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Why Do Welfare States Persist?

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The shape and aggregate output of welfare states within many developed democracies have been fairly resilient in the face of profound shifts in their national settings, and with respect to the global environment of the past 20 years. This contrasts with once-widespread predictions of universal retrenchment, and it has broadened debates over trends in social policymaking to focus on the phenomenon of welfare state persistence. Research on persistence has not, to date, directly considered the possibility that welfare states survive because of enduring popular support. Building from recent welfare state theory and the emerging literature on policy responsiveness, we consider the possibility that mass public opinion—citizens' aggregate policy preferences—are a factor behind welfare state persistence. We analyze a new country-level data set, controlling for established sources of welfare state development, and buttressing estimates by testing for endogeneity with respect to policy preferences. We find evidence that the temporal distribution of policy preferences has contributed to persistence tendencies in a number of welfare states. We discuss results in conclusion, suggesting the utility of further consideration of linkages between mass opinion and social policy in cross-national perspective.

Once viewed as spiraling into steady decline, welfare states within many developed democracies now appear resilient in the face of dramatic shifts in their national settings and with respect to the turbulent global environment of the past 20 years. In contrast to early declarations of the seeming inevitability of retrenchment (e.g., Brown 1988; Marklund 1988; Schwartz 1994), high levels of social services and cash benefits continue to define many West European polities (Castles 2004; Iversen 2001; Swank 2002). In Scandinavia, despite important changes such as a reindexing of a number of benefits and eligibility requirements in Sweden, the social democratic model continues to set a standard for public generosity in the OECD (Kautto et al. 2001; Lindbom 2001; Stephens 1996).

Welfare state analysts are acutely aware of economic and political pressures on mature welfare states that contribute to slower rates of growth or

cut-backs within specific policy domains (e.g., Clayton and Pontusson 1998; Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001). But while the “golden age” of postwar social policy expansion has for now drawn to a close, the emerging consensus is that sweeping declarations of retrenchment provide a limited basis for understanding welfare state *persistence* in the contemporary historical era. Key to understanding social policy trends is that domain-specific cuts have at times been offset, sometimes even overshadowed, by expansion or stability in other policies (Esping-Andersen 1996; Pierson 2001; Stephens, Huber, and Ray 1999).¹

Accounting for persistence tendencies in the overall output or size of welfare states defines an important new agenda for theory and research. What are the causal mechanisms behind contemporary patterns of persistence? This issue takes on particular significance in light of the possibility that the factors

¹As powerfully documented in the work of Allan and Scruggs (2004) and Scruggs and Allan (2006), retrenchment trends have been most apparent in policy domains relating to cash entitlements, particularly sickness and unemployment benefits. These trends are important, yet it would be premature to equate them with patterns of change in aggregate social policy output. Welfare state policymaking spans both social services *and* cash benefits, and the increasingly service-oriented character of welfare states has been noted by many analysts (Esping-Andersen 1996; Huber and Stephens 2000; O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999; Swank 2002). Rising public expenditure on services constitute an important redirection (but not retrenchment) of social welfare. A focus on replacement income entitlements is informative with respect to questions concerning cash benefits, yet it provides an insufficient basis with which to evaluate trends in *overall* welfare state output or to reject scholarly consensus concerning retrenchment.

underlying contemporary welfare states differ from those generating initial pressures.²

The question we consider in this paper is whether citizens' attitudes toward social policy—mass policy preferences, in our shorthand—help to account for persistence tendencies within contemporary welfare states. A number of scholars have anticipated the possibility that mass policy preferences have a buttressing effect on many welfare states, and there is theoretical reason to expect that citizens' opposition to cuts in social programs would be consequential. But to date, no systematic empirical analysis has been developed to test such a proposition. Our initial investigation addresses several challenges. These include the possibility that policy preferences are a proxy for another mechanism of welfare state development, such as partisan governance. Our analyses take into account established welfare state factors (such as political institutions, demographic composition, and macroeconomic factors) and globalization forces (measured by foreign direct investment). We also assess the validity of our results by testing for endogeneity in the interrelationship of policy preferences and welfare state policy output.

Theoretical Perspectives on Welfare State Persistence

Power Resources and Path Dependency

The theoretical perspectives developed by scholars within the power resources and path dependency traditions have dominated debates over welfare state trends. Recent work within both traditions clearly anticipates a significant role for policy preferences. The causal focus of the power resources approach (Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Korpi 1989) is on political parties and class-related factors. A key proposition is that welfare state policies are a product of legacies of class and partisan influence. This historical patterning is said to create ideal-typical welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990, 2000), where institutionalization of high levels of provision is most secure in polities in which benefits and services are distributed universally. Power resources scholars have argued

that legacies of partisan control over national government generate inertia in countries' approaches to social policy (Korpi and Palme 1998; Rothstein 1998). In Huber and Stephens' formulation, welfare state development creates a "policy ratchet" in which conservative parties accept new forms of social provision because "those reforms were popular with the mass public" (2001, 28–29).

