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# Party Politics and the Poor: A Research Note

Roger A. Lohmann<sup>1</sup>

Why is it that some states make payments to public welfare recipients that are at least twice as large as those paid to recipients in some other states? On its face, the arbitrary unfairness of such conditions seems obvious yet little is being done to address the matter.

Various explanations for this phenomenon have been advanced. One of the most widely held among political scientists is that the size of such payments reflect the different welfare orientations of the states – a political cultural explanation – and that these welfare orientations in turn are at least partly the result of differential levels of competition among and within political parties in each state. This explanation, first advanced in 1949, has recently been the subject of a great deal of controversy as well as a considerable outpouring of research by political scientists over the past two decades, and also a fair amount of criticism. Following up on the consequences of a statistical re-examination of this relationship for the fifty states by Dawson and Robinson (1963) more than half a dozen investigators have weighed in on the subject. They found a statistically significant relationship between party competition and welfare orientation but the effect disappeared when per capita income was controlled. This result was confirmed by Hofferbert (1966), who found no independent effects for any of the political variables he examined. Despite its obvious implications for public welfare practice and policy, social work researchers have ignored this research completely.

The general trend of findings suggests rejecting any relationship between these two variables, and yet general unwillingness to do so has been grounded both in disciplinary and methodological concerns. In general, the effect of these studies has simply been to obscure the relationship and to render any possible conclusions indeterminate and to call for further needed research.

## Political Parties and Poverty

The focus of this paper is explicitly interdisciplinary. It is directed at researchers interested in questions of social policy, public welfare practice, state government, and American political parties. Even though the research mentioned above, and the renaissance of interest in state politics it is part of, has been conducted within a single discipline – political science – resolution of the issues raised has implications for a much broader interdisciplinary audience. While research in other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and economics also could be brought to bear, the principal focus here will be limited to research in political science and “macro” social work – specifically social policy and social planning.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time this was written, the author was an Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN.

The paper is an appeal for interdisciplinary, or short of that, multi-disciplinary inquiry on questions of the contemporary relationship between American political parties and the poor. I will attempt to demonstrate that a number of fruitful avenues of inquiry have been suggested and opened in the past but are presently subject to appropriate skepticism due to certain methodological and procedural weaknesses – some of them stemming from the use of statistical procedures requiring large and random samples on a universe of fifty cases.

More definitive investigation of many of the underlying questions will be called for as a prelude to seeking viable alternatives for reforming the public welfare system.<sup>2</sup> Opportunities for reform through the much vaunted – and much maligned – two party system are only a backdrop for the paper. The central focus here is on the social scientific question of the empirical relationships between political parties and poor people in our social world and specifically on the role of public welfare as one such linkage.

## Problem

Following the “rediscovery” of poverty in the Kennedy years (1960-1963) and the initiation of the Johnson-era (1968-1968) War on Poverty (Kramer, 1969; Moynihan, 1969; Sharkansky & Hofferbert, 1969; Spergel, 1972), there has been much recent interest in the social sciences on the question of the relationship between poverty and politics in American society. Although social workers and political scientists have, perhaps, the largest professional audiences on the subject, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, social psychologists and others from the liberal arts have also demonstrated interest in these questions at one point or another in recent years. Moreover, the issue has traversed the bounds of the conventional post-New Deal dialogues as both of America’s political parties have entered into the debate, along with activist reform groups like the National Welfare Rights Organization and professional trade associations including the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association and the National Association of Social Workers. During the past decade the question of politics and the poor has been largely dominated by national perspectives and Congressional proposals.

Yet, several things stand out about the emerging consensus on welfare reform. First, it has focused almost exclusively on two levels of American government: the federal government and cities; leaving a third, and equally important – the states – entirely excluded. Secondly, there appears at times to be something approaching universal agreement – at least among the academic specialists involved – that the present welfare system is substantively and morally bankrupt and can only be

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<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of someone reading this, it is obvious that the early, naive “policy sciences” orientation of this statement was completely ignored by actual policy-makers and that both the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and later, Clinton-era welfare reforms were adopted on the basis of the actual political culture of elected legislators – including a number of notable falsehoods. The very diversity of opinions among policy scientists appears to have mitigated any effects they might have had in the area of welfare reform.

replaced (Piven & Cloward, 1971). Thirdly, there is a kind of pious non-partisanship to all of these discussions that suggests (quite falsely, it turned out) that the issue of the poor transcends politics.

The approach taken here is at variance with these points of apparent consensus. First, the focus is exclusively on the state level of government, politics and policy. Second, with the defeat of Nixonian proposals for welfare reform – specifically a national guaranteed annual income – it appears that the present public welfare system – including the newly established SSI program, which somehow escaped through that defeat – will be with us for the foreseeable future. Based on recent experience, we can assume that public welfare in our society is a profoundly political issue and one about which there is very little genuine consensus.<sup>3</sup>

Today, just as a decade ago, when renewed interest in poverty arose, the single most important issue in a problem-ridden public welfare system is the generally, but inconsistently, low levels of payments to recipients in the majority of states. It is not accurate to assume that payments to all welfare recipients in all states are uniformly deficient. In fact, the second most important problem from a systematic standpoint is the enormous variability in payment levels. This variability was a principal rationale for the 1972 amendments creating the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, which is a uniform, nationally administered program of the Social Security Administration established to replace the categorical state programs for the Aged, Blind and Disabled. However, the variability still remains for the most controversial Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and there is growing evidence that variability continues to be an issue both in state-supplements of SSI and in the Medicaid program.

