



Shaping Attitudes, Shaping Politics

How Have U.S. Social Policies Changed Since the 1970s?

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What Shapes Citizens' Attitudes and Participation in Government?

I ask a key question throughout my research: When people experience a government program—for example as a beneficiary of the GI Bill (one of my major completed studies) or recipient of Pell Grants, or when they encounter a government agency such as the Department of Motor Vehicles—how does that experience shape their attitudes about government? How does it influence how they perceive government's role and which responsibilities should be left to the private sector? How do these experiences of public policy and government agencies affect people's participation in politics?

Many social scientists study the social and economic consequences of public policy. If they look at social policies, for example, they ask: "Do more people go to college as a result of Pell Grants? Are there fewer people or more people in poverty as the result of the policy of study?" But we rarely ask how policies shape politics—how they shape the political attitudes and participation of beneficiaries and other citizens.

In the middle of the 20th century, many people participated in politics at higher rates than their counterparts have in recent decades. Since the mid-1970s, we have seen a decline among young people

and low-income people. By the same token, more affluent people take part in more and different activities than in the past, particularly given the growing importance of campaign contributions. To what extent do these changes have to do with transformations in the role of government in people's lives? The middle of the 20th century was a time of high economic growth, but government also did much more to help ordinary people weather times of economic insecurity and to move people out of poverty than has been the case in the past 30 years. Does this make a difference?

Illuminating a Change in American Social Policies

I have two large-scale projects under way: one on 20 social policies, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, and one on higher education policies. I look at 20 social policies at the national level in the United States and at how these policies have changed from the 1970s to the present. They include Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, unemployment insurance, Pell Grants, and also student loans. They include programs that are part of the tax code, like the home mortgage interest deduction and the nontaxability of employer-provided retirement benefits. I want to know how the real value of these policies has changed over time. How have these changes affected the attitudes of citizens about government and their participation in politics?



GI Bill Users Participate More in Civic Activities and Politics

I begin with the GI Bill story because of the implications for my two studies. Many people consider the GI Bill a landmark program in American politics. It enabled veterans after World War II to pursue more education or training at government expense—college or vocational training. How did this affect people’s participation

The Black Veterans’ Story

I had to look at black male veterans separately. I reached veterans through their military unit organizations. The 87th Infantry Division, for example, gave me its mailing lists, and I contacted people. Because the military was segregated at that time, black veterans had served in separate troops, so I had to obtain separate lists for them. The big problem, however, for studying black

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in politics? After people benefited from such a generous government program, might they become more active in politics, or might they have become dependent on government and be less active?

veterans was life expectancy—they were dying sooner than white veterans. When I did this research beginning in 1998, it was 50 years after World War II and already too late to reach a representative sample of black veterans. I got as many lists as I could and ended up with a small sample of about 120 black veterans, whom I surveyed. Because this was not a representative sample, I had to use the data very cautiously.

Using the data as best I could, it showed that among black male veterans, everyone who had gone to college used the GI Bill. This meant I did not have a control group, but it was instructive. Black veterans tended to have grown up in worse socioeconomic circumstances than the white veterans, and they would not have gotten an education—period—had it not been for the GI Bill. For them it was hugely important. But then I found that black veterans who had used the GI Bill became very active in civic life later on at a much higher rate than the black non-GI Bill users and at a higher rate than the white GI Bill users. They became tremendously involved from 1950 to 1964 in the Civil Rights movement. Then, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, those same individuals became active in formal politics.

A Period of Rising Economic Inequality

Up until now, in my historical research, I have examined the middle of the 20th century. The two new projects focus on the period from 1973 to the present, which has been a period of rising economic inequality

I studied veterans who used the GI Bill and those who did not use the GI Bill. I did interviews nationwide and a survey of World War II veterans. These allowed me to combine statistical and qualitative analysis to understand what the GI Bill meant in veterans’ lives, or if they did not use it, why not? When I controlled for all other factors, the GI Bill was highly significant as a determinant of subsequent participation in civic activities. If there were two nonblack male veterans—black veterans have a different story—with the same level of education, the same socioeconomic background in childhood, and both served in the war, but one of them used the GI Bill for their education and training and one of them did not, the GI Bill user went on to participate in 50 percent more civic organizations during the middle of the 20th century and 30 percent more political activities. It turns out that they became “good citizens.”