For its part, path dependency theories assume that early social policy developments set nations on distinct trajectories that, once adopted, are difficult to reverse. Work within this theoretical tradition identifies two distinct types of causal mechanisms behind path dependency. One of these is policy feedback, where the establishment of new government policy influences sources of welfare state support and the strategies of actors seeking to shape policy (Hacker 2002; Hecllo 1974; Skocpol 1995). Recent work by Pierson (1996, 2001) further hypothesizes that the "old politics of welfare states" involving class conflict have begun to be displaced. The contemporary stage of welfare state development is said to reflect a "new politics" characterized by novel constituencies as well as different incentives for government officials to expand (or maintain) government benefits and services. In the new political environment of the welfare state, a pattern of locking-in tends to develop as politicians receive greater benefits from "credit-claiming initiatives" than "blame avoidance" for spending cutbacks (Pierson 1996).

Why Mass Policy Preferences?

Recent extensions of power resources and path-dependency theorizing are broadly consistent with, and perhaps even suggest, a causal role for mass policy preferences as a mechanism behind persistence tendencies in welfare states. In the power resources argument, the historical development of specific types of welfare regimes is expected to influence the degree of zero-sum conflict and the distribution of interests among social groups (Korpi and Palme 1998; Rothstein 1998). This suggests that the persistence of generous welfare states is linked to robust preferences on the part of working and middle-class citizens (and, more generally, the population as a whole). Similarly, the path dependency thesis (Pierson 1996, 2001) is readily coupled with the proposition that the "asymmetry" of benefits versus costs for government officials to maintain rather than retrench welfare spending and entitlements is shaped by the prior distribution of policy preferences on the part of voters. Indeed, this proposition is perhaps most persuasive if

²In the words of Pierson: "On the growth of the welfare state, there is a huge and sophisticated literature . . . This cannot be said of the dynamics emerging in this new era. Indeed, a systematic program of research has barely begun. Such a program is badly needed . . . because there is good reason to believe that research on the 'golden age' of social policy will provide a rather poor guide to understanding the current period." (2001, 2–3).

interest groups operating *in tandem* with the policy preferences of voters exert pressure on politicians to maintain social programs. A systematic analysis of opinion impacts on welfare states may thus be informative.

The proposition that policy preferences shape welfare state policies is, however, buttressed by important new work on policy responsiveness within democracies (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Wlezien 1995; cf. Burstein 1998). Focusing on linkages between mass opinion and public policy outputs, the policy responsiveness literature advances a far-reaching proposition: that government officials have incentives to incorporate policy preferences into policymaking so as to avoid voter sanctions in the form of electoral defeat or public protests (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, chapter 7). This hypothesis could, of course, fail to accurately describe policymaking in specific national settings. But evidence to date offers a notable degree of corroboration.

A significant portion of this research has investigated policy responsiveness in the United States, finding evidence for linkages between mass opinion and legislative or spending output across various policy domains, and also with respect to executive or legislative branches of government (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Wlezien 1995; cf. Geer 1996). Further evidence comes from work on the subnational domain of state houses (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1989; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995; cf. Johnson, Brace, and Arceneaux 2005). Moving beyond the United States, a number of innovative studies have presented evidence for linkages between mass policy preferences and government spending within Canada (Petry 1999; Soroka and Wlezien 2005b), Germany (Brooks 1990), and the United Kingdom (Soroka and Wlezien 2005a). The empirical focus of this work has generally been on government spending as a whole (or, in the American case, aggregated legislative output) and not on welfare state output per se (see Manza and Cook 2002 for review). But the evidence presented by these studies suggests the operation of public policy responsiveness beyond the United States, and the further likelihood that government officials may also respond to preferences concerning the welfare state.

Data and Methods

Analysis of welfare state persistence requires high-quality data on welfare state policy output and mass

policy preferences in cross-national and historical perspective. Welfare state data should use standardized definitions of social policy output. Data on mass policy preferences should be based on items that employ identical question wording and response formats. The new data set we have assembled addresses these requirements by merging together data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Social Survey Program, enabling analysis of 14 democracies during the period from 1980 through 2000 (International Social Survey Program 1988, 1993, 1994, 1999, 2001; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c).

