NOMINATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Social policy in rich and poor countries

Social policy in rich and poor countries: Socio-economic trends and political-institutional determinants
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Abstract. To what extent can the dramatic differences in social policy efforts in rich and poor countries be accounted for by genuinely political explanations? The hypothesis that is advanced in this article rests upon the combination of two schools of thought in comparative social policy analysis: socio-economic models which focus attention on levels of economic wealth, need and demand for social security, and models of a comparative-historiographic and political-institutionalist nature. Empirical applications of socio-economic models with lagged dependent variables reveal the existence of two deviant families of nations: overspenders in social policy (such as overspenders of social-democratic complexion and of Christian-democratic composition) and underspenders (such as superpowers in East and West as well as Japan and East Germany). The residuals that can be derived from these models are amenable to an explanation which resides in comparative-historiographic political analysis of social policy.

Nomination:
Does politics matter? A perennial question!

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One of the core issues in comparative political science over the past 25 years has been the debate on whether politics has an impact on public policy-making. Browsing through the back issues of the European Journal of Political Research (EJPR), this certainly proves to be one of the themes that has attracted most attention from authors from various countries (see, for example, Haniff 1976; Dryzek 1978; Castles & McKinlay 1979; Keman 1984; Hicks et al. 1989; Hofferbert & Klingemann 1990; Castles 1994a). It therefore seems
appropriate for this Anniversary Issue to outline this debate briefly and to select one of the contributions to this debate for special attention. Before the selection, however, I will first outline the development of the debate and its contribution to political science. I shall then move on to the particular contribution by Manfred Schmidt and explain why it deserves special attention. Its value will be discussed, inter alia, by a statistical replication of his analysis in order to see whether his original analysis still holds (up to the 1990s) if applied to the OECD-universe. Finally, I shall look at the extent to which Schmidt’s contribution continues to constitute a relevant approach to the problem.

The debate revisited

The question of whether ‘politics matters’ can be traced back to the comparative public policy analyses which were published in the USA during the 1960s and early 1970s, and to the work of Cutright (1965) and others who compared public expenditures across the American states. These authors tended to find that non-political variables (such as, for example, demographic and economic factors) accounted for much of the variation in public expenditures. Hence, the influence of party differences, the alternation of parties in government, and ideology, appeared to be at most marginal (see also Wilensky 1975). These findings led to a counter attack, in which alternative models, data and indicators were introduced to find out whether ‘politics’ really was important for policy-making in terms of both output and outcomes (see, for example, Castles & McKinlay 1979, an article which has also been nominated for inclusion in this Anniversary roll of honour).

The various and vigorous research activities and related publications on this debate in the EJPR have not (yet) led to a definitive answer – at least, in my view. In fact, the final answer to the question is perhaps not even that important any more. But what is important is that the progress of political science and, in particular, that of comparative politics, has benefitted enormously from this long-standing engagement. In the first place, comparative methodological issues became more relevant than ever, since it became obvious that the research designs used (e.g., cross-sectional or longitudinal, the choice between sampling and limiting oneself to a (closed) universe of discourse), and the related statistical techniques, have been of central importance to both the evidence which is adduced and the conclusions which have been drawn (see, for example, the debate between Castles and Therborn, in EJPR 26 (1994: 103–115). It can therefore be argued that the debate itself has contributed greatly to the development of more elegant models of comparative inquiry and has led to the introduction of a more sophisticated use of statistical techniques.