

Policy Makes Mass Politics

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Abstract

This review examines policy feedback effects among the mass public, with a focus on social policies in the United States and Europe. It shows that existing policies feed back into the political system, shaping subsequent policy outcomes. Policies exert this effect by altering not only the capacities, interests, and beliefs of political elites and states but also those of the public. Public policies can shape political participation and attitudes. These effects can be positive or negative, enhancing or undercutting participation and conferring positive or negative messages about individuals' worth as citizens. These effects originate in elements of program design, such as the size, visibility, and traceability of benefits, the proximity of beneficiaries, and modes of program administration. Thus, public policy itself shapes the distance of citizens from government, with profound implications for democratic governance.

INTRODUCTION

Public policies do not arise in a vacuum but are shaped in profound ways by earlier policy. Existing policies define the political environment, shaping the capacities, interests, and beliefs of political elites and states and therefore the outcomes of subsequent rounds of policy making. Such policy feedback effects influence political behaviors and attitudes among the public as well, and these in turn also have consequences for subsequent policy outcomes. By examining the consequences of policies for individuals as well as for political elites, the policy feedback literature adds public policy to the list of factors influencing behavior and attitudes among the public.

This review canvasses the literature in the field of American politics—and, to a lesser extent, in comparative politics—concerning mass publics and feedback effects arising from social policies in the United States and Europe, the focus of much of this scholarship. Owing to space constraints, I must ignore valuable scholarship on feedbacks in other locations, such as Africa (MacLean 2011), and in other policy domains, such as taxation, voter registration, and the military draft. However, the literature on the effects of social policies in the United States and Europe has amassed a wealth of insights that are relevant for other places and issue areas.

After briefly reviewing the intellectual origins of the policy feedback concept and walking through some empirical findings, the article catalogs more systematically the policy characteristics that seem to matter in generating mass policy feedbacks. A discussion of the implications of these policy effects for democratic governance ensues, followed by an enumeration of challenges that remain for scholars working in this area. Despite great strides in a few short years, outstanding questions linger as to the mechanisms and conditions under which feedbacks emerge. There are also continuing methodological concerns about inference and causality. In many ways, however, this is a literature to be celebrated because it combines the concerns and methods of historical institutionalism and political behavior, two approaches normally pursued separately by different groups of scholars. The feedbacks-and-publics literature introduces a new factor, public policies and their designs, into the well-trod landscape of causes of behaviors and attitudes. And it brings citizens into historical institutionalism, where they have often been absent. The result can be a messy, multilevel amalgam, but it provides rich insights into the actual workings and consequences of political systems.

ORIGINS OF POLICY FEEDBACK THEORY

The study of policy feedbacks began with the seminal work of Schattschneider (1935) on the politics of tariffs, followed a generation later by the policy typologies of Lowi (1964) and Wilson (1973). This work argued that policies of different types generate different patterns of political mobilization. The central insight was that public policies are not merely products of politics but also shape the political arena and the possibilities for further policy making. Subsequent scholars developed a vast theoretical and empirical literature that has examined feedback effects at the levels of the state and the political elite (for overviews, see Thelen 1999 and Pierson & Skocpol 2002). This work shows that public policies and the nature of governance are not determined solely by demand or function but also by past policy legacies. It demonstrates how institutions, including public policies, shape interests and choice among elected politicians, bureaucracies, interest groups, and other elite actors through mechanisms such as path dependence, increasing returns, and self-sustaining processes. In summary, policies themselves can be causal, shaping the political landscape and influencing the capacities, interests, and preferences of political actors and of the state itself.

A few examples illustrate these arguments. Skocpol (1992) showed how the existence of an early, and corrupt, system of public pensions for Civil War veterans thwarted the development

of universal public pensions in the United States for decades. Pierson (1994) explained how the design of the American Social Security system creates a barrier to privatized individual accounts because of the “double payment” problem: today’s payroll tax receipts fund today’s benefits, and so there is no extra money to put aside in individual accounts to accrue for the future. Hacker (2002) showed how the development of employer-provided health insurance during World War II and its subsequent subsidization through the tax code created patterns of political mobilization and stakeholder interests that thwarted health insurance reform for many years. In each of these instances, existing policies established stakes, shaped capacities, defined interests, and created budget constraints. Subsequent policies were generated not on a blank slate but in the context of these prior policy-generated conditions.

The fact that the literature on policy feedback effects first developed with an examination of elite political entities makes empirical sense. Much as the rational choice literature found that objective stakes influence the behavior of elites (say, members of congressional committees) much more than the behavior of mass publics, so too has the feedback literature focused on elites, who possess much more information, have more clearly defined goals, and are situated in institutions that actually change with policy (Soss & Schram 2007). Another reason that political behavior scholars were not the first to examine feedback effects has to do with bifurcations within political science that kept the public policy and political behavior research areas poles apart. For behavior scholars, public policy long represented a “remote, eventual target of political action” or “an indeterminate object of citizen preferences,” as Mettler & Soss (2004, p. 55) described in their cogent intellectual history of policy feedback scholarship, not something to be included in their studies. Public policy and mass politics represented “opposite ends of the political process” that were “effectively cordoned off from each other.”

Scholars began to break through these barriers, bringing public policy and political behavior together by developing hypotheses about the ways in which public policies might influence individuals’ attitudes and behaviors and in turn shape the political environment. In early, seminal work, Schneider & Ingram (1993) argued that the designs of public policies generate the “social construction of target populations,” which the authors defined as “the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy” (p. 334). These characterizations, or “stereotypes,” in turn influence the subsequent behavior of public officials toward these groups. Schneider & Ingram’s work was in part a reaction to the literature on the “culture of poverty,” which asserted that the poor had a value system that undermined their ability to escape the underclass (e.g., Moynihan 1965). Schneider & Ingram argued instead that any such group characteristics were not exogenous but rather shaped by public policy itself.