I sought to undercover how that had come about. Why? I found that they received the message through the GI Bill program that government was for people like them, and they participated at higher rates as a result. Government was relevant to their lives and made a big difference for them. Many said, “I never would have gone to college had it not been for the GI Bill.”

Fascinating!

- We rarely ask how policies shape politics—how they shape the political attitudes and participation of beneficiaries and other citizens.
- I have two large-scale projects under way: one on 20 social policies, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, and one on higher education policies.
- Why are we no longer finding ways to keep expanding access to college education, as we did in the middle of the 20th century? Who are the culprits?
- When people leave college \$25,000 in debt, they may not feel grateful to government and ready to go out and be active citizens as a result.
- It is interesting how policies, once established, shape politics. I examine this at organizational and individual levels.
- Tax expenditures reinforce the idea that we are separate individuals rather than a society with obligations to each other.

University Photography





in the United States. For this period of time, I study how policies have affected people's lives, how policies change, and how they affect people's attitudes about government.

20 Social Policies

I look at people's participation in 20 social programs and how these programs have affected their rate of participation in a wide range of civic activities: voting, working on campaigns, serving on local boards, or protesting. The differences among generations of people are wide. For younger citizens, government has been less present in their lives, therefore it is less relevant to them, and they participate less, particularly young people with less education—those who have not gone to college and have lower incomes.

My hypothesis is that there are three main experiences, each related to a different group of policies: direct benefits that remain strong; direct benefits that have deteriorated; and tax breaks, which have grown more

generous. The first category covers policies mostly for elderly people such as Social Security and Medicare, in which policies are as generous today as they were in the early 1970s. Social Security has cost-of-living adjustments. It has maintained its value over time, and elderly people participate at the highest rates of anybody in the United States with no decrease over time. Government continues to be important in their lives. A very high proportion of the incomes of low- to moderate-income elderly people comes from Social Security. It is no mystery that government matters, so they get out and vote.

People who are not senior citizens have different experiences depending on their income group. For most low- to moderate-income people, the policies that really matter are direct, visible programs, such as unemployment insurance, Pell Grants, and welfare. Many of these policies have deteriorated in real value over time because they do not have cost-of-living adjustments.

Congress has to decide, for example, whether to increase unemployment insurance. Incomes of low- to moderate-income people have not improved much, and some have declined. Government has not picked up the slack. For these people, government has likely seemed less present in their lives than it did for past generations.

For high-income people, the social programs that are most beneficial are tax expenditures, such as the home mortgage interest deduction programs. We may think of the home mortgage interest deduction as a great program that helps people to buy homes, but the biggest amount of money in the program goes to the most affluent people—the tax break is for a home up to \$1.1 million. These folks may be saving up to \$21,000 on their taxes, whereas the average family in the upper middle class is saving \$1,500. Most people who own homes do not qualify for the benefit because they are not itemizing on their taxes, so they receive nothing.

Except for the earned income tax credit, which is for low-income people, major tax expenditures have become more upwardly distributed for the highest income people and have actually grown over time. Does this make them better citizens? Are they becoming more active in politics as a result? My hypothesis is that this is not the case.

Student loans are in the hidden welfare state. When I talk to students in my class about student loans, they say, “Well, that’s not a government benefit. It’s the banks that give student loans.” Yes, they are financed by government subsidies, but when people leave college \$25,000 in debt, they may not feel grateful to government and ready to go out and be active citizens as a result. My hypothesis is that this may change their attitude and makes them more resentful of government.

Tax expenditures reinforce the idea that we are separate individuals rather than a society with obligations to each other, while Social Security gives the message that we are in this together. I will be exploring these ideas through analysis of survey data and interviews over the next two years.

