to public resources. These processes can affect the whole of the welfare state, but also more limitedly specific policy areas or even instruments.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the different theoretical approaches used to investigate welfare state change with a particular emphasis on cross-national comparative analysis of Western Europe and North America. For analytical purposes, the chapter classifies extant theories in four families: 1) macro-structures; 2) institutions; 3) actors; and 4) individual preferences and attitudes. This distinction is based on the prominence afforded to different types of factors and the way their influence on the welfare state is conceptualised. The first family looks at the “environment” in which welfare states operate and points to the role of macro-structural transformations and changing socio-economic contexts. The second family turns the gaze to the state to analyse how political institutions and formal procedural rules filter the effect of the macro-context and social and political mobilisations. Several ideational approaches also tend to fall within this group. The third family focuses on the meso-level of organisations and political actors, their behaviour and strategies as the main drivers of change. The last family analyses public attitudes and electoral preferences with the aim of providing an account of the micro-foundations of the legitimacy of welfare states. Before discussing each family, it is important to emphasise that they have not developed in strict chronological order, rather they have often overlapped and are not always mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, each tends to privilege the analysis of a particular historical period and they can be subdivided based on their focus on either the post-war period of sustained expansion of welfare states, or their maturation in post-1970s.

2.2 Theory family one: the “environment” of social policy

While many countries already had some rudimentary form of social policy, the consolidation of modern nation states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave new prominence to social policies. Between the late 1970s and 1990s, the main puzzle to be solved was why welfare developed at different rates and reached different levels of spending (Skocpol and Amenta 1986; Myles and Quadagno 2002).

The theories used to answer this question generally focused on macro historical phenomena creating both the conditions and the need for state intervention. These processes could be economic in nature as in the logic of industrialism (Wilensky 1975) and capitalist development (Gough 1979; Offe 1984), political as in the consolidation of mass democracy (Marshall 1950), or both as in theories of modernisation (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981). These theories all shared a neo-functionalist understanding of the dynamics of welfare state expansion which put the emphasis on the evolving nature of the “environment” in which welfare states operated. In this view, the growth of the welfare state was conceived as the inevitable outcome of the emergence of new social needs and the economic and political resources generated by

large socio-economic transformations and their correlates (e.g. ageing populations, family change, rising productivity). This process would ultimately lead to the convergence of welfare states. From this perspective, politics was not a prominent explanatory factor. Faced with comparable levels of demands and resources, welfare programmes would develop independently of the balance of power among political forces. Another shared characteristic of these theories is their focus on an undifferentiated notion of the welfare state, often operationalised as welfare effort, i.e. aggregate social spending on income-maintenance programmes.

These theories have been widely criticised for their emphasis on impersonal socio-economic forces and the lack of attention to how the issues they generated were picked up by political actors initiating the reforms. The assumption that social policies were simply a response to social needs rendered them unfit to explain differences in national programmatic profiles or among countries with similar levels of development. Nonetheless, their insight remains of considerable importance and the set of factors they identify are widely acknowledged as a baseline of conditions for welfare state expansion (Skocpol and Amenta 1986; Pierson 1991). While these theories find limited applicability today, other contemporary perspectives follow similar heuristics. Prominent examples are studies that focus on the effect of exogenous shocks – for instance, economic crises (Farnsworth and Irving 2011; Greve 2020; Starke, Kaasch, and Hooren 2014) or globalisation (Swank 2002) – but differently from studies in the earlier period they draw on a more diverse set of explanatory factors.

The new social risks (NSR) perspective with its emphasis on the new social needs produced by the transition to post-industrial economies and associated family and labour market changes is one such example. The range of social risks considered is long and varied but among them stand out those relating to work–life balance, skill formation and labour market dualisation (Bonoli 2005; Taylor-Gooby 2004). Thus, family and education policies – and services – which had remained at the margin in studies of the welfare settlement, now come to the fore. Similar to theories in the earlier period, the idea that the main input for reforming the welfare state comes from changing socio-economic contexts lies at the heart of this approach. However, the NSR also shows some important points of departure from previous neo-functionalist accounts. First, it does not postulate convergence, but rather views change as occurring through various mechanisms of adaptation, and welfare states as set on different trajectories because of differences in their institutional contexts (Bonoli 2007). Drawing on institutionalist perspectives (family two), NSR posits that existing social policies and the pattern of interests they produce play a fundamental role in shaping reform strategies and the capacity of welfare states to adapt to changing socio-economic contexts (Taylor-Gooby 2004; Armingeon and Bonoli 2006). Second, it affords some salience to political actors, particularly in the form of policy preferences of those social groups most affected by new social risks (women, young and low-skilled individuals). However, it remains pessimistic about their ability to influence policymaking given their heterogeneous composition and limited representation in the electoral arena (Bonoli

2005). The NSR approach increasingly draws on the “new politics” perspective to conceptualise the influence of political actors (family three).

