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"Welfare States and Public Opinion: Mass Policy Preferences, Regime Differences, and Welfare State Theory"

Abstract

Welfare states have profound consequences for the dominant patterns of stratification in developed capitalist democracies. Scholarly advances during the past three decades in understanding causal mechanisms behind welfare state development have been considerable, yet research to date has not systematically considered the role of public opinion in contributing to cross-national differences in welfare state regimes. This is perhaps surprising, as the influential power resources approach (with its emphasis on partisan control over government), as well as recent theorizing on path-dependency, both provide hints that factors relating to mass opinion may help to explain differences between types of welfare state regimes. Taking as our point of departure the limitations inherent in the early "national values" paradigm, we develop a new theoretical approach that addresses such limitations while providing constructive bridges to more recent power resources and path dependency arguments. Focusing on the level of public support for social rights as a key dimension of public opinion, we present the first cross-national analysis of the effects of mass policy preferences on welfare states. Analysis of a new dataset for OECD democracies in Western Europe, North America, and Australasia provides evidence that variation in social rights support explains a substantial portion of the differences between social, Christian, and liberal welfare state regimes. Our estimates take into account theoretically-relevant sources of welfare state policy established by past welfare state theories, and tests for endogeneity provide further evidence of the influence of factors relating to public opinion over welfare state spending. We discuss implications of these results for extending power resources and path dependency theories, and for advancing social-scientific understanding of novel sources of difference between welfare states in developed democracies.