It is critical to employ a fully comparative cross-national design that has standardized data for multiple countries and time periods. Statistical analyses of single countries (or comparisons using country-specific data) are limited by the possibility that differences in levels (or effects) of variables are an artifact of country-specific measures. Our investigation accordingly draws upon standardized measures that are fully comparable.

Measures of Overall Welfare Output

Our primary dependent variable measures the aggregated output of welfare states. Policy-specific provisions relating, for instance, to pensions or unemployment benefits are informative, yet past debates over retrenchment have highlighted the importance of considering the *overall* policy output of welfare states (Huber and Stephens 2001; Lindbom 2001; Swank 2002). This is because it is the overall output and expenditure of welfare systems that appear to be most clearly characterized by persistence tendencies. Within some countries, specific domains may suggest more extensive patterns of decline, while others are characterized by expansion trends or a pattern of stability.³ A focus on domains experiencing spending cuts or retrenchment would thus yield a selective portrait, one that is insufficient to use as a basis with which to analyze persistence tendencies in contemporary welfare states.

We use the ratio of government spending on aggregated benefits and services relative to gross domestic product to measure the policy output of

³For instance, in the key cases of Sweden (e.g., Kautto et al. 2001; Lindbom 2001) and the United States (e.g., Hacker 2002; Weaver 2000), programmatic changes in the 1990s to AFDC and unemployment benefits respectively represent significant instances of policy retrenchment, but ones that provide an insufficient basis for observing trends in overall welfare output within these countries.

welfare states. Such measures of *welfare state effort* were introduced in early studies (e.g., Pampel and Williamson 1985; Wilensky 1975), and they remain a staple of contemporary work (e.g., Swank 2002). Effort-related measures have a further relevant property: overall welfare state spending relative to GDP has been found to predict patterns of inequality and poverty within democracies (Brady 2003; Kenworthy 2004; Moller et al. 2003). We emphasize that our focus on overall welfare state output does not preclude further consideration of the possible influence of mass policy preferences on domain-specific outputs and entitlements (e.g., Allan and Scruggs 2004; Clayton and Pontusson 1998; Korpi and Palme 2003). But an analysis of overall welfare effort provides a useful starting point for considering the phenomenon of persistence and its possible linkage to mass policy preferences.

Our measure of overall welfare state effort summarizes 13 categories of cash benefits and services (see web site Appendix Table 3 at <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>). This measure is from the *Social Expenditures Database* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2002), and it represents the most comprehensive current index of welfare spending (Castles 2004; Swank 2002). We use these data to first summarize trends in welfare effort for specific countries; we combine countries according to the standard typology (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990) to generate results for liberal, Christian democratic, and social democratic regime types. In our analyses, liberal democracies are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States; Christian democracies are Austria, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Switzerland; and social democracies are Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.⁴ While the regime concept is not without controversy (Arts and Gelissen 2002), the Esping-Andersen typology continues to provide scholars with a fruitful summary of welfare state differences, particularly as regards variation in the overall shape of social policy output. Because this typology has been central to research on welfare state trends and the persistence scenario (Esping-Andersen 1996; Huber

and Stephens 2001; Pierson 2001), it allows us to situate our results in relation to those of previous investigations.

Independent Variables

Our measure of policy preferences is extracted from the International Social Survey Program's *Religion I and II*, and *Role of Government I, II, and III* surveys (1988, 1993, 1994, 1999, and 2001). Care was taken by ISSP principal investigators to field survey questions in a standardized way across countries. The two items we use in the analyses have identical question wording and response formats across surveys, asking about respondents' attitudes toward government responsibility for providing employment and reducing income inequality. These items scale with a high degree of reliability ($\alpha = .92$),⁵ and we have merged policy preference scores for countries with the OECD data for welfare state effort. The unit of analysis in the merged data set is thus the country-year.⁶

To consider the impact of policy preferences in contributing to temporal persistence in welfare states, we take into account established factors behind welfare state development (for further information, see web site Appendix Table 4). Past scholarship has argued for the importance of a nation's political institutions for understanding the historical development of welfare states (e.g., Pierson 1994; Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol 1988). Following recent work (Huber and Stephens 2001; Swank 2002), we measure this factor by the number of institutional "veto points" within a polity, where a higher number of veto points is expected to lower the likelihood of generous social programs because it provides greater opportunity for business organizations and their political allies to block egalitarian initiatives.