Pierson (1993) offered a description of the mechanisms behind mass feedback effects, asserting that public policies have “resource” and “interpretive” effects that alter the capacities and interests of affected publics. His hypotheses have guided work in this area ever since. Eventually this literature came to examine a wide variety of mass policy feedback effects. As Soss & Schram (2007, p. 113) put it, “Politics can set political agendas and shape identities and interests. They can influence beliefs about what is possible, desirable, and normal. They can alter conceptions of citizenship and status. They can channel or constrain agency, define incentives, and redistribute resources. They can convey cues that define, arouse, or pacify constituencies.”

FINDINGS ON POLICY FEEDBACKS AND MASS PUBLICS

In the two decades since Pierson and Schneider & Ingram laid out their theoretical expectations, an extensive literature searching for and demonstrating feedback effects on mass publics

AFDC: Aid for Families with Dependent Children

TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

has emerged in both the American politics and comparative politics fields. Because the members of the public know and care about politics and policy less than political elites, are less attuned to government activity, and are less sure about their stakes in government action, much of the search for policy feedback effects on mass publics has centered on social welfare policy, one of the most salient policy areas to ordinary citizens. In the American context, studies have looked at Social Security (Campbell 2003); Medicare (Morgan & Campbell 2011); the GI Bill (Mettler 2005); welfare (Aid for Families with Dependent Children, AFDC), Head Start, and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) (Soss 1999, 2000); welfare reform (Soss & Schram 2007); and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, Head Start, and public housing assistance (Bruch et al. 2010). There are studies of other policy areas as well, such as tax expenditures (Mettler 2011a), the criminal justice system (Weaver & Lerman 2010), conscription policies and military casualties (Kriner & Shen 2010), and the women's rights movement (Goss 2012). Scholars of comparative politics also have examined feedback effects arising from social policies (see Mau 2003; Kumlin 2004; Kumlin & Rothstein 2005; Lynch 2006; Svallfors 2007, 2010; Larsen 2007; Alber & Kohler 2009; Lynch & Myrskylä 2009) and from additional types of policies, such as active labor market policy (Anderson 2009). As this review proceeds, please note that I refer to programs in the United States, unless otherwise noted, and that as an Americanist—with apologies to my comparativist colleagues and readers—I use “Social Security” to refer to the American public pension system and “welfare” to refer to the AFDC/TANF social assistance programs.

What Policies Do: The Nature of Feedback Effects for Mass Publics

The existing literature has explored the pathways by which public policies affect the public; discovered both positive and negative effects arising from different program designs; examined both attitudes and behaviors as dependent variables; and explored whether feedback effects occur just for target populations or for broader publics. Although a number of questions remain open, the literature has made great strides in a few short years.

How do policies influence behavior and attitudes? An early theoretical claim was that welfare-state programs would generate constituencies with incentives to protect their benefits, an attitudinal and behavioral effect with its basis in self-interest (Pierson 1994). Subsequent research sought to unpack this claim, showing that social policies could affect target groups through three pathways: affecting levels of politically relevant resources, affecting feelings of political engagement such as political efficacy and political interest, and affecting the likelihood of political mobilization by interest groups and other political entrepreneurs. For example, Social Security helped transform senior citizens, who were once the least active age group in politics, into the most active by (*a*) giving them the resources of money and free time (the latter by making retirement a reality for most); (*b*) enhancing their levels of political interest and efficacy by tying their well-being visibly to a government program; and (*c*) creating incentives for interest groups to mobilize them by creating a political identity based on program reciprocity. These effects are strongest among low-income seniors, for whom Social Security represents a greater share of their total income. Seniors subsequently used their enhanced participatory capacity to combat threats to their government programs (Campbell 2003). Other studies demonstrated similar resource and interpretive effects. The GI Bill enhanced the political and civic participation of veterans who took advantage of the educational benefits it conferred, particularly those veterans from lower socioeconomic groups who would have been unlikely to go to college otherwise. The program both provided a resource, education, and fostered an interpretive effect, “reciprocity,” by which veterans felt obliged to give back to a society that had provided them with such a wonderful opportunity (Mettler 2005).

The reciprocity effect suggested that self-interest was not the only driving force behind policies' behavioral effects.

Further work showed, however, that unlike the Social Security and GI Bill examples, policy feedback effects on mass publics are not always positive. Negative policy experiences arising from other types of policy design can undermine rather than enhance political participation. For example, because the American social assistance program for families with dependent children ("welfare," or AFDC/TANF more formally) is administered by caseworkers whose control over benefits can seem capricious and arbitrary, recipients come to view not just welfare but government in general with mistrust and skepticism (Soss 1999, 2000). This program design and the stingy benefit levels render the political participation rates of its recipients even lower than their already modest resource levels would predict; benefits are too small to have a positive resource effect on participation, and the program's interpretative effects are negative. Similarly, the more intensive one's encounters with the criminal justice system, the less likely one is to participate in politics subsequently, presumably because of the negative citizenship messages received (Weaver & Lerman 2010). Thus, policy feedback effects can be positive or negative, depending on program design.