2.3 Theory family two: states and institutions as filters and interactions

The point of departure of studies in the second family is its emphasis on how the organisation of the state shapes welfare states by filtering and interacting with both larger macro-structural factors and social and political mobilisation. These theories challenge the view of the state as neutral arbiter of the competition among social groups, and rather share an interest in the many ways in which the features of governments and polities influence access to policymaking and hence reform patterns (Immergut 2006). Theoretically, several of these works are located within historical institutionalism; methodologically, they tend to privilege comparative historical analysis of one or a small number of cases. Despite these shared characteristics, this family remains heterogeneous with regard to the specific factors that are the focus of the analysis.

One approach (often referred to as “state-centred”) highlights the apparatus of the state and the activities of relatively independent bureaucrats as the main cause of both cross-national differences and the expansion of welfare states through time (Heclo 1974; Orloff and Skocpol 1984; Weir and Skocpol 1985). These works reconceptualise the state from an arena of social conflict to an actor with the autonomy to set its own goals and different capacity to realise them (Orloff 1993; Skocpol 1992). Such an approach recognises the centrality of social and political actors but views them as conditioned by the institutional configuration of the state and previously enacted policies. An important contribution of this body of research is the conceptualisation of policy feedback, that is, the idea that once policies are in place, they change the politics of subsequent policy change by altering the patterns of group conflict through which reform occurs (Weir and Skocpol 1985; Skocpol 1992; Pierson 1993). These works paved the way for the analysis of slow-moving causal processes of welfare state transformation that occur through path dependence or gradual and incremental institutional change (Streeck and Thelen 2005).

A second approach has instead focused on institutional rules and procedures. While some of these studies look at broad welfare state dynamics, they generally privilege the analysis of specific policy sectors (Immergut 1992; Thelen 2004; Steinmo 1993). The core claim of these studies is that the way the formal institutions of governments are designed fundamentally alters the mechanisms by which social pressures are transmitted to policymakers, resulting in different patterns of reform. Immergut (1992) has put forward the concept veto points – defined by the interactions of constitutional rules and electoral results – to formalise the analysis of this dynamic process. As stated by Immergut (1992, 243) “political institutions can be thought as the outer-

most frame of political conflict". Thus, while they do not determine reform outputs, they do significantly shape trajectories of policymaking by altering the power of particular actors to influence reforms, their strategic calculations and political behaviour.

A third approach focuses instead on the role of ideational institutions (Béland 2005; Blyth 2002; Hall 1989; Jenson 2009; Rothstein 1998; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). Hecló's pioneering study (1974), which claimed that pension policy in Britain and Sweden had been shaped by civil servants "puzzling" over problems, was among the first to identify the relevance of policy learning effects. Despite this early formulation, attention to ideational factors represent a later addition to this family, and the various works that can be placed here show fundamental disagreement about core concepts (Béland and Cox 2010; Campbell 2002). Under the broad umbrella of ideational analyses, we find such different things as norms, frames, discourses or policy paradigms, pointing at different ways in which ideas can transform welfare states. Scholarship emphasising the role of gender norms in the construction and evolution of welfare states is often also implicitly or explicitly ideational (Adams and Padamsee 2001). The contributions of this research are too vast and diverse to do them justice here, but they all share an interest in the way that ideas alter the cognitive frameworks of socio-political actors and are used performatively to influence patterns of support for welfare measures.¹