A second set of independent variables captures changes in the domestic environment of welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1996; Kuhnle and Alestalo 2000). We consider the economic factors of unemployment and per capita GDP, as well as the percentage of the aged population. Women's labor force participation has been established as a key gender-related source of

⁴Data is available for Japan, and while the Japanese welfare state has occasionally been classified as a conservative/Christian democratic regime, the absence of a Christian democratic or successful religious party in postwar Japan provides little basis for such a classification. Indeed, the limited use of universalistic entitlements in Japan places it in closer proximity to the liberal democracies. In the analyses that follow, we do not classify Japan as one of the three ideal-typical welfare states, noting that its inclusion in the liberal-democratic type yields indistinguishable results.

⁵These items are drawn from a larger battery of ISSP questions about attitudes towards social policy. Initial analysis of this battery revealed that the two items we use account for just over 50% of the total variance; the eigenvalue for the second component dropped considerably, providing evidence that the items we analyze capture the common factor underlying the larger set of ISSP items.

⁶Surveys of specific countries for a given ISSP module were not always fielded in the same calendar year, so the coding of country-years in the analyses reflects the actual survey date.

pressure on welfare states (Huber and Stephens 2000). To capture the insights of power resources theory, we consider measures for the three major party families (Esping-Andersen 1990; Huber, Ragin, and Stephens 1993; Korpi 1989). The estimates we present below are for left and religious parties, and we note inclusion of the (small and nonsignificant) right party governance variable has no effect on other coefficients.⁷ Our final variable captures pressures associated with economic globalization. Here we focus on outflows of capital (Alderson 1999; Firebaugh and Beck 1994) as a key dimension of globalization, noting that parallel analyses of a measure of capital inflows or a scale of inflow and outflow data yield indistinguishable results.

Cross-Sectional Time-Series Methods

The data in this study are cross-sectional time-series data, in which the unit of analysis is the country-year. Cross-sectional time-series data can be characterized by the presence of heteroskedastic or correlated errors, violating classical assumptions regarding independent and nonvarying errors (Greene 2000). Our data set, like many other cross-section time-series data that are generated by merging country-level summaries of survey data with OECD data (Brady 2003; Bradley et al. 2003), has a “wide” structure in which there are more countries than time periods. We follow Moller et al.’s approach (2003) in analyzing data of this sort, employing a robust-cluster OLS model to address correlated and nonidentically distributed errors. The robust-cluster approach provides corrected standard errors in the presence of unequal variance among errors or correlated within-unit errors. In the course of the analysis, we also compared the robust-cluster approach with random-effects and fixed-effects estimators. This analysis (see Brooks and Manza 2006) favors the robust-cluster approach, using Raftery’s Bayesian Information Criterion (1995; see also Beck and Katz 2001) to compare models.⁸

⁷We do not include a measure of union density in the analyses, but given high levels of association between left party strength and union density (Huber and Stephens 2001), the unmeasured influence of the latter may be taken into account by the measures of partisan control over government.

⁸The fixed-effects approach is commonly applied to address omitted variable bias and other nonrandom error structures in (longitudinal) individual-level data, yet its limitations for analyzing cross-section time-series data are generally severe. This is because fixed-effects requires a purely *within-country* analysis and estimation, even though many country-level data sets are characterized by greater *between-country* than within-country variance (Plumper, Troeger, and Manow 2005).

We also considered the possibility that mass policy preferences are endogenous with respect to aggregated welfare output. Results of those analyses are presented in web site Appendix Table 1. Our application of the Hausman specification test (1978; Davidson and MacKinnon 1993) provides evidence against endogeneity in mass policy preferences. To be sure, long-term policy feedback processes in which welfare state development eventually affects policy preferences (or other right-hand side variables) may occur. But a key point for these analyses is that the endogeneity test provides evidence against simultaneous or short-term policy feedback, where the latter could introduce bias into our estimation of the contemporaneous influence of mass policy preferences.