Scholars have examined the effects of policy designs on two types of dependent variables, political behavior and political attitudes. Much of the earlier work focused on political participation, partly because of Pierson's call to look for protective constituencies and partly because the mechanisms linking policies and behavior seemed relatively straightforward. Because public policies can tangibly influence the level of politically relevant resources that citizens possess—such as money, free time, and skills—they can affect the political and civic behavior of target populations in an apparently direct manner (as in the Social Security and GI Bill examples).

In contrast, the search for policy effects on attitudes has been more complicated, with fewer consistent findings. On the one hand, Wlezien (1995) found that the public reacts to the policy status quo in a "thermostatic" manner, moving to favor reduced government spending when spending is high and vice versa. Similarly, scholars of comparative politics have found a relationship between public policies and several attitudinal outcomes. Swedish citizens who had more experiences with "customer" institutions of the national welfare state—typically universal programs with a high degree of client empowerment—exhibited greater trust in politicians, more support for increased welfare-state funding, more leftward ideological self-placements, and greater social capital and interpersonal trust compared to those experiencing targeted "client" programs (Kumlin 2004, Kumlin & Rothstein 2005). In the United States, receiving benefits from the means-tested AFDC program is associated with lower external efficacy (Soss 1999), while receiving support from universal programs like Social Security is associated with greater efficacy (Campbell 2003).

On the other hand, there is less evidence that changes in policy designs produce changes in attitudes. For example, changes in the design of Medicare (Morgan & Campbell 2011) and welfare (Soss & Schram 2007) had little effect on attitudes toward those programs or toward related issues. The Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 (MMA) increased the privatization of Medicare by introducing a prescription drug benefit that was not available through traditional government Medicare but only through stand-alone private insurance plans. The MMA also increased the incentives for senior citizens to leave traditional Medicare altogether and to receive all of their health care through private managed care companies such as health maintenance organizations (HMOs). In the run-up to the bill's passage, there was a state-versus-market political debate about whether this increased privatization would alter seniors' views about government versus individual responsibility for health insurance, their feelings of group consciousness and solidarity, their support for traditional Medicare funding, or their support for other forms of privatization, such as Social Security individual accounts. However, comparing the preferences of seniors who

did and did not enroll in the prescription drug plans or in the managed care plans before and after MMA implementation, Morgan & Campbell (2011) found no change in these attitudes. Similarly, Soss & Schram (2007) found no change in public attitudes toward AFDC/TANF after the 1996 welfare reform. Despite the fact that the reform introduced lifetime limits and work requirements for welfare—reforms that the public supported and that addressed directly the aspects of the pre-existing program the public most disliked—the public became no more positive toward the program, its recipients, or the Democratic party, which had forged the reform.

The failure of changes in program designs to alter attitudes may have to do with the drivers of attitudes as opposed to behavior. Although political behavior is driven by factors that programs can tangibly and noticeably alter, political attitudes typically arise from sources that are difficult to overcome, such as early political socialization, group identifications, or symbolic politics and values (e.g., partisanship and ideology). That said, public attitudes do have a dynamic element, changing in response to real-life events and stimuli (Page & Shapiro 1992, Zaller 1992). But this dynamism depends on information reaching citizens. Many Americans may not have known that welfare was reformed, or in what direction; many seniors may not have perceived a change in the government's role with the MMA's privatization of Medicare. Attitudinal change may also be more dependent on intermediary institutions and actors, such as interest groups, to inform the public and alert them to the significance of policy alterations.

Related to the search for attitudinal or behavioral effects of policy designs is the population of interest: do policy feedback effects shape the behaviors and attitudes only of the target population or those of larger publics as well? The effect of policy is typically more salient for program clienteles, and most research has focused there. A few scholars have looked at effects on larger publics—such as the Soss & Schram study of welfare reform—but have not uncovered significant effects. One might imagine countermobilization of larger publics in the face of gains by target populations—there has long been speculation that intergenerational “warfare” will break out in the United States and elsewhere as nonseniors come to resent and attempt to combat seniors' generous welfare-state benefits with participatory surges of their own (e.g., Fairlie 1988, Peterson & Howe 1989)—but neither attitudinal nor participatory movements of this type have yet emerged. More work examining feedback effects on the general public would be welcome.

Policy Characteristics that Generate Policy Feedbacks

Pierson's early observation that policies generate resource and interpretive effects has been helpful in guiding scholars' search for policy effects. Scholars expanded on these general guidelines to look for the specific characteristics of policies that produce the feedback effects observed. Patashnik & Zelizer (2009, p. 7) rightly pointed out that in the feedback literature writ large, “the lack of a common conceptual framework has prevented authors from fully engaging one another,” with insights “scattered across different cases and time periods.” However, it is nonetheless possible to distill some generalizations about the effects of policies on individuals.

Originally, feedback work vis-à-vis the mass public focused on the participatory and attitudinal effects of universal programs versus targeted ones. Scholars extolled the advantages of the former over the latter, asserting that universal programs are able to help the poor in a nonstigmatizing way through hidden redistribution (Skocpol 1991, Wilson 1987). As Mettler & Stonecash (2008, p. 275) put it more recently, “Universal eligibility criteria may help incorporate beneficiaries as full members of society, bestowing dignity and respect on them. Conversely, means-tested programs may convey stigma and thus reinforce or expand beneficiaries' isolation.” That beneficiaries of universal programs such as Social Security and Medicare participate in politics at far higher rates

than those of means-tested programs such as AFDC/TANF seemed to suggest that the former generate positive feedback effects and the latter negative effects.