The principal implications of this are as simple as they are profound: If, in fact, recipients in one state receive on average less than half of what recipients in some other state receive and the difference is not related to cost-of-living differences between those states, is there not a strong case that citizens are being treated differently by their government in violation of the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution? The political challenge is whether the general will exists to face up to these challenges. Although there are major legal and constitutional issues involved here, equally important is the empirical question of the political cause(s) to which these systematic differences can be attributed. Since it is a causal connection that is sought, we might initially set forth the parameters of that term as it is usually employed in the social sciences. First, in order for any factor we seek to attribute as causal to be plausible, it must precede in time the factor which it explains. Secondly, there must be a real, discernable (that is, meaningful) relationship between any cause and its effect.

The contemporary explanations of this phenomenon in the published literature can be divided into two broad categories. Both of these are causal explanations

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<sup>3</sup> Note that this statement conforms closely to Benjamin Barber's later (1988) philosophical definition of politics as arising under two conditions: public good and uncertainty.

grounded in statistical correlations. On the one hand, there are the social order explanations that identify some differentiating characteristics of the social orders of sub-national jurisdictions – states or localities – as the causal factor accounting for the differentials in welfare payments. The other are the social organization explanations, which identify some characteristic s of the organizations, associations or groups to which persons in the various jurisdictions may belong as causal factors. An example of the first is the commonly held urbanization-industrialization orientation which links higher levels of welfare orientation to industrial cities, and lower levels to agricultural and rural areas. The second is associated with the approach under consideration here: the inter-party competition hypothesis. Where parties (or factions within parties) are more competitive, welfare orientations will be higher, and where they are less competitive they will be lower.

It must be noted here that the issue has too often been approached as an either-or proposition in which social order explanations are pitted directly against social organization explanations. However, the evidence offered by any of the investigations to the present is not sufficiently convincing in one direction or the other, and further there are serious methodological implications involved in such a head to head comparison. One of the possibilities that deserves more attention than it has received is a multi-variate model in which both social order and social explanations contribute jointly to a composite impact on welfare orientations.

## The Party Competition Hypothesis

One of the earliest formulation of the causes of variations in welfare payments was outlined by the late political scientist V.O. Key Jr., in his class study of *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949). Two decades later Cnudde & McCrone summarized Key's initial argument thus:

Key sees the degree of party competition as crucial because it reflects the the extent to which politics is organized or unorganized. Party competition, by producing some semblance of an organized politics lessens the difficulty of lower status groups in sorting out political actors and issues, thereby enabling them to promote their own interests more effectively..." (Cnudde & McCrone, 1969)

Several implicit assumptions and apparent assertions of Key's approach are worth noting. First is the use of party competition of an indicator, or index of the level of political organization in a state. Secondly, there would appear to be an assumption that the poor everywhere seem to adequately promote their own interest politically and that this is, in some manner, directly responsible for more satisfactory welfare payment levels in some instances. This assumption is seemingly contradicted by lower rates of voting and political participation individually and in associations.

This assumption has a good deal in common with pluralist approaches to power elites and with "modal voter" arguments. The assumption that all citizens in a

democracy have pretty much the same ability to affect policy outcomes has been seriously challenged by a range of studies by C. Wright Mills and others (Mills, 1963).

Further, Key's approach fails to systematically account for (or dismiss) a range of social order variables that have been shown to be relevant in other studies (C.f., Dye, 1966; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Wilensky & LeBeaux, 1965). In particular, two social order explanations are not sufficiently explored or discounted: the role of federalism; and the political economies of individual states. Focus on party competition as a determinative factor also seems to discount rival hypotheses of political organization; specifically, the role of interest groups and public bureaucracies. All state welfare departments cannot be assumed to be equal in the defense and advocacy of the programs before legislative bodies and in budget negotiations with their respective governors' offices, for example.

In addition, the Key approach demonstrates certain measurement weaknesses. Statistically, the resultant models fail to satisfactorily control for possible spurious correlations. There is also a heavy reliance on standard, social indicator-type data.

The central premise of the Key approach seems to be that in situations of political competition, state politicians will seek the support of the poor by promising and then delivering higher welfare payments. In general, this premise lacks face validity and it is difficult to identify state-level examples where this has occurred or is occurring. It is far more likely that such discussions and debates have and will continue to occur among political elites and that any influence of party competition will be mediated through competition among those elites.

## Conclusion

The issue of the causes of the extreme variations that exist among the American states in the levels of welfare payments is obviously a very important one. It is also clear that no satisfactory explanations – not the interparty competition thesis nor the various social order explanations adequately explain these variations. What is needed is a model of a multi-variate explanations which combines both social order and social organization variables into a more comprehensive account.

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