Institutionalist perspectives have made several contributions to knowledge, and concepts such as policy feedback and path dependence are now routinely used in analyses of welfare state change. However, authors located in this family easily concede that "the state certainly does not become everything" (Skocpol 1985, 7) and that the effects of political institutions are best considered as interaction effects (Immergut 2010), and thus cannot predict reform outputs without consideration of the policy actors (family 3) and the characteristics of the broader socio-economic context (family 1). However, they also contend that explanations that focus on the latter determinants will remain unsuccessful until they include an examination of the political institutions that makes them relevant (Immergut 1992). The insight of institutionalist and state-centric perspectives has deeply influenced contemporary theorising on the welfare state, and even actor-centred theories such as those emphasising partisanship, now acknowledge that the preferences and strategies of political actors are significantly constrained by the broader institutional context of policymaking (Beramendi et al. 2015; Starke, Kaasch, and Hooren 2014). Thus, at the centre of present debates is not so much the issue whether it is institutions or actors that matter, but rather if it is more productive for the analysis to begin from the institutional context, or from the preferences and strategies of political actors.

1 On this point, see also the section on Theory family four.

2.4 Theory family three: actors as the engine of change

The third family of theories considers political and social actors as the main drivers of change. At its origin it developed as a response to neo-functionalist approaches and their neglect of political processes in the articulation of social needs (family one). This body of research focuses prominently on the strategies and behaviours of political parties, but it has also included other actors, particularly trade unions, employers' organisations, businesses and other private interests (Anderson 2001; Gingrich 2011; Ebbinghaus and Manow 2004; Hall and Soskice 2001; Mares 2003; Martin and Swank 2012; Naczyk 2013; Swenson 1997). Attention to political factors also brought greater attention to the striking diversity of welfare states across industrialised nations (Esping-Andersen 1990; Sainsbury 1999). The core statement of these theories is that politics matters, but the ways it does is the object of disagreement. In particular, it has become commonplace to distinguish between an old politics of the golden age of welfare state expansion (1945–1975), and a new politics of the subsequent age of austerity.²

The power resource theory (PRT) (Korpi 1983; Huber and Stephens 2001) is probably the most credited account for the period of expansion. This theory views the growth of welfare states as the result of distributive struggles among classes. Its starting point is that class is the dominant cleavage in capitalist societies, and that the power resources of the working class – in the form of socially (unions) and politically (social-democratic parties) organised interests – determines the level of universalism and generosity of welfare states (Kersbergen and Vis 2014). Recognising that the strength of the Left alone has historically proven insufficient to the expansion of social rights, Esping-Andersen (1990) further expanded PRT to include the history of cross-class coalitions as the decisive cause of variation in welfare state arrangements. Thus, according to this perspective, the reach and redistributive capacity of welfare states is a function of the strength of working-class political mobilisation and the incorporation of the middle classes in the pro-welfare coalition.

While PRT still provides the main explanation for cross-national differences in social programmes during the so-called golden age, subsequent works have updated several of its assumptions to address some limitations. First, studies have extended the focus from social-democracy to also consider other party families, including Christian-democratic, right-wing and more recently populist parties (van Kersbergen 1995; Greve 2021; Jensen 2014). Secondly, they have moved beyond the assumption typical of PRT of political institutions as mere arenas for conflict to investigate the ways they condition and alter the strategic calculations of partisan actors (Beramendi et al. 2015;

² For a critique of this periodisation see Wincott (2013).

Gingrich 2011; Häusermann 2010). Finally, other studies have questioned the idea that political ideology predetermines the policy preferences of political parties and rather explains them in light of shifting socio-economic cleavages, electoral competition and forms of party-voters linkages (Green-Pedersen 2001; Häusermann, Picot, and Geering 2013; Morgan 2013) – a point which will be further developed by theory family four.

A more fundamental critique to PRT has come instead from the Paul Pierson's work (1996, 2001) on the New Politics of the welfare state. Pierson contended that the politics of retrenchment differs in fundamental ways from the old politics of expansion. In an age of permanent austerity, political parties have become increasingly concerned with avoiding being blamed by the electorate for unpopular reforms. An additional obstacle to retrenchment comes from changes in the institutional context. Drawing on historical institutionalism, Pierson argued that the creation of large social programmes in the previous period generated major impediments to welfare state change in the form of mechanisms of increasing returns and policy feedback (Pierson 1993). These mechanisms are to be found at the level of both voters and interest groups benefiting from existing schemes and opposing major cutbacks. Therefore, the new politics suggests a resilience of the welfare arrangement of the golden age, still change is possible because political parties can adopt various strategies – obfuscation, compensation, division – to implement cutbacks. This process of retrenchment by stealth will more likely assume the form of incremental change.