However, subsequent scholars noted that the “universal” and “means-tested” labels denoted constellations of characteristics that tend to bundle together, and they have sought to untangle the specific elements of each, in much the same way that scholars of political participation, having noted that socioeconomic status (SES) is strongly correlated with political participation, were able to tease apart the influence of each constituent element of SES, education, income, and occupation (e.g., Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980). In addition, later scholars demonstrated that not all means-tested programs generate negative feedback effects, as first thought. Thus, research in this area has become more specific and nuanced (e.g., Bruch et al. 2010), although much work remains to be done.

Size of benefits. One of the main resource effects that scholars have uncovered is the size of benefits. When large, benefits can enhance political participation by increasing participatory capacity. Generous benefits, such as Social Security payments to retirees, facilitate income-driven acts such as contributing to campaigns, and, by making retirement a reality for many Americans, enhance participation in time-dependent acts such as campaign work as well. Large benefits also have attitudinal effects; with seniors getting on average over half of their income from Social Security, and the bottom two-fifths dependent on the program for nearly all their income, they have compelling reasons to pay attention to public affairs as their well-being is so visibly and inextricably linked with government action (Campbell 2003). This political-interest effect spurs other political activity, such as voting. In contrast, when benefits are too small, they may fail to generate resource effects. Like Social Security, AFDC/TANF confers cash payments, but benefits are so low, leaving families below the poverty line, that they do not enhance political participation rates. The Family and Medical Leave Act is a social policy that failed to spur political participation because the 12-week leave that it provides for workers who are ill or caring for family members is unpaid; few can afford to take advantage of the program, and as a result, no political constituency has emerged to protect or expand it (Howard 2007). There are also examples outside of social welfare policy: the War on Poverty’s Model Cities program was spread too thin to have much effect, and the general revenue-sharing program of the early 1970s was too meager to create state and local government allies; in both cases, protective constituencies failed to emerge, and both programs ended with a whimper (Patashnik & Zelizer 2009). Larger benefits fuel not only a stronger resource effect but also a greater sense that a benefit is worth fighting for.

Visibility and traceability of benefits. Benefits that are discernable and traceable to government action (Arnold 1990) are more likely to generate feedback effects, Social Security pension payments being a preeminent example. In contrast, Mettler (2011a) showed that social policy benefits delivered through the tax code as tax breaks, or more formally, tax expenditures—such as child care tax credits or college tuition tax credits—are not recognized by recipients as government benefits and do not therefore generate the same kind of attention to government action as direct spending programs.

The contrast between two reforms of Medicare further illustrates the visibility point. The Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act of 1987 expanded Medicare by capping the out-of-pocket costs beneficiaries faced for copayments, deductibles, and other cost sharing. This enhanced benefit was to be funded by an increase in seniors’ monthly Medicare premiums and a surtax on the income of the top 40% of seniors. But few Medicare recipients ever face such catastrophic costs, and many seniors, particularly the affluent who were being asked to fund this new benefit, already had private insurance covering such costs. Consequently, seniors could not see how they would benefit from

this new law, and they successfully lobbied Congress to repeal it. In contrast, the new prescription drug benefit added by the MMA in 2003 was designed to be as visible as possible: the program provided a benefit that most seniors would enjoy (more than 80% take at least one prescription medicine); benefits would flow at the outset without waiting for revenues to build up to fund the program (indeed, the program was funded almost entirely by general tax revenue and only modestly by seniors themselves); and the program provided first-dollar coverage, so recipients would enjoy coverage immediately. Despite shortcomings in the legislation, seniors are nonetheless very happy with the new benefit, and a protective constituency has emerged (Morgan & Campbell 2011).

Visibility and traceability are informational effects; a benefit that is more visible or more traceable to government action conveys information to the recipient that influences attitudes and behaviors. The role of information is further illustrated in an analysis showing that individuals who received statements about their future Social Security pension benefits gained more knowledge of the program and had more confidence in it than those who did not receive such statements, after controls for individual characteristics (Cook et al. 2010). Thus, the visibility of the government's role is a characteristic of programs that matters for the creation of feedback effects.

Proximity and concentration/diffusion of beneficiaries. Another program characteristic, which contains both informational and mobilization elements, is the proximity and concentration or diffusion of beneficiaries. Beneficiaries who are geographically near to others and who can identify them (or who can be identified by mobilizing entities such as interest groups) can more easily exchange information and band together for political action. Soss & Schram (2007) additionally noted that “proximity” need not be geographic; proximity can refer to the likelihood that other members of the public identify with a program or believe that they might benefit from it someday. Thus, in their two-way framework for analyzing feedback processes—how visible and proximate policies are—Soss & Schram categorized welfare (AFDC/TANF) as a “distant-visible type” of program for most. In other words, welfare is highly visible as an emblem of all that is wrong with government spending, and distant in that most people think they will never be beneficiaries themselves. Because people underestimate their likelihood of utilizing means-tested programs (Rank & Hirschl 2002), but can envision themselves as beneficiaries of universal programs such as Social Security and Medicare, they are more supportive of the latter.

Duration of benefits. The duration of benefits also appears to influence the emergence of feedback effects. Programs of long duration, such as Social Security and Medicare, from which one will benefit for the rest of one's life, seem to spark more activism, in part because one will benefit from the fruits of one's political labors. There is less incentive to engage in political activity around programs that are of short duration or are episodic in nature. College is short; bouts of unemployment generally are short as well. By the time an individual's activism helped secure better terms for federal college loans, enhanced job training, or greater unemployment insurance benefits, the individual would be out of the program. Similarly, that one can move in and out of eligibility for means-tested programs deters activism as well.

Program administration. Program administration is a crucial and multifaceted aspect of program design that shapes policy feedback effects, positive or negative. The way in which a program is run can generate resource effects: Soss (2000) showed how the inclusive design of Head Start, in which parents of preschool children participate in curriculum planning and other tasks, can foster politically relevant skills.

