



# SOCIAL WELFARE: POLITICS & PUBLIC POLICY

Diana M. DiNitto  
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# **SOCIAL WELFARE**

## **Politics and Public Policy**

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# Preface

*Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy* is intended to introduce students to the major social welfare programs in the United States and to stimulate them to think about major conflicts in social welfare policy today. By focusing on “issues,” we hope to emphasize that social welfare in America involves a series of *political* questions about what should be done about the poor, the near-poor, and the nonpoor—or whether anything should be done at all.

*Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy* describes major social welfare programs—their histories, trends, and current problems and prospects. But, more importantly, it tackles the difficult conflicts and controversies which surround these programs. Social welfare policy is *not* presented as a series of solutions to social problems. Instead, social policy is portrayed as public conflict over the nature and causes of poverty; over what, if anything, should be done about poverty; over who should do it; and over who should decide about it.

Major public programs—

Social Security (OASDI)  
Unemployment Compensation  
Supplemental Security Income

Aid to Families with Dependent Children  
General Assistance  
Food Stamps  
School Lunches  
Community Action  
Comprehensive Employment and Training  
Mental Health  
Care of the Elderly  
Child Welfare Services  
Legal Services  
Vocational Rehabilitation  
Medicare  
Medicaid

are described and analyzed, and alternative proposals and “reforms” are considered.

This book is designed for undergraduate and beginning graduate courses in social welfare policy. It does not require prior knowledge of social work, nor does it attempt to introduce students to all aspects of the social work profession.

Many books on social policy treat social insurance, public assistance, and social service programs *descriptively*; by so doing they tend to obscure important conflicts and issues. Other books on social policy treat these programs *prescriptively*; by so doing they imply that there is only one “right” way to resolve social issues. *Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy* views social policy as a *continuing political struggle* over the issues posed by poverty and inequality in society—conflicting goals and objectives, competing definitions of problems, alternative approaches and strategies, multiple programs and policies, competing proposals for “reform,” and even different ideas about how decisions should be made in social welfare policy. A distinguishing feature of the book is that it discusses the relationship of Reaganomics to the social welfare scene and provides an up-to-date discussion of Reagan’s welfare reforms for each of the major social welfare programs.

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# 1

## Politics, Rationalism, and Social Welfare

### POLITICS AND SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

No one is really happy with the nation's welfare system—not the working taxpayers who must support it, not the social work professionals who must administer it, and certainly not the poor who must live under it. Since the Social Security Act of 1935, the federal government has tried to develop a rational social welfare system for the entire nation. Today, a wide variety of federal programs serve the aged, the poor, the disabled, and the sick. "Income maintenance" (social insurance and public assistance) is the largest single item in the federal budget, easily surpassing national defense. The Department of Health and Human Services is the largest department of the federal government, and many additional welfare programs are administered by other departments. Yet even after nearly fifty years of large-scale, direct federal involvement, social welfare policy remains a central issue in American politics.

Social welfare policy involves a series of *political* issues about what should be done about the poor, the near-poor, and the nonpoor—or

whether anything should be done at all. The real problems in social welfare are not problems of organization, administration, or service delivery. Rather, they are political conflicts over the nature and causes of poverty and inequality, the role of government in society, the burdens to be carried by taxpayers, the appropriate strategies for coping with poverty, the issues posed by specific social insurance and public assistance programs, the relative reliance to be placed on cash versus services for the poor, the need for reform, and the nature of the decision-making process itself. In short, social welfare policy is a continuing political struggle over the issues posed by poverty and inequality in society.

Policy-making is frequently portrayed as a *rational* process, in which policy-makers identify social problems, explore all of the alternative solutions, forecast all of the benefits and costs of each alternative solution, compare benefits to costs for each solution, and select the best ratio of benefits to costs. In examining social welfare policy, we shall explore the strengths and weaknesses of this rational model.

More importantly, we shall portray social welfare policy as a “political” process—as conflict over the nature and causes of poverty, and over what, if anything, should be done about it. Social welfare policy is “political” because of disagreements about the nature of the problems confronting society; about what should be considered “benefits” and “costs”; about how to estimate and compare benefits and costs; about the likely consequences of alternative policies; about the importance of one’s own needs and aspirations in relation to those of others; and about the ability of government to do anything “rationally.” We shall see that the *political* barriers to *rational* policy-making are indeed very great.

