



Reply to Myles: Theory and Methods for Comparative Opinion/Social Policy Research

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Theory and Methods for Comparative Opinion/Social Policy Research

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We thank John Myles for his comment. We agree with Myles on many points. There are three specific issues that we see in a different light: (1) methodological requirements for analyzing the causal status of mass opinion with respect to welfare state outputs; (2) theoretical assumptions underlying opinion/social policy linkages; and (3) how a systematic incorporation of mass opinion into welfare state scholarship should proceed.

THE IMPACT OF MASS OPINION: CAUSAL INFERENCE AND EVIDENCE

Myles expresses concern that our study might generate a “surface debate [that] will focus on technical and statistical issues” and that does not address the theoretical substance of our argument. Yet he proceeds to offer specific methodological assertions, including the claim that “the underlying data structure is too weak to support ‘tests’ of fully specified complex causal models.” Would Myles’ subsequent replacement of the language of causal inference with the language of “correlation” be preferable in our study, or in other research? Comparative researchers and econometricians are by now cognizant of the probabilistic nature of causal inference, the inherent uncertainties in analysis of non-experimental data, and the small-N nature of datasets that can be assembled for cross-national scholarship. But this has not prevented scholars from using appropriate standards to develop nuanced causal inferences, and pushing theory and debate forward.

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How does our own work proceed? We draw upon theoretical and methodological innovations in macrocomparative welfare state research and the new opinion/policy scholarship—including standardized measures, controls for established causal factors, and suitable statistical techniques—to generate results. One novel feature of our study is our application of Hausman’s specification test for endogeneity. This feature is worth highlighting again, for reverse causation or simultaneity scenarios raise an important challenge for inference. We seek to address this challenge systematically, adjudicating alternative scenarios concerning the direction of causality.

Results of our endogeneity analysis provide evidence against contemporaneous feedback processes, buttressing our causal inferences. *Longer-term* feedbacks from policy to opinion are interesting in their own right. But as we discuss in our paper, their existence applies to all established factors behind social policy development. For instance, the fact that, in the long run, welfare state institutions affect such processes as women’s labor force participation or unemployment is noteworthy, but it does not prevent these factors from exerting *contemporaneous* influence over social policy outputs.

THEORIZING POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

We agree with Myles that early public opinion scholarship did not specify or envision the precise institutional processes through which the preferences or normative orientations of national publics might influence government output. An analytical breakthrough has been to conceptualize the legislative activities of elected officials as the central conduit through which mass opinion is translated into policy outputs. Political elites are an essential part of the causal model linking the public’s preferences to the

development and output of national government. Only recently has systematic work on opinion/policy linkages emerged (Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995; Burstein 1998).

We are indebted to this work, and we also seek to move forward to consider opinion-policy dynamics in comparative perspective (situating past evidence of policy responsiveness in the United States within a broader context). The social policy responsiveness proposition we develop summarizes theoretical assumptions. One assumption is that the structure of democratic political institutions gives government officials incentives to incorporate information (or make heuristic attributions) concerning the preferences of the electorate. This is a key idea. Once we grant the possibility of government officials' incorporating mass opinion into legislative decision-making, a central issue for research is the comparative and historical patterning of opinion/policy linkages.

A second theoretical insight is that it is *aggregate* public opinion that may send meaningful signals to government officials. This too is a critical point. We have found a recurrent series of misunderstandings within much of the commentary on mass opinion. More than a few scholars believe that the attitudes of mass publics are too whimsical, low in information, or subject to elite or other contextual influences to provide anything like a meaningful signal, much less one with sanctioning power. But a robust set of findings among opinion researchers has been the striking degree of coherence in patterns of welfare state attitudes in the aggregate, that is, across countries and over time (Smith 1990; Svallfors 1997; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003). Aggregate opinion cancels out individual-level confusion and non-attitudes, and it moves in meaningful ways (Page and Shapiro 1992). These two qualifications are critical, because *welfare state attitudes* display exceptional coherence in comparison to many other issue domains; and it is in the *aggregate* that such coherence emerges. Instability, incoherence, or low-information characteristics of public opinion is an individual-level phenomenon. It is when aggregation is considered that the possible signaling capacity of mass opinion emerges.

MASS OPINION AND WELFARE STATE SCHOLARSHIP

Finally, we turn to the question of future directions. We agree with Myles regarding the uneasy relationship sociologists have had with the topic of public opinion. However, it is possible to discern a trend towards anticipating or treating mass opinion as a causal factor behind policy-making, including within the core welfare state literature (e.g. Pierson 1996:176; Esping-Andersen 2000:4; Huber and Stephens 2001:3).

We do not want to reify the gulf between "democratic theory" and political sociology. For instance, Burstein (1998) demonstrated in the mid-1990s that political scientists had gone further in developing empirical analyses concerning policy responsiveness. But motivated in part by Burstein's watershed challenge, sociologists have recently begun to consider how and when the views of ordinary citizens, in conjunction with such other factors as social movement mobilization, can influence the policymaking process in the United States (McAdam and Su 2002; Chen and Phinney 2004; Amenta, Caren, and Olasky 2005). Results of this emerging scholarship reveal a degree of complexity, with public opinion mattering more in some contexts than in others (Manza and Cook 2002; Wlezien 2004; Gilens 2005; Burstein Forthcoming). With respect to our issue domain of aggregate welfare output, one of our findings is that policy responsiveness varies cross-nationally: liberal democracies are less responsive than Western Europe's social and Christian democracies (Brooks and Manza forthcoming). Only a comparative analysis building upon the earlier insights of welfare state scholarship would uncover such a relationship.

Acknowledging that mass opinion matters for welfare states, and that welfare state theory might benefit from reformulation, does not mean that we must abandon earlier theories or findings about the structure of government institutions, political parties and major social cleavages, or elites' conflicts over policy ideas. But it does raise intriguing questions concerning their interrelationships. Myles refers to the economic costs of U.S. Social Security privatization as a factor behind its endurance. It is also important to consider the high degree of public pref-

erence for such provisions as a complementary political factor inhibiting retrenchment. Path dependency arguments, we have argued elsewhere (Brooks and Manza 2006b), can benefit from a systematic focus on mass policy preferences as operating in tandem with interest group and social movement influence. The “asymmetry” of benefits versus costs for political officials to maintain rather than retrench welfare entitlements is shaped by the prior distribution of preferences on the part of voters. A key reason we think sociologists and political scientists are perhaps more “ready” than in the past to take mass opinion seriously is because it provides a set of causal factors that helps to shed light on such phenomena as path dependency and the presence of extensive cross-national differences in the overall shape of welfare states.

Clem Brooks is Rudy Professor of Sociology at Indiana University, Bloomington. His interests are electoral politics, public opinion, and welfare states in developed democracies. With Jeff Manza he is completing a book entitled *Why Welfare States Persist* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), developing a new theoretical approach to understanding sources of cross-national variation in social policy. Other projects include a national survey that uses embedded experiments to understand better the degree of malleability in Americans' policy attitudes.

Jeff Manza is Professor of Sociology and Associate Director of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. In addition to his collaborative work with Brooks, he is the coauthor (with Christopher Uggen) of *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy* (Oxford University Press 2006). He is spending the 2005–06 academic year on leave at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City.

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