However, scholars have more commonly shown how program administration confers interpretive effects that influence political efficacy and feelings of “deservingness” or stigma. Factors in

program administration that appear to matter include program structures, the routines followed by administrators and recipients, and organizational cultures (J. Soss, private communication). Each of these deserves its own section, but both in the interest of saving space and because scholars often treat them as groups of factors that tend to be found together in program designs, I discuss them under the broader heading of “program administration.”

A variety of studies demonstrate that whether program administration is rational or arbitrary—that is, whether programs follow the principles of procedural justice (Tyler 1998)—has a large effect on recipients, conveying messages about their worth as citizens and about how fairly and courteously government will treat them. Social Security sends positive messages of incorporation to seniors by reaching out to them to initiate their benefits and working with them to maximize their pensions. Recipients hear the message that they are deserving and that the program will work with them to capitalize on their citizenship rights. Similarly, Kumlin & Rothstein (2005, p. 347) found that where programs are run in a bureaucratic-rational manner, clients are treated with “respect and dignity,” and they feel both that they are able to communicate their concerns to civil servants and that their opinions are heard. Soss’s seminal work (1999, 2000) on Social Security Disability Insurance showed that although SSDI is a complicated program, beneficiaries feel that the system is governed by rules, that they have a voice in the system, and that their problems will eventually be resolved in a just manner. As a result, SSDI recipients view government as open and responsive.

On the other end of the spectrum, recipients in the American AFDC/TANF system hear the opposite, stigmatizing message: that they are undeserving and that their claim to government benefits is shameful. Moreover, because their benefits are dependent on interactions with “grass-roots bureaucrats” who act as gatekeepers and who can easily be suspected of using “prejudice, stereotype, and ignorance as a basis for determination” (Lipsky 1980, p. 69; Goodsell 1981), they view the welfare system, and by extension, the federal government, as an arbitrary entity in which they have little input (Soss 1999).

Following from this work, Bruch et al. (2010) examined three programs that vary in the structure of “authority relations,” from the incorporating design of Head Start at the positive end of the participatory democracy principle to the paternalistic design of TANF at the other end, with the bureaucratic design of public housing in the middle. They found correspondingly positive, negative, and null effects of the programs on recipients’ civic and political participation, which they attributed to the citizenship messages conferred by these varying authority structures.

Finally, Plutzer’s (2010) work on food stamps too suggested that means-tested programs are not necessarily stigmatizing. Although the food stamp program is income tested, he found that the political participation of young adults from families that were poor when they were age 14 was greater in states with better (more extensive) food stamp coverage. That is, the effect of moving from the tenth worst to the tenth best state closed up half of the participation gap between poor and nonpoor young adults. Inference is a little loose (he does not have individual data on food stamp recipiency), and these data cannot discern the mechanism by which greater food stamp coverage leads to higher political participation among the poor (whether it is the welcoming administration of the program or overall state culture), but the effect is consistent with a story of positive citizenship messages conveyed in the more inclusive states.

Thus, the manner in which programs are run has a large effect on client attitudes—especially on their feelings of political efficacy—and their likelihood of engaging in political activity. The routines, organizational cultures, and structures of social programs convey messages to clients about their worth and determine whether they will be treated fairly or arbitrarily. These program interactions spill over into the political realm, as client experiences at the hands of program officials become the clients’ indicator of their place in society and government.

Implications for Democratic Governance

The literature on policy feedbacks and mass publics has moved beyond the universal-versus-targeted dichotomy to show how specific characteristics of programs confer resources and convey interpretive effects. How generous benefits are, whether they are earned, how visible the government role is, how proximate other beneficiaries are, how long program membership lasts, and how programs are administered affect both whether programs augment or undercut individuals' politically relevant resources and what kind of messages individuals receive about the legitimacy of their claim to benefits and their worth to society. Universal programs tend to convey positive messages, but even means-tested programs can have positive interpretive effects, depending on how they are designed and administered.

These effects of program design have significant implications for two important aspects of democratic governance. First, the policy feedbacks phenomenon raises serious questions for theories of democratic representation predicated on responsiveness. As theorists from John Stuart Mill to Robert Dahl have asserted, the hallmark of democratic governance is the notion that a government's policies should reflect the preferences of its citizens (Mill 1962, Dahl 1971); the "open interplay of opinion and policy is the distinguishing mark of popular rule," as Harold Lasswell put it (quoted by Key 1964, p. 7). A large empirical literature assesses the health of democratic systems by measuring levels of such responsiveness (for overviews, see Burstein 2003 and Manza & Cook 2002). Of note is that in both theoretical and empirical accounts, responsiveness is evaluated in normative terms: congruence between supposedly exogenous citizen preferences and policy outputs is good, and more is better. However, the feedbacks concept threatens this citizen-input model by showing that the very citizen preferences to which policy makers are supposed to respond may arise from previous policies themselves. This may force us to think about representation in new ways if it turns out that "policy makers play a key role in constructing the citizen 'inputs' they respond to" (Joe Soss, personal communication).

Second, an important extension of the responsiveness literature has examined inequalities in citizen voice (e.g., Gilens 2005, Bartels 2008), and here too the feedback literature has deep implications. Democracy is predicated on the equal distance of citizens from government, and yet some citizens' preferences are much more likely to be expressed in policy than others'. But feedback scholarship demonstrates that public programs themselves shape the ability, interest, and opportunities of citizens to participate politically. The structure of policies can undermine or build up recipients' participation, disadvantaging or advantaging groups beyond their personal characteristics. Government itself shapes patterns of political inequality through the designs of public policies.