Results

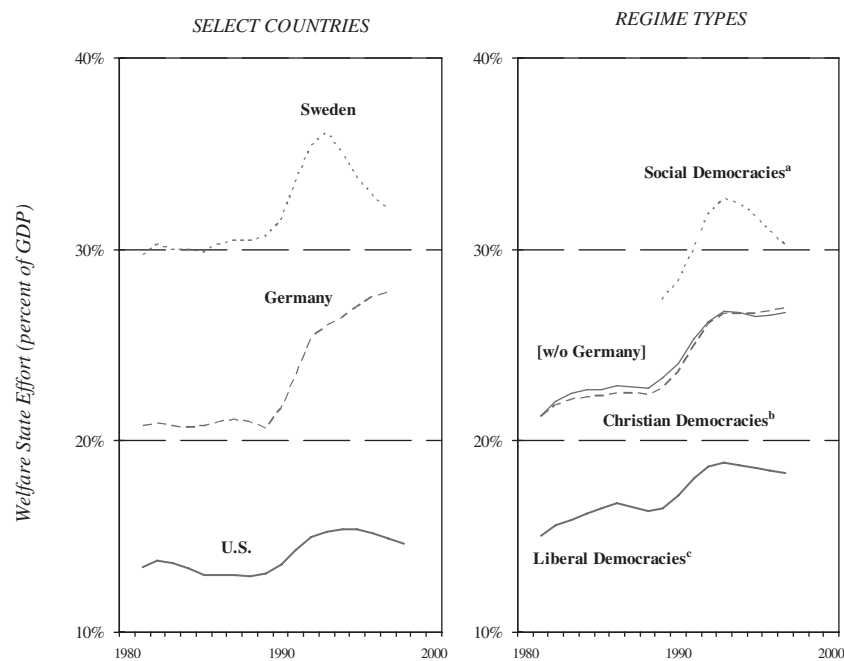
Trends in Overall Welfare State Effort

We first consider the nature of trends in aggregate welfare state output within developed democracies. This corroborates the consensus that there is no universal pattern of retrenchment when it comes to the overall size of welfare states. Figure 1 presents three-year moving averages for trends in overall welfare spending effort within specific countries (the left-hand panel) and regime types (the right-hand panel). We present additional over-time data for all countries in web site Appendix Figure 1.

Starting with the results for Sweden, welfare state spending during the 1980s was stable at 30% of gross domestic product, rising to approximately 36% by 1993, but quickly moving back towards earlier levels by the late 1990s. Net of this cyclical variation, Swedish welfare state spending during the past two decades shows little evidence of extensive decline, in keeping with the conclusions of past studies (Kautto et al. 2001; Lindbom 2001; Stephens 1996). Parallel results for all social democracies in Figure 1’s second panel are also congruent with previous research (Andersen et al. 1999; Nordlund 2000) and show a comparable pattern of change in which increases in the late 1980s were offset by cut-backs during the 1990s.

While the Scandinavian democracies had by far the highest overall level of welfare spending during the 1990s, the Christian democracies experienced a dramatic increase during the early part of the decade. As shown in Figure 1’s data, this increase was largest in Germany, but similar patterns of growth occurred elsewhere in continental Western Europe (cf. Castles 2004; Iversen 2001; Swank 2002). The single exception

FIGURE 1 Trends in Welfare State Effort (3-year moving averages)



a. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

b. France, Italy, The Netherlands, and Switzerland (shorter series for Austria excluded).

c. Australia, Canada, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, U.K., and the U.S.

is the Netherlands, whose approximately 30% welfare state effort during the early 1980s was more characteristic of the social democratic regime type. Yet in the 1990s the Dutch welfare state experienced a pattern of steady decline, yielding a net change of approximately -4 percentage points.

Turning to the liberal democracies, Figure 1's data show a positive if smaller trend in welfare state effort, where this increase occurred primarily during the late 1980s, declining slightly in the 1990s. The United States experienced some variability, but with no evidence of retrenchment trends by decade's end. In cross-national terms, the liberal democracies are characterized by lower levels of social spending (cf. Huber and Stephens 2001; Pierson 2001), with a pattern of modest growth during the early 1990s followed by temporal persistence during the remainder of the decade.

Analysis of Welfare State Persistence

We begin our analysis of welfare state persistence by first estimating a model of the merged OECD/ISSP data, where the dependent variable is welfare spending effort and right-hand side variables include the novel factor of mass policy preferences. We then use coefficient estimates in conjunction with relevant sample

means to predict welfare state spending output under different, theoretically relevant conditions. These include trends in which all countries approach the level of policy preferences represented by the United States (holding constant other covariates at observed levels). This allows us to simulate the effect of specific temporal patterns of change on welfare state output. Because it is well-known that mass support for welfare states in many countries shows considerable stability, or, in some cases growing support in recent decades (Andersen et al. 1999; Smith 1987; Svallfors 1997), simulations enable us to gauge evidence for the contribution of these temporal patterns to welfare state persistence. To be sure, such simulations carry with them intrinsic uncertainty. We acknowledge this uncertainty and emphasize that our application seeks to incorporate criteria identified by scholars as central to valid methodological applications.⁹

⁹Simulations of this sort are gaining in application within the social sciences (e.g., Alderson 1999; Dinardo and Lemieux 1997; Kiser and Levi 1996), including among quantitative analysts. With respect to our application (Hawthorne 1991; Tetlock and Belkin 1996), we incorporate the key methodological criteria of *clarity* (specifying the variables under consideration); *historical consistency* (maximizing plausibility by minimizing the number of counterfactuals simultaneously considered); and *statistical consistency* (developing inferences based on analysis of real data).

