

Entitlements: Social Welfare Policy in the United States

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Political Science 224

COURSE SUMMARY:

Among the various western democracies, America stands apart by virtue of its social welfare system. Unlike many European nations, America has eschewed universal benefits in favor of a more restrained, piece meal approach. Some scholars have concluded that America's unique historical experience, which includes a deep mistrust of central authority and a concurrent abiding admiration for individualism, is the reason why a European-style welfare state has never taken hold. Those who embrace the "American exceptionalism" argument insist that a paternalistic state runs counter to our cultural values and heritage.

Nevertheless, during the last century a fairly extensive social welfare system emerged. Although it will never be confused with a Nordic "cradle to grave" approach, the United States government provides retirement benefits through the Social Security system, health care through the Medicare and Medicaid programs, and an assortment of aid to several legally defined classes of citizenry. The federal government asserted itself beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and continued with the anti-poverty programs sponsored by Lyndon Johnson. Yet, the argument over the size of the role the state should play in social welfare policy has not been settled. Contemporary political discourse is replete with references to Social Security privatization, block grants, and universal health insurance coverage. The government's commitment to social welfare policy is a topic that continues to animate our political debates.

This course examines America's major social welfare programs (also known as entitlements) and the political processes that shape them. Specifically, we shall explore the roles played by elected officials, interest groups, and public agencies in developing these programs. We shall also consider the ideological and cultural arguments surrounding social welfare policy. In addition, our discussion will cover the basic structure of social welfare programs. Finally, we shall assess contemporary efforts to reform the various entitlements. The topics that will be discussed include Social Security, anti-poverty programs such as welfare, and to a lesser extent Medicare and Medicaid.

REQUIREMENTS:

Your grade will be comprised of a take home mid-term exam, a 20-25 page paper (to be presented in class) and class participation.

BOOKS

Countdown to Reform by Henry Aaron and Robert Reischauer

The Real Deal by Sylvester Schieber and John Shoven

Losing Ground by Charles Murray

Ending Welfare as We Know It by R. Kent Weaver

The Divided Welfare State by Jacob Hacker

The American Dream by Jason DeParle

Other readings will be distributed throughout the course.

COURSE OUTLINE

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Weeks 1 and 2:

- What are entitlements? Operational definitions and historical antecedents.
- A brief survey of social welfare systems in other industrial nations. Germany, the modern day pioneer, and the Nordic model
- American culture and social welfare policy – “American exceptionalism” and why socialism never took hold in the U.S.
- Race and social welfare policy – how racial attitudes shape welfare programs.
- Federalism and social welfare policy – states rights’ and state experiments
- The Varied Nature of Entitlements – the stigma of welfare vs. the universal popularity of Social Security
- An overview of the present political environment

READINGS:

chapters 2, 7 in *Growing Public* by Peter Lindert

chapters 1, 8 in *It Didn't Happen Here* by Seymour Martin Lipset

chapter 6 in *The Divided Welfare State*

chapters 5 - 7 in *When Work Disappears* by William Julius Wilson.

SECTION 2: SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY AND THE AGED

Weeks 3 and 4:

Social Security – origins and legislative history

- The Social Security Act of 1935. FDR and the New Deal politics
- The Greenspan Commission and the 1983 legislative changes

READINGS:

chapters 2-7, 10 in *The Real Deal* by Sylvester Sheiber and John Shoven

chapters 1,4,7,9,12, 15-18 in *Still Artful Work* by Paul Light

Week 5:

Social Security – the mechanics

- How the system works – benefit structure, paygo funding, and COLA's
- Strengths – stable income replacement for senior citizens; universality
- Perceived failings – future solvency concerns and outdated benefit structure
- Demographic challenges and fiscal responses to an aging population

READINGS:

chapters 3,4 in *Countdown to Reform* by Henry Aaron and Robert Reischauer

chapters 1 in *The Coming Generational Storm* by Laurence Kotlikoff and Scott Burns

chapter 8 in *Growing Public* by Peter Lindert

Week 6:

Social Security – reform proposals and contemporary issues

- Interest groups and Social Security reform
- Personal accounts, the payroll tax, and altered benefits

READINGS:

Selected press clips and congressional testimony

Chapter 7 in *Countdown to Reform*

Chapter 6 in *The Coming Generational Storm*

- Week 7:** Medicare – health policy and the aged
- The Great Society – legislative history
 - Mechanics – strengths and perceived failings
 - Contemporary issues – prescription drugs and catastrophic coverage

READINGS:

chapter 5 in *The Divided Welfare State*

chapters 1, 4, 8 in *The Politics of Medicare* by Theodore Marmor

Take home mid term is handed out

SECTION 3: SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY AND THE POOR

- Weeks 8 and 9:** Anti-poverty programs – origins and legislative history
- The New Deal and the establishment of unemployment insurance
 - The Great Society and AFDC
 - Reagan, New Federalism and block grants

READINGS:

chapters 1-4 in *Ending Welfare as We Know It* by R. Kent Weaver

chapter 3 in *Between the Lines: Interpreting Welfare Rights* by Shep Melnick

chapters 1-3 in *Losing Ground* by Charles Murray

- Weeks 10 and 11:** Anti-poverty programs – reforms and contemporary issues
- The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996/TANF
 - Interest groups and welfare
 - Conservatives vs. liberals – perverse incentives and a guaranteed income; the deserving and undeserving poor.
 - The efficacy of workfare and the minimum wage
 - Private charities and aid to the poor

READINGS:

chapters 5, 8-13 in *Ending Welfare as We Know It*

chapters 11-17 in *Losing Ground*

chapter 10 in *Growing Public*

- Week 12 and 13:** The Future of Social Welfare Policy in America
- 21st century needs and 20th century policies
 - Lies, damned lies and statistics

READINGS:

chapter 7 in *The Divided Welfare State*

The American Dream by Jason DeParle

- Weeks 14** Class Presentations