Another normative concern is the direction of feedback effects created. To the extent that self-interest drives these feedback effects, is it possible to avoid feedback effects that only create solely self-interested constituencies? Ingram & Schneider (1993, p. 90) summed up the attitude of such constituencies: "Advantaged groups see government as a responsive forum for pursuing their own purposes, and they often win. There is little difference between their interests and the public interest, and so there is nothing wrong with purely self-interested behavior." Can such attitudes be avoided? How can policies be designed that generate broader civic values? Evidence from comparative scholars suggests that broad universal programs can increase interpersonal trust, social capital, and in turn civic solidarity, rather than merely fuel narrow self-interest among target populations (Kumlin 2004, Kumlin & Rothstein 2005). However, the relationship between these broader civic effects and the designs of specific programs, the breadth and generosity of welfare-state regimes in general, or larger political contexts remains to be addressed.

CHALLENGES

Although the literature on policy feedbacks and mass publics has made considerable strides, several serious challenges remain for scholars working in this area.

Causality and Inference

First is the question of causality and inference, at both the theoretical and empirical levels. How can we know whether programs themselves affect political attitudes and behaviors? There are so many reasons that different groups may have different preferences and exhibit different patterns of political activity—how can we plausibly attribute such group differences to program experiences and not simply to pre-existing factors and characteristics?

To determine causality, researchers ideally could conduct experiments, randomly assigning subjects to different treatments, such as programs of different design, in order to discern program effects on attitudes or behaviors. For example, if a researcher wished to determine that a certain program design feature affected an outcome—for instance, that benefit size affected political participation rates, with those receiving larger government benefits hypothesized to participate at higher rates than those receiving smaller benefits—she could randomly assign subjects to each treatment and then see whether political participation rates subsequently differed. Because assignment to treatment is random, the researcher could rule out other causes of any observed participatory differences. (Note, of course, that experiments are useful for determining causality but not necessarily mechanisms. In this instance, the researcher would not know without further work whether the observed post-treatment participatory difference was due to a resource effect or an interest effect; see below for more on mechanisms.)

However, true random experiments are rare in social science, and researchers have typically possessed only observational data on program reciprocity or other policy experiences. Moreover, existing data have often also been cross-sectional or retrospective. The difficulty that cross-sectional data pose for causal inference is that they are subject to selection effects. If we observe that recipients of two programs of different designs hold differing attitudes or exhibit differing patterns of political participation, we cannot attribute those differences to their differential program experiences with confidence: the observed differences may simply be due to pre-existing differences in the target populations rather than to a treatment effect (see Kumlin 2004, pp. 98–99). We can attempt to control for all the ways in which we think target populations differ (various demographic characteristics and so on), but two problems remain. One is that what truly differentiates the populations may remain unmeasured in the data (for example, unobserved differences in ambition, educational cohort, or local context)—an omitted-variable problem. The other is the empty-cell problem that occurs when target populations are too dissimilar. When there is not enough overlap between groups as different as Social Security recipients and TANF recipients on income and other factors, the requirements of multiple regression are not met (Lieberman 1985, Plutzer 2010). The problem of unmeasured variables or empty cells is particularly acute in cross-national studies. How can we control sufficiently for the myriad cultural, sociological, institutional, and programmatic differences between countries?

Researchers have also utilized retrospective data at times. Particularly when one is interested in the effect of policies that individuals utilized earlier in life, or when one wishes to control for earlier experiences or resource levels—such as childhood SES—one must ask respondents to report on levels of these variables from the past. However, recall is fraught with problems: individuals have difficulty reporting past behaviors because memories telescope; they have difficulty reporting past conditions or personal characteristics because of projection from the present; and so on.

Differential mortality (both actual mortality and panel mortality in multiwave surveys) threatens inference as well.

Fortunately, there are ways to address many of these problems. The quality of retrospective data can be improved tremendously with better recall techniques, including the use of landmark events such as marriage and the birth of children to anchor memories or the recreation of autobiographical information using event history calendars (Belli et al. 2001). The confidence we have in inferences from post-treatment cross-sectional data can be improved using matching, where individuals who did and did not experience a certain program are matched on all other characteristics [although when one only has post-treatment cross-sectional data, one can never be certain that the variables on which the matching is done did not themselves change as a result of the program experience (Sekhon 2004)].

Scholars within the policy feedback field have already begun to tackle inferential problems with the best defense—effective research designs. Careful program comparison improves inference about the effects of program designs. Soss (1999, 2000) compared AFDC and Head Start—programs that have different designs but the same target population. Thus controlling for pre-existing differences among recipients, he could plausibly attribute differences in post-treatment attitudes and behaviors to differential program design. But because these programs might differ in degree of stigma, an even stronger design examines cross-state variation within one program: the Bruch et al. (2010) examination of TANF beneficiaries across states with more and less paternalist program designs. Because TANF participants are roughly similar across states and discourse about “welfare” is national in scope, observed differences in the political participation of TANF recipients across states could confidently be explained by differential program rules. Similarly, Plutzer (2010) examined cross-state variation within one program, namely food stamps; because benefit levels and eligibility are set federally and are therefore uniform across states, he could attribute observed differences in the later political participation of the poor versus the nonpoor across states to differences in state administration of the food stamp program.