TABLE 1 Statistical Models^a of Welfare State Effort (N = 32)

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Constant</i>	-1.97 (8.31)	-1.58 (7.69)	16.33* (4.62)
<i>Year</i>	.30* (.11)	.32* (.13)	.43* (.14)
<i>Policy Preferences_{t-1}</i>	2.99* (.45)	3.28* (.80)	3.72* (.63)
<i>Policy Preferences_{t-1} × Liberal Democracy</i>	-2.76* (.59)	-2.93* (.66)	-2.72* (.66)
<i>Institutional Veto Points</i>	-.36 (.50)	-.27 (.49)	.24 (.52)
<i>Unemployment</i>	-.49* (.25)	-.47* (.23)	—
<i>Per Capita GDP</i>	-.42 (.26)	-.49 (.27)	-.81* (.24)
<i>Aged Population</i>	.67* (.22)	.64* (.22)	—
<i>Women's Labor Force Participation_{t-1}</i>	.24* (.06)	.27* (.08)	.25* (.06)
<i>Left Party Control</i>	<.01 (.01)	— ^b	-.01 (.01)
<i>Cumulative Left Party Control</i>	— ^b	-.02 (.07)	— ^b
<i>Religious Party Control</i>	.09* (.02)	.09* (.02)	.06* (.02)
<i>Direct Investment Outflows</i>	.37 (.36)	.41 (.32)	.80* (.22)
<i>R²</i>	.94	.94	.89

a. Coefficients estimated by OLS with robust-cluster standard errors; an asterisk next to a coefficient denotes significance at the .05 level.

b. Contemporaneous and cumulative left party control not estimated in the same model.

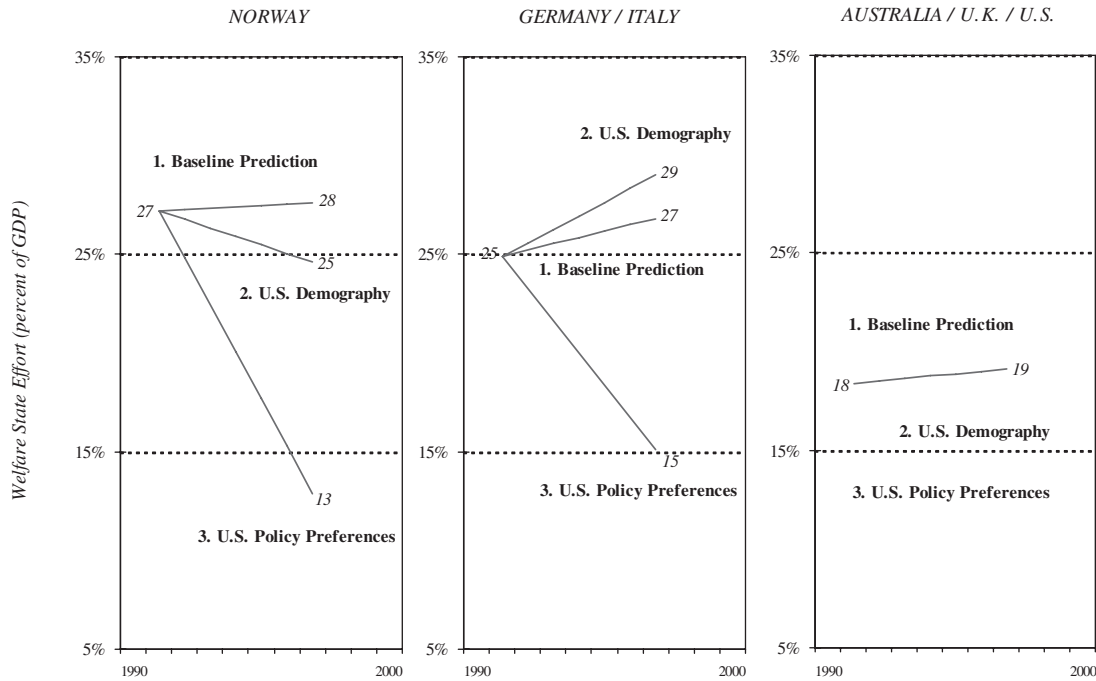
We emphasize that mass policy preferences share with a number of other country-level variables a degree of temporal stability in their distributions. This characteristic does not disqualify these variables as causal factors behind social policymaking. For instance, political-institutional attributes exhibit *perfect* temporal stability over the time period we consider, and aged population composition shows a pattern of considerable inertia. Yet both factors are clearly inputs into social policy. Rather than explaining *change*, then, relatively stable temporal patterns in the level of policy preferences are expected to exert pressures towards inertia and persistence in welfare states.