Conducting the Research

The survey is a random sample covering 1,000 people nationwide, 20 programs, and 400 additional people. I oversample low-income people and young people, because both groups are hard to reach and both are essential for my research. I conduct in-depth interviews of people around the country from all of these different age groups. I will do about 35 interviews for the 20 social programs project; these will help me understand what the statistical trends mean in the lives of individuals. Sometimes I come across something in my data as I crunch the numbers, and I do not understand what it means. I can look back at the interviews, which enlighten the analysis and give the numbers meaning. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research makes for an interactive process. The interviews give context and help me write a more interesting book, because I can tell stories of people’s lives.

Higher Education Policies—A Whodunit

Why are we no longer expanding access to

college education the way we did in the middle of the 20th century? From the creation of the GI Bill in 1944 up through Pell Grants in the early 1970s, we were enabling more and more people from across the income spectrum to go to college in the United States. Since 1980, there are more people than ever going to college, but the increases come predominantly from families in the most affluent income quartile. Higher education is now reinforcing class stratification in American society,

I remember that toward the end of my senior year in college, everyone else was becoming happier as they were counting the days until graduation—but I was becoming sadder. I thought, “It does not get any better than this.”

rather than mitigating it. This is very disturbing, given that a college degree and subsequent job opportunities are more important than ever. Although equal opportunity is an American ideal, we are not making it a reality today through the higher education policy. This study asks why. What has changed? I am looking across the political system—it is like a whodunit story. Who are the culprits?

First, I look at public opinion. Has public opinion changed? Are people less supportive of expanding access to higher education today? Are they less supportive of equal opportunity? The short answer is no. Americans are as supportive of these things as they were in the early 1970s. So I have to look elsewhere. I explore a wide range of possibilities. I have conducted interviews in Washington, D.C., with policy makers and people who work in interest groups. I use established survey data from the past, as well as the survey I conducted in the summer of 2008. I am conducting about 35 interviews with people in their 20s and 30s, asking about their college experience, why they did not go to college, or why they dropped out.

Young people participated in politics at high rates in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was during that time period when we had our most generous policies for college students. During the 1980s and 1990s, elected officials did not hear as much from young

people, so it was easier not to respond to them. However, young people participated more in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections than has been the case in a long time, and Congress does seem to be paying more attention to them now as a result. It is also interesting how policies, once established, shape politics. I examine this at organizational and individual levels. I investigate whether policies promote activities among certain organizations and discourage it among other kinds of organizations.

Why Are the Students Silent?

In 1972, policy makers established Sallie Mae, the government-sponsored agency, because institutions were reluctant to make loans to students then. Over time, Sallie Mae became very successful. In recent years, the nation’s highest reimbursed CEO was Sallie Mae’s, because of the number of students going to college and because the government gives Sallie Mae generous subsidies and many incentives to loan money to students. Now Sallie Mae is a private firm, trading on Wall Street. The same is true of many banks that loan to students: their profits over the past 15 years have been tremendous. Our public policies have encouraged this development, and they have also helped facilitate lenders’ political activities.

Sallie Mae and other lenders have become very active over the past 15 years in lobbying and campaign finance contributions. By contrast, you may ask, “What about students? Are they organized?” One group, the United States Student Association, has long been active in Washington, but they have very small numbers and a declining membership. Relative to the lenders, theirs is not a well-heard voice in Washington. The federation of public interest research groups, the U.S. PIRG, also works on these issues, but they also have much less power and voice than the lenders. I examine these kinds of organizational effects as well as what is happening in Congress.

Remaking America

My book with Joe Soss and Jacob Hacker, *Remaking America: Democracy and Public Policy in an Age of Inequality* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), has both a theoretical and a substantive significance. Theoretically, the book advances policy-centered research. Political scientists, ironically, have not studied public policy all that much—sociologists and economists study it more. Joe, Jacob, and I think public policy needs to be put front and center. We can better understand the political system by studying public policy and how it has changed over time. It is a prism through which we can understand what is happening more broadly and how power relations work. The book gauges, in a period of rising economic inequality, to what extent government is responding. To what extent is government part of the solution? How did public policy play into this trend of rising economic inequality?