Another powerful research design examines within-program change. If a program changes design, do attitudes and behaviors change as a result? The difficulty with this potentially promising approach is that many feedbacks may be the result of slow-moving processes (Pierson 2004) that would not be captured in the time frame of the research. In particular, attitudinal change may only come in the long term with generational replacement, rather than through change within individuals. The fact that Morgan & Campbell (2011) failed to find attitudinal changes among Medicare recipients four years after the program’s design changed suggests this might be the case. Perhaps the changed design of Medicare would shape attitudes, not by changing the views of those already in the program but rather by creating a “new normal” of privatized provision that new cohorts of Medicare beneficiaries are socialized into over time. A second challenge for within-program change is how great a break with the past the new policy design represents. If a new design—like private, stand-alone prescription drug plans—is merely “layered” onto an existing design (Schickler 2001), its effect may be muted. A third challenge is whether individuals even notice that a design change has taken place; such changes can be subtle from the perspective of citizens far more attentive to work and family concerns than to program structures, particularly if there are no mediating actors explaining the significance of program change. A fourth challenge with examining program change is whether researchers have an adequate measure of prechange attitudes or behaviors. Panel data would be ideal for this purpose, if the baseline were early enough to capture attitudes or behaviors before the program change took place. But the question about such over-time data is the choice of a starting point—is it arbitrary or meaningful?

Another effective research design is the graduated effect. In this successful approach, researchers look for gradations in program designs and correspondingly graduated attitudinal or behavioral

effects. It is worth underlining the strong research designs behind two previously mentioned articles. Bruch et al. (2010) examined the same low-income population exposed to different policy designs in welfare, public housing, and Head Start. The programs are graduated in terms of the nature of program administration, and the authors found a correspondingly graduated effect on their dependent variables of interest. Similarly, Weaver & Lerman (2010) found that increasingly intensive and severe exposure to the criminal justice system—from being questioned by police to being arrested, convicted, jailed, and serving serious time—resulted in monotonic declines in subsequent political and civic participation. In both instances, the fact that the size of the effect corresponded to the size of the treatment heightened confidence that the policy was actually causing the participatory outcomes. Weaver & Lerman additionally had a measure of predilection for criminality; with this control, they could be even more certain that the association between contact with the criminal justice system and participation was causal rather than merely correlational.

Finally, although random-assignment experiments are rarely available to social scientists, natural experiments can provide valuable inferential leverage. Scholars have utilized lotteries such as the Vietnam-era military draft or have employed regression discontinuity designs, such as Lerman & Onofrio's (2011) work on privatized garbage collection in Chicago. There, apartment buildings use private versus public garbage collection depending on their size; because it is unlikely that residents select their apartments based on mode of garbage collection, Lerman & Onofrio could see whether opinions on state-market issues differ between residents immediately above and below the cutoff point, groups that should not differ on other dimensions. Chen (2011) similarly capitalized on a natural experiment to assess whether voter turnout is influenced by receipt of a distributional government program, in this instance hurricane disaster relief. He examined pre- and post-hurricane voter records to show that those who received hurricane relief in Florida in 1994 were more likely to vote in the subsequent election than those whose claims were rejected. Because hurricane relief is an exogenous stimulus, this design overcomes selection effects, and we can be more certain that the turnout differential was due to the mobilizing effects of program reciprocity. Scholars should be on the lookout for similar opportunities.

Mechanisms

Identifying the mechanisms that link public programs with individual attitudes and behaviors remains a stubborn challenge. Some mechanisms arise from program designs themselves. As Lynch & Myrskylä (2009) cogently summarized, existing work shows how feedback effects “may work through ideas—the way that policy institutions affect public anxieties about corruption (Skocpol 1992) or recipients’ beliefs about civic duty (Mettler 2005), their own political efficacy (Soss 1999), or the legitimacy of their claims-making (Schneider & Ingram 1993)—and/or through the more tangible resources of time and money that policies may confer on individuals (see Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005).” Sometimes a policy feedback effect is measured, but the mechanism remains unknown. The design of Plutzer’s food stamp work is well suited for demonstrating a feedback but cannot discern the mechanisms linking food stamp coverage during individuals’ adolescence with their political participation as young adults, as he readily admits (2010). Sometimes survey data permit mechanisms to be discerned; in other cases, in-depth qualitative work has best captured mechanisms, as in Soss’s work (1999, 2000).

The effects mentioned above all arise from program designs. However, mediating institutions such as interest groups, political parties, bureaucracies, and the media are also crucial in determining how individuals understand policies (Laura Stoker, personal communication). It may be that individuals can discern the impacts of public policies themselves—Social Security being the chief example of a program so salient, visible, tangible, and generous that recipients need not be

told where their interests lie. However, for many other policies, individuals need help in knowing what a policy does and what its political significance is. Do people know welfare reform passed, or that Medicare is single payer? Apparently not, unless they are informed by one of these meso-level institutions. An informative analysis of the role of such institutions in not only providing information but also influencing preferences is the Anderson & Lynch (2007) account of the organization of pensioners in Germany and Italy. They showed that pensioners do not always reject pension reform in a categorically self-interested way; when organized into independent pensioners' unions in confederations (as opposed to remaining in sectoral unions), pensioners are more likely to support significant reform in part because of the messages they hear from leaders. Sectoral union leaders' legitimacy depends on defending the majority interests of their sector, and in sectors with aging workers, this means opposing pension reforms. But leaders in confederated unions have to balance interests across sectors (and seniority) and are more likely to support reform that secures the "greater good."