In Table 1, we present coefficients and standard errors for our statistical model of welfare state effort. Starting with Model 1, our primary model of interest, most coefficients are significant and their signs are generally consistent with past scholarship. Coefficients for economic and demographic factors represent large effects. Even larger is the effect for mass policy prefer-

ences, with the negatively signed coefficient for the interaction term implying that this effect is smaller within liberal democracies in comparison to other polities.¹⁰ The coefficient for left party control over government is small and not significant, consistent with studies finding smaller effects of left party incumbency on overall welfare state output during recent decades in comparison to earlier historical eras (see Huber and Stephens 2001, chapter 6). In light of the possibility that the cumulative pattern of left party control may itself be associated with mass policy pref-

¹⁰This effect is consistent with institutionalist work on political processes in liberal versus other welfare regimes (Pierson 1996, 2001; Rothstein 1998), and in the course of the analyses we tested for other interactions involving policy preferences. Additional tests find evidence restricted to the interaction with liberal democracies, an informative consideration in light of the possibility that social policy responsiveness varies across such other features of national context as constitutional structure or electoral system type (Huber and Stephens 2001; Manza and Cook 2002; Powell 2000).

FIGURE 2 Predicted Trends in Welfare State Effort



ferences, we present in Model 2 an alternative specification that replaces the (contemporaneous) left party governance covariate with a cumulative left governance measure. As displayed in the second column of Table 1, inclusion of this measure increases the magnitude of the policy preference coefficients.¹¹

Turning to our analysis of sources of welfare state persistence, we focus on three sets of countries (Norway, Germany/Italy and Australia/United Kingdom/United States) during the time period from 1991 to 1997. These countries exemplify the social democratic, Christian democratic, and liberal welfare state type, and we have full information in the data set for all six countries in 1991 and 1997. The first panel in Figure 2 summarizes results for Norway. The *baseline* estimates are obtained by using *no* hypothetical manipulation in covariate levels, and they reveal a 1 percentage point increase in the Norwegian welfare

state.¹² In scenario 2, we simulate the effect of a movement toward U.S. demographic composition, where Norway attains by 1997 the American level of aged population and women’s labor force participation—this results in a net *reduction* of 2 percentage points in welfare effort, suggesting the importance of these factors. But results for scenario 3 are even more dramatic: simulating the U.S. level of policy preferences leads to a very large (14 percentage point) net decline in Norwegian welfare effort in the 1990s, resulting in a retrenchment scenario. This suggests the importance of (high) levels of policy preferences to maintenance of the Norwegian welfare state.¹³

In Figure 2’s second panel, the baseline prediction for the combined cases of Germany and Italy show a 2 percentage point increase in welfare effort from 1991 to 1997. In scenario 2’s estimate, welfare state effort *increases* by an additional 2 percentage points, and this is because women’s labor force participation in Germany and Italy is much lower than in the United States. In scenario 3, a movement toward the U.S. level

¹¹Using Model 3, we consider a final scenario, namely, that trends in welfare state output are linked to distributional changes involving unemployment and the age structure of the population. Deleting the unemployment and aged population variables from the model yields a larger year coefficient (.43 in Model 3 versus .30 in Model 1), consistent with this hypothesis. But with respect to our primary focus on mass policy preferences, exclusion of the unemployment and aged population effects yields *larger* policy preference coefficients, and we again rely on the more conservative estimates obtained from Model 1.

¹²For these analyses, we use Norway as an exemplar of the social democratic regime type since the OECD/ISSP data set contains data on Sweden only in 1997.

¹³We performed calculations for all remaining independent variables, finding that simulating the 1997 U.S. level of mass policy preferences had the largest impact on Norwegian welfare state spending.

of policy preferences results in a 10 percentage point net drop in welfare effort in Germany and Italy, a forecast similar to the earlier calculations for Norway. These results suggest the importance of recent levels of policy preferences to persistence in the Christian democratic welfare state.