The publication of this work stirred considerable debates in the late 1990s and early 2000s about the continued relevance of partisan politics (Allan and Scruggs 2004; Kittel and Obinger 2003; Korpi and Palme 2003) and the supposed stability of welfare states (Häusermann 2010; Palier 2010), and more recently on the use of blame avoidance strategies (Vis 2016; Jensen et al. 2018). The new politics thesis has produced an enduring influence on the field, particularly in the prominence afforded to electoral politics and the view of political parties as vote-seeking rational actors and welfare states as shaped by various forms of policy feedbacks (Béland and Schlager 2019; Hacker and Pierson 2019) defined in the interaction between political parties and the electorate (Jensen, Wenzelburger, and Zohlnhöfer 2019; Starke 2021).

The idea of a temporal discontinuity in the constellations of actors and political mechanisms shaping the transformation of welfare states after the heydays of the golden age is now generally accepted, and the distinction between an old and new politics widely used (Green-Pedersen and Haverland 2002; Starke 2021). Political actors, their behaviours and strategies are central in contemporary theorising of welfare state change, and this is probably both one of the most populous family of theories and the one where disagreement is more frequent. However, in time we have also witnessed a narrowing down of the scope of analyses from a broader set of actors and social processes to an understanding of the politics of reforms as essentially electoral politics. In particular, fewer studies today investigate the influence of business groups, interest groups and protest movements that had been included in earlier studies of welfare state expansion (Piven and Cloward 1979; Quadagno 1992; Amenta 2006).

2.5 Theory family four: the micro-foundations of welfare states

Do mass policy preferences influence welfare states' outputs and trajectories in advanced democracies (Brooks and Manza 2006)? The two approaches used to answer this question, focus on either public attitudes or electoral preferences with an underlying concern for the legitimacy of welfare states, conceptualised as a sort of responsiveness to citizens' preferences. Methodologically, these studies generally implement quantitative analysis of large surveys, theoretically they draw on a diverse set of established traditions which emphasise either the sociological or political underpinnings of welfare states' legitimacy.

The first approach is rooted in sociological traditions of study of public attitudes and investigates the determinants of support for the welfare state, often in the form of either preference for redistribution (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Ebbinghaus and Naumann 2017; Mau 2004; Svallfors 1997; Taylor-Gooby 1985) or the perceived deservingness of welfare beneficiaries (Kangas 1997; van Oorschot 2000; Larsen 2008; Sachweh 2019). The privileged level of analysis is the whole of the welfare state, but a few studies also look at support for specific sectors (Chung and Meuleman 2017; Busemeyer, Garritzmman, and Neimanns 2020). Explanations for cross-national differences include combinations of individual-level factors (socio-demographic characteristics, ideological positions) and features of the macro context such as norms and values but also the feedback effect produced by existing welfare institutions. This research has produced great innovations in the ways welfare states are conceptualised and attitudes measured (Taylor-Gooby et al. 2020). However, and with few exceptions, these studies do not directly engage with the question of how mass preferences relate to political parties' positions and legislative initiatives, which constitutes instead the focus of the other body of literature analysed here.

The second approach is firmly located in comparative political economy traditions. Its starting point is also cross-national differences in preferences for redistribution, particularly in its relation to levels of inequalities and welfare institutions (Gingrich and Ansell 2012; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Rehm 2016). A particular focus of a growing number of these studies is the way that socio-structural transformation typical of the post-industrial era (e.g. new occupational and demographic structures) have transformed classic social cleavages, voting behaviours and political parties' positions. Differently from political theories in earlier periods (family three), these studies do not assume that political parties have ideologically predetermined programmatic stances, rather in the post-industrial era the partisan politics of welfare states is shaped by two interrelated transformations: 1) in the dimensions of political conflict and the underlying distribution of preferences (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch 2008; Vlandas 2021); and 2) in the mechanisms linking citizens' preferences to political parties

(Kitschelt 2000; Kitschelt and Rehm 2015). By connecting studies of electoral politics and welfare states, this research aims to provide a more complex picture of how individual preferences are formed and if and how they relate to political parties' policy positions.