## SCOPE OF SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

Social welfare policy is anything government chooses to do, or not to do, that affects the quality of life of its people. Broadly conceived, social welfare policy includes nearly everything government does—from taxation, national defense, and energy conservation, to health, housing, and public assistance. More elaborate definitions of social welfare policy are available;<sup>1</sup> most of these definitions refer to actions of government which have an impact on the welfare of citizens by providing them with services or income.<sup>2</sup> For practical purposes, however, let us limit our concerns to the policies of government which *directly* affect the income and services available to the aged, sick, and poor. We would discourage lengthy discussions of the definition of social welfare policy. These discussions are often futile, even exasperating, since few people can agree on a single

definition of social policy. Moreover, these discussions divert attention away from the study of specific welfare policies.<sup>3\*</sup>

Note that we are focusing not only on government action, but also on government *inaction*—that is, what government chooses *not* to do. We contend that government inaction can have just as important an impact on society as government action.

The boundaries of social welfare policy are fuzzy. But this should be viewed as a challenge, not an obstacle. Specifically, we will be concerned with major government programs in

#### Income Maintenance

- Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)
- General Assistance
- Social Security
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Unemployment Compensation

#### Nutrition

- Food Stamps
- School Breakfasts
- School Lunches

#### Health

- Medicaid
- Medicare
- public health

#### Social Services

- Community Action programs
- community mental health
- Comprehensive Employment and Training (CETA)
- legal services
- social services for children and families

---

\* This definition implies a difference between governmental actions and an overall plan of action toward a specific goal. The problem, however, in insisting that government actions must have *goals* in order to be labeled as “policy” is that we can never be sure what the goal of a particular government action is. We generally assume that if a government chooses to do something there must be a goal, objective, or purpose, but often we find that bureaucrats who helped write the law, lobbyists who pushed for its enactment, and members of Congress who voted for it all had different goals, objectives, and purposes in mind! The stated intentions of a law may also be quite different from what government agencies actually do. All we can really observe is what governments choose to do or not to do.

Political scientists Heinz Eulau and Kenneth Prewitt supply still another definition of public policy: “Policy is defined as ‘standing decision’ characterized by behavioral consistency and repetitiveness on the part of those who make it and those who abide by it” *Labyrinths of Democracy* [Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1973], p. 465). Now certainly it would be a wonderful thing if government activities were characterized by “consistency and repetitiveness”; but it is doubtful that we would ever find a public policy in government if we insisted on these criteria. As we shall see, much of what government does is *inconsistent* and *nonrepetitive*.

social services for the elderly  
vocational rehabilitation

Some of these programs are labeled *public assistance* programs because people must be poor (according to legal standards) in order to receive benefits; benefits are paid out of general revenue funds. Public assistance programs include AFDC, Food Stamps, Medicaid, SSI, School Lunches, and General Assistance. Other programs are labeled as *social insurance* programs because they are designed to prevent poverty; people pay into these programs during their working years and are entitled to their benefits whether poor or not. Social insurance programs include Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment compensation. Still other programs are labeled *social service* programs because they provide care, training, and assistance to children, the elderly, the poor, sick, or disabled. Social service programs are included in children and family services, care for the elderly, community action, CETA, legal services, mental health, public health, and vocational rehabilitation.

We shall endeavor, first of all, to *describe* these programs. But we shall also be concerned with the *causes* of social welfare policy—why policy is what it is. We want to learn about some of the social, economic, and political forces that shape social welfare policy in America. We shall be concerned with how social policies have developed and changed over time. We shall also be concerned with the *consequences* of welfare policies—their effects on target groups and on society in general. We shall consider some alternative policies—possible changes, “reforms,” improvements, or phase-outs. Finally, we shall be concerned with *political conflict* over the nature and causes of poverty—and conflict over what, if anything, should be done about it.

#### **SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY: A RATIONAL APPROACH**

Ideally, social welfare policy ought to be rational. A policy is rational if the ratio between the values it achieves and the values it sacrifices is positive and higher than any other policy alternative. Of course, we should not measure benefits and costs in a narrow dollars-and-cents framework, while ignoring basic social values. The idea of rationalism involves the calculation of *all* social, political, and economic values sacrificed or achieved by a public policy, not just those that can be measured in dollars.

Rationalism has been proposed as an “ideal” approach to both studying and making public policy.\* Indeed, it has been argued that

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\* Other major theoretical approaches to the study of public policy include institutionalism, elite theory, group theory, system theory, and incrementalism. For an introduction to these approaches, see Thomas R. Dye, *Understanding Public Policy*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), especially chapter 2.