In chapters 1–3, we thought mainly about the explanatory side of our research problem—how personal welfare state experiences affect political orientations. We have discussed potentially influential aspects of welfare state experiences, and how different sorts of welfare state institutions may systematically affect these aspects. However, while chapter 1 gave away the basic information that the dependent variables will be political trust and ideology, little has actually been said about these political orientations and the processes through which they may be affected by personal welfare state experiences.

We have proceeded like this with good reason. The main research puzzle outlined in chapter 1 has to do with a will to learn more about political effects of personal welfare state experiences, rather than an aim to explain a maximum amount of variation in any given dependent variable. Nevertheless, we are left with a theoretical gap and the purpose of this chapter is to fill it.

It begins by discussing different possible mental processes underlying experience effects, a discussion that is structured by a distinction between “memory-based” opinion formation and “on-line” opinion formation respectively. This discussion leads to the two major groups of dependent variables: political trust and ideology. After having pondered definitions of, and alternative explanations for, these political orientations, we consider the possibility that the ingredients of the experience effect vary across trust and ideology. Specifically, we raise the suspicion that the relative importance of self-interest and social justice varies depending on whether political trust or political ideology constitutes the dependent variable.

**The Experience Effect: Memory-Based or On-Line?**

A fundamental assumption of the new institutionalism is that individuals have limited cognitive capacity. In a complicated and volatile world, individuals look to stable institutions and standard operating procedures for guidance as to what attitudes and behavior are appropriate (see March and Olsen 1989; Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992; Rothstein 1996). Interestingly, while explicitly acknowledging limited cognitive capacity, the literature often implicitly promotes overoptimistic views on how politically
sophisticated and motivated citizens are. Individuals are assumed to keep track of a large number of sociopolitical orientations, including values, norms, identities, opinions, attitudes, and ideologies. Also, people are assumed to be motivated enough to update these orientations in the light of new relevant information emanating from institutions. As expressed by March and Olsen (1996:249), “Institutions organize hopes and dreams, and fears as well as purposeful actions [...] emotions and expressions of emotions [...] sentiments of love, loyalty, devotion, respect, friendship, as well as hate, anger, fear, envy, and guilt.” Likewise, Rothstein (1998:135) argues, “Opinions, interests, values, ideology [...] all influence institutions and policy. But policies and institutions also influence opinions, etc.”

The implicit assumption that people hold and update a large number of political preferences is problematic. It has long been known that citizens’ political belief systems typically fall short of the classical ideal when it comes to scope and crystallization (Converse 1964; Luskin 1987; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). People simply do not walk around with a great number of preexisting political attitudes that are all changed in the light of new information. Therefore, we want to specify in more detail what type of political attitudes might reasonably be affected by experiences with welfare state institutions.

A first step in the search for realistic dependent variables is to distinguish between two broad categories of opinion formation models: memory-based opinion formation and on-line opinion formation respectively. It should be pointed out right from the start that the intention is not to explicitly test the empirical viability of these models. This would be a task for many separate studies. Instead, we take advantage of the research that has accumulated around them. This discourse will eventually help us in selecting dependent variables that are meaningful when looking for political effects of welfare state experiences. In fact, as we will eventually see, the choice of dependent variables is based on the idea that on-line opinion formation is often the more realistic model for such effects.

Memory-Based Opinion Formation

According to memory-based models, the immediate cause of an attitude is the information about the object in question that can be remembered at the time of forming the attitude. An attitude is the outcome of the particular mix of “pros and cons” or “likes and dislikes” one can recall at the time of forming the attitude. Memory-based explanations of political attitudes and behavior are common. For example, according to Kelley’s and Miser’s (1974:574) theory of “the simple act of voting,” “the voter canvasses his likes and dislikes of the leading candidates and major parties involved in an election [...] he votes for the candidate toward whom he has the greatest number of net favorable attitudes.”

An important category of memory-based models builds on the notion of agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972). As in the case of other