Family four shows an affinity with both partisan (family three) and institutional (family two) – including ideational – theories of which they try to establish the micro-foundations in public attitudes and electoral preferences. For instance, by testing and refining assumptions on policy feedback and interest-representation by political parties (Häusermann, Picot and Geering 2013; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014). They also often draw from family one to show the macro foundations (particularly, in changing labour market and occupational structures) of the reconfiguration of mass preferences, and hence of the pro-welfare state coalition in post-industrial economies. This scholarship has made several original contributions to knowledge on welfare state change particularly with regard to the interplay of individual and macro-level factors, and the democratic basis of the legitimacy of welfare states. However, it also shows some of the biases of other families such as the emphasis on party politics and limited attention to other forms of expression of political preference beyond the ballot box and the role of intermediary organisations in aggregating and shaping preferences (Kriesi et al. 2020; Ciccia and Guzman-Concha 2021). Moreover, it tends to privilege questions relating to the formation and distribution of preferences, while mechanisms linking preferences to political actors and policy outputs have so far received less attention.

2.6 Conclusions

What drives welfare state change? This chapter offered a non-exhaustive review of that vibrant area of scholarship which addresses this question. Several decades of intensive research have produced a large number of theories and concepts which have been subject to constant refinement in order to explain anomalies, sectoral and regional specificities and temporal developments. This chapter grouped these theories in four families based on the nature of the factors considered and the way their influence is conceptualised. In 2003 Edwin Amenta (2003, 115) wrote that theoretical advancement in social policy research had been spurred by the presence of a “relatively high agreement on what was to be explained – the adoption and expansion of major social programs – but relative disagreement among theoretical perspectives”. The review presented here shows that while this statement is still broadly valid today, there is both growing disagreement about the definition of what is to be explained and increased convergence about what explains it.

The conceptualisation and measurement of welfare state change are still highly debated, and in time attention has shifted from the whole of the welfare state (measured as welfare effort or social rights to income-transfer programmes) to the level of

sectors and single instances of reform and the inclusion of a wider set of policy areas (e.g. family policies, education and healthcare). Whereas functionalist and power resource theories worked with an undifferentiated notion of the welfare state, institutionalist perspectives brought to the fore the importance of sectoral dynamics and constellations of actors. Micro-foundational analyses have also tended to privilege a holistic view of the welfare state as preferences for redistribution or aggregate social spending, although they have sometimes also focused on specific programmes, particularly childcare and education. At the same time, studies have shown that what counts as change varies radically based on both the extent and pace of reforms (Palier 2010; Streeck and Thelen 2005). In sum, the conceptualisation and measurement of welfare state change have become increasingly heterogeneous, which accounts for both the generation of new theories and a level of disagreement – and incommensurability – between perspectives.

Despite these differences, dissimilarities between theoretical approaches are becoming increasingly more a matter of degrees of emphasis on particular sets of factors than a clash between world views. Ontological and epistemological differences remain between some of these perspectives, but a general consensus seems to have emerged around a basic set of assumptions. The majority of social policy scholars today would probably agree that macro-structural transformations and exogenous events such as crises generate both the need and opportunities for reforms. Few would also deny that the way these inputs set welfare states on different paths depends on political actors, and that their preferences and behaviours are altered by existing institutions and the welfare state structures in which they operate – although they may start to disagree about the exact nature of those actors and the institutions that matter most.

We should also acknowledge that boundaries between families are not clear-cut and several works can be placed in two or more of these perspectives. For instance, theories of partisanship have evolved to consider the constraining influence of the institutional context (Beramendi et al. 2015; Starke, Kaasch, and Hooren 2014). Similarly, the starting point of much micro-foundational analyses is the consideration of both the socio-structural and institutional foundations of shifting mass preferences, political cleavages and party systems (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015). Explanations that draw on a single set of factors are today not only rare but considered as inadequate. We have witnessed a proliferation of middle-range theories which draw on two or more of the families described here to develop an explanation of well-delimited instances of change such as post-industrial economies, easy vs. unpopular reforms, specific forms of welfare regimes and social policy sectors. In sum, theoretical advancement has generally occurred less through the falsification and rejection of existing theories than through a process of integration, layering, refinement and contextualisation whereby new approaches have been used to complement and specify older ones and their field of applicability.

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