Finally, some scholars have expressed skepticism about the role of self-interest. Several scholars of the welfare state, including Pierson (1994) and Baldwin (1990), have upheld self-interest as the motivator for protective constituencies that have emerged around social programs. However, self-interest is not the only feedback effect; often interpretive effects operate through other means such as procedural justice. Scholars of symbolic politics, such as David Sears, have argued that self-interest is less important for policy preferences and attitudes than symbolic orientations such as party identification or liberal-conservative self-identification (Sears et al. 1980). Moreover, scholars looking for attitudinal patterns corresponding to self-interest across nations have been disappointed. Lynch & Myrskylä (2009) found across 11 western democracies that older persons more dependent on public pensions were no more likely to oppose cutbacks than the less dependent; general welfare-state attitudes, not dependence, drove pension attitudes. Moreover, pension attitudes vary greatly across countries, suggesting that self-interest is not equally influential across different contexts. This and other mechanisms need to be explored more extensively.

Conditions

Another lacuna in the literature is a more systematic enumeration of the conditions under which feedbacks emerge or fail to emerge. As Patashnik & Zelizer (2009) pointed out, feedbacks can fail to emerge because of weak policy design, inadequate or conflicting institutional supports, or poor timing.

A policy's benefits may be too small to create a supportive constituency, or the constituency that emerges may be too weak to take on entrenched business interests or other clienteles. Another possibility is that a policy's effects may be insufficiently visible, traceable, and salient to generate a feedback effect—an informational shortcoming. Feedbacks may also fail to emerge when mediating institutions are absent or institutional safeguards inadequate, Reconstruction (Valelly 2004) and Prohibition being two examples. It could be that feedbacks from policy reform do not occur because the reform does not wipe away old institutional arrangements—as with the reaccretion of tax expenditures after the Tax Reform Act of 1986 had swept a number of them away (Patashnik 2008). Or feedbacks may not emerge because of poor timing; policy change may go with the political or economic stream or run against it. These are examples from the elite-level feedback literature, but the same limitations exist for mass-level feedbacks.

Scholars have also only begun to consider the conditions under which feedback effects might unwind or end. One compelling example is Mettler's (2011b) work on federal aid for education. For decades, banks and other lenders enriched themselves by collecting hefty administrative fees as middle men for federal college loan programs. Despite the formidable interest group environment

favoring this system—banks used lobbying and campaign contributions to keep the system in place and the fees flowing—eventually it came to an end. Banks were discredited during the financial crisis of 2008, creating an opening for proponents of direct lending to insert a change to federal college loan administration in the health care reform legislation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. Changing political conditions interrupted the feedback effects and created an opening for a new program design.

Systematic study of the conditions under which such feedbacks unravel would be a tremendous service. In many respects, the feedback literature has imitated the social movement literature in selecting on the dependent variable by analyzing cases where the phenomenon of interest appeared. However, as Goss (2006) pointed out in her study of a social movement that did not emerge—a national gun-control movement in the United States—analyzing cases of both success and failure is necessary for understanding the factors behind success. Similarly, in the feedback realm, examining instances in which feedback effects did not emerge or in which they came to an end is needed to be able to say something conclusive about the conditions under which they do occur and persist. And on a normative level, knowing how feedbacks end is crucial for determining how to make the political system more responsive (Julia Lynch, personal communication).

Capturing the Lived Experience

The existing feedback literature has had difficulty in capturing two aspects of individuals' lived experiences with public policies (Laura Stoker, personal communication). First, scholars have tended to focus on the effects of one policy at a time, whereas individuals live in a world of multiple jurisdictions and are affected by multiple policies at once. Indeed, multiple levels of government may have instituted policies in a given area, such as education or gay marriage in the United States. Which is most relevant to the individual and how can analysts capture that? Second, the search for policy feedbacks and mass publics laudably combines the methods and research foci of historical institutionalism and political behavior research. However, to the extent that the psychological paradigm is ascendant in contemporary behavioral work, it may be more fruitful to revisit the methods of the older sociological paradigm, with its in-depth work and focus on uncovering the subjective perceptions and knowledge of individuals. Such methods may bring us closer to the lived experience than can the surveys on which scholars have largely depended. They can also enhance understanding of causality and mechanisms. The richness and verisimilitude of work such as Soss's (1999, 2000), which combines in-depth interviews with national-level survey analysis, point us in the right direction.

Showing the “Back”

Many existing feedback studies show the feed but not the back (or they just assume the back). Such studies show that policies affect the public in some way, altering attitudes or behaviors. But often such studies do not take the next step. They do not demonstrate that those attitudinal or behavioral patterns owing to program design affect subsequent policy outcomes. Or studies simply assume that when a group participates at lower rates than similar others because of their experience with government policy, that group will suffer as a consequence—that its policy preferences will be ignored because it is a lower-participation group. This is a plausible assumption that lies beneath much behavioral research but that has been demonstrated far more rarely than one might suppose. There is still much work to be done to show, for example, that differential participation actually results in differential policy outcomes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The search for policy feedback effects among mass publics is an important scholarly endeavor both because it brings together approaches normally pursued separately in our siloed disciplines and because it engages questions of great normative significance for democratic governance. That public policy itself can shape the capacity and interests of ordinary citizens raises important questions about political inequality, its sources, and its consequences.

Although this field has made great strides, with studies of ever more policy areas, the onus is on researchers to do more and better work. There is the question of data and approach: as more surveys ask both about political behaviors and attitudes and about program participation, scholars will be able to test hypotheses across a wider range of policies. But it is also incumbent on researchers to utilize methods that capture accurately the influence policies have on members of the public. This may require combining statistical analysis of large-N datasets with in-depth interviews and ethnographic research where possible. And as this research continues, scholars must continue to work on developing theory, solidifying inference, delineating mechanisms and conditions, and creating a common conceptual framework that will facilitate accumulation of knowledge in this area.

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