Connecting Academic Political Scientists and Policy Makers to Effect Change

The connection between what most of us do in academia and policy makers is remote. Certainly our greatest impact is on our students, through teaching, advising, and mentoring. But in addition, I seek out scholarly projects that have relevance to social and political problems in the United States today, and I attempt to draw out those linkages in my work.

When my GI Bill book came out, I appeared on numerous radio programs, and I wrote op-ed pieces. I focused on lessons that the historical story had for the present, on what it tells us about the role of government in people's lives today relative to the past. In recent years, I also served on a task force on inequality in American democracy, a group convened by our professional organization, the American Political Science Association. This group recently returned to a practice it had 50 years ago, which was to set task forces in place to speak to broad public issues and to make connections between scholarship and politics.

Choosing Academia

Academia is where I thrive. I remember that toward the end of my senior year in college, everyone else was becoming happier as they were counting the days until graduation—

but I was becoming sadder. I thought, "It does not get any better than this." I loved having the opportunity to think, to read, and to write. After graduating I worked in Washington a few years for a citizen lobbying group, and I enjoyed that. It was my bridge to practical politics. But I found that I most like being able to ask big questions, thinking about them, and bridging that activity together with practical concerns about public policies. At that point, I realized that I was drawn to pursue a PhD. So here I am in academia, and I love it! I feel incredibly fortunate to have a job I enjoy so much, and I am amazed by the satisfaction I derive from teaching and research. I get to do these things for a living!

A Journey over Time

Cornell is so large, and so much is happening across the campus that I feel like I am now just starting on a journey to get to know people and to affiliate with Cornell's institutes. I am a member of the Center for the Study of Inequality. I am excited about the activities of the Higher Education Research Institute, run by Ronald Ehrenberg. I look forward to getting to know the people in Policy Analysis and Management who will have similar interests to my own. One could be at Cornell for a very long time and still find new ways to engage intellectually with scholars across campus.

What I Love about Ithaca

Ithaca. The area is beautiful. It is one of my favorite towns. It is pleasant to be in an academic institution that's in a small town. One of our advantages is that because we are in Ithaca, we are less frenzied than people in more urban environments. We are able to give students more attention because of this—to be present to students more.

Private Time. The rest of my life goes to my family—two daughters and a husband. We actually live in Syracuse, but we have always taken day trips to Ithaca. We love coming to Ithaca in the summer to swim and enjoy the lake, hike to the waterfalls, and go to the farmers' market. We can't leave town without visits to the Ithaca Bakery and of course, Purity Ice Cream. My favorite thing to do in Ithaca is swim in the lake at Taughanock Falls State Park. It has such beautiful clear, clean water. Ithaca has

always been a fun getaway for us. So now I work in a place that is a getaway location.

The Cornell Campus. I love the suspension bridge. It's fascinating to go there as the seasons change. In the winter, when there's a ton of ice on the walls of the gorge, it's very dramatic. On a windy day, walking across it is quite exciting—it gets your adrenaline flowing. And in summer, it's astounding. On a hot day, you'll see lots of students below, sunning on the rocks. The whole scene changes so spectacularly.

The Last Word

On the Move

I did my PhD in government at Cornell in 1994. I was a faculty member at Syracuse University until 2007, when I returned to Cornell. Upon returning I found a more dynamic institution, particularly apparent with the new emphasis on the social sciences. Cornell is on the move, and it is an exciting time to return and be part of it.

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About Mettler

Years as Cornell faculty
2

Came to Cornell from
The Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Favorite spot on campus
Fall Creek Suspension Bridge

Cornell's research distinction
Bringing together tradition and innovation

Cornell's trademark
The blend of excellence, relevance, and accessibility. Ezra put it best: any person can find instruction in any study.

I am also
Working in one of my favorite getaway locations