Results for the liberal democracies of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are presented in Figure 2's third panel. The baseline prediction is a modest increase in spending between 1991 and 1997. The second scenario leaves the baseline prediction unchanged because of similarity in levels of demographic composition across these countries. But scenario 3's assumption of the U.S. level of policy preferences *also* has no effect on the baseline prediction. This result is attributable not only to similarity in policy preferences within these countries, but also because the linkage between policy preferences and welfare states is lower within liberal democracies.¹⁴ Note that if we recalculate scenarios 1 and 3 to focus solely on Australia and the United Kingdom (thus ignoring the U.S. case), we obtain similar results: baseline estimates are 20% in 1991 and 22% in 1997, and estimates for scenario 3 leave the baseline trend unchanged.

Taken in summary, then, these simulations of negative pressures enable us to gauge the importance of demographic composition and policy preferences as sources of welfare state persistence. We can see in the Norwegian and German/Italian cases how, *absent* current levels of demographic composition and especially policy preferences, a pattern of persistence during the 1990s would likely have devolved into welfare state retrenchment. These results bear on questions about sources of persistence. We discuss implications below.

Discussion

Questions about the developmental trajectory of the welfare state—and the possibility of retrenchment—have been central in recent comparative politics and political-sociological scholarship. An accumulating body of evidence has challenged once-common forecasts of the inevitability of welfare state decline (Pierson 2001; Stephens 1996; Swank 2002), pointing to restructuring and a medley of policy-specific

trends. The limitations of the retrenchment scenario for capturing the complexity of current developmental patterns have raised important new questions concerning sources of persistence tendencies in the size and aggregate output of welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1996, 267).

This study has sought to consider mass policy preferences as one source of aggregate persistence tendencies within welfare states. We have employed a comparative research design in which measurement of variables are standardized across countries and over time to examine the impact of mass policy preferences. Our measure of overall welfare state effort (which includes both cash benefits and social services spending relative to GDP) does not exhaust the possibilities for examining this question. But it provides a useful connection to previous literature and one basis for considering factors behind persistence tendencies in the aggregate output of welfare states.¹⁵

Our multivariate analyses have taken into account established factors of welfare state development, while also addressing the possibility of endogeneity with respect to the linkage between policy preferences and welfare state output. Explicit tests for endogeneity set a high standard for inference, but there remain other puzzles regarding long-term feedback processes that we have not explored in this paper. We emphasize that the current study is properly viewed as providing an initial set of baseline estimates for subsequent research and debate, not as the final word on sources of persistence.

Our programmatic finding concerns the centrality of mass policy preferences to persistence in welfare states during the 1990s. We presented a set of simulations that suggest the magnitude of the temporal impact of mass policy preferences. In the Norwegian case, the significance of high levels of welfare state preferences for understanding welfare state persistence can be seen through our simulation of a trend toward the *lower* levels of preferences found in the United States. In reducing welfare state spending by 15 percentage points from the baseline estimate, our results suggest how the Norwegian welfare state would likely have fared absent the temporal pattern of policy preferences during the 1990s. Similar results are found for the German and Italian welfare state, where simulating

¹⁴This can be seen by simulating (higher) welfare state responsiveness in social/Christian democracies ($\beta = 2.99$ from Table 1), yielding a more sizable 5% decline in welfare state output in liberal democracies.

¹⁵We emphasize again that the policy outputs of welfare states have been subject to heterogeneous and at times divergent trends. Our focus here has been on one measure of the aggregate outputs of welfare states, leaving open questions concerning the impact of mass policy preferences within specific social policy domains.

a movement toward the (lower) level of U.S. policy preferences results in a comparably large net decline between 1991 and 1997.

Where policy preferences appear critical to the maintenance of welfare states within these national contexts, our analyses yield quite different results for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Because our multivariate analyses provide evidence that the linkage between policy preferences and welfare output is fairly weak within liberal democracies, parallel simulations involving historical shifts in the level of preferences have a modest impact on liberal welfare states. As a factor behind welfare state persistence, mass policy preferences appear of greatest significance within the European social and Christian democracies, where levels of welfare state support have frequently been quite high and enduring.

The results of this study suggest the possibility of fruitful synthesis between existing welfare state theories and the newer policy responsiveness literatures. Mass policy preferences fit well within both power resources and path dependency theories, and the results presented here suggest they contribute to the institutionalization of social policy frameworks within specific national settings. The temporal effects of aggregate preferences on welfare state persistence also have implications for considering mechanisms through which path dependency operates. Indeed, an important reason why political officials may have greater incentive to maintain (or extend) entitlement programs stems from their enduring degree of popularity within many polities. In this way, then, recent patterns of welfare state “locking in” operate not only through well-known mechanisms such as constitutional structure, but also through mass policy preferences. Results of this study suggest the utility of considering the policy preferences of national populations as part of an explanation for the resiliency of welfare states.

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