

FOURTH ■ EDITION

# SOCIAL WELFARE

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

DIANA M. DiNITTO

*F o u r t h   E d i t i o n*

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*Social Welfare*

*Politics and Public Policy*

**Diana M. DiNitto**

*The University of Texas at Austin*

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*For my family and for everyone who has known AIDS*

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## Preface

*Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy*, Fourth Edition, is intended to introduce students to the major social welfare policies and programs in the United States and to stimulate them to think about major conflicts in social welfare today. The focus of the book is on *issues*, and it emphasizes that social welfare in the United States involves a series of *political* questions about what should be done for groups such as the poor, the near poor, and the nonpoor—or whether anything should be done at all.

*Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy* describes the major social welfare programs—their histories, trends, and current problems and prospects. But more importantly, it tackles the difficult conflicts and controversies that 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 social welfare problems; over what, if anything, should be done about them; over who should do it; and over who should decide about it.

Some of the major policies and programs covered in this book are

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Social Security                            | Special Supplemental Food Program<br>for Women, Infants, and Children |
| Unemployment compensation                  | Community action programs   |
| Workers' compensation                      | Job Training Partnership Act  |
| Supplemental Security Income               | Job Opportunities and Basic Skills<br>program                         |
| Vocational rehabilitation                  | Mental health services  |
| The Americans with Disabilities Act        | The Older Americans Act   |
| Child support enforcement                  | Child protective services   |
| Aid to Families with Dependent<br>Children | Medicare  |
| General Assistance                         | Medicaid  |
| Food Stamp Program                         | Civil rights legislation  |
| School lunch and breakfast<br>programs     | Immigration legislation   |

Although it is impossible to capture all the complexities of social welfare in the United States in a single volume, these policies and programs are described and analyzed, and alternative proposals and “reforms” are considered. Public policies that address gender inequities and the inequities faced by members of various ethnic groups are also addressed.

This book is designed for undergraduate and beginning graduate courses in social welfare policy. It does not require prior knowledge of social welfare, and it may serve as a springboard to further interest in social welfare policies and programs.

Many texts 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 treat these programs *prescriptively*; by so doing, they imply that there is a “right” way to resolve social problems. *Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy* views social policy as a *continuing political struggle* over the issues posed by poverty and other social welfare problems in society—different goals and objectives, competing definitions of problems, alternative approaches and strategies, multiple programs and policies, competing proposals for “reform,” and different ideas about how decisions should be made in social welfare policy.

I owe a special debt to Professor Thomas R. Dye. Although he no longer appears as a coauthor of the book, without him there would never have been a book at all. I wish to thank the reviewers who commented on previous editions, including reviewers of the Third Edition: Professor Doris Burton, Indiana University; Professor Matthew Kinkley, Lima Technical College; and Professor Lon Johnston, University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. I wish to especially thank two reviewers who provided in-depth comments on this edition: Professor Robert B. Hudson of Boston University, and Professor Lon Johnston of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. Comments by Charles Lynn Usher were also helpful in revising the chapter on nutrition policy. I also want to thank Margaret Oakes, Sue Plattsmier, Carol Dodgen, Dorie Martinez, Phyllis Bassole, and Kelly Larson for their assistance in helping me complete this edition. Several users of the book, both faculty and students, have communicated with me about the third edition. I appreciate their interest and look forward to further contacts with readers.

D.M.D.

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# Chapter 1

## *Politics, Rationalism, and Social Welfare*

### *Politics and Social Welfare Policy*

No one is happy with the nation's public assistance system—not the working taxpayers who must support it, not the social welfare professionals who must administer it, and certainly not the poor who must live under it. Even the nation's social insurance system has become a source of controversy. 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 people who are aged, poor, disabled, sick, or have other social needs. Income maintenance (social insurance and public assistance) is now the largest single item in the federal budget, easily surpassing national defense. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has the largest budget of any department of the federal government, and many additional social welfare programs are administered by other departments. Yet even after sixty years of large-scale, direct federal involvement, social welfare policy remains a central issue in U.S. politics.

Social welfare policy involves a series of *political* issues about what should be done for 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 involve 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 social problems, the issues posed by specific social insurance and public assistance programs, the relative reliance to be placed on providing cash rather than services to 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 and by other social problems in society.

Policymaking is frequently portrayed as a *rational* process in which policymakers identify social problems, explore all the solutions to a problem, forecast all the benefits and costs of each solution, compare benefits to costs for each solution, and select the best ratio of benefits to costs. In examining social welfare policy, I shall explore both the strengths and weaknesses of this rational model.

More importantly, I portray social welfare policy as a political process—as conflict over the nature and causes of poverty and other social problems and over what, if anything, should be done about them. 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.” You will see that the political barriers to rational policymaking are indeed very great.

### *Scope of Social Welfare Policy*

Social welfare policy is anything a 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 care, 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 that have an “impact on the welfare of citizens by providing them with services or income.”<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars have insisted that government activities must have “a goal, objective, or purpose,” in order to be labeled a “policy.”<sup>3</sup> This definition implies a difference between governmental actions in general 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! Multiple goals are not necessarily a bad thing, especially when they mean that more people stand to benefit from a policy, but any of the intentions of a law (stated or not) may also be quite different from what government agencies actually do. All we can really observe is what governments choose to do or not do.

Political scientists Heinz Eulau and Kenneth Prewitt supply still another definition of public policy: “Policy is defined as a ‘standing decision’ characterized by behavioral consistency and repetitiveness on the part of those who make it and those who abide by it.”<sup>4</sup> It might be a wonderful thing if government activities were characterized by “consistency and repetitiveness”—that they seem

to have “rhyme and reason”—but it is doubtful that we would ever find a public policy in government if we insisted on these criteria. As you shall see, much of what government does is neither consistent nor repetitive.

Note that I will focus not only on government action but also on government *inaction*—that is, on what governments choose *not* to do. Government inaction can have just as important an impact on society as government action.

For practical purposes, I will limit much of the discussion to the policies of government that directly affect the income, services, and opportunities available to people who are aged, poor, disabled, ill, or otherwise vulnerable. I 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 welfare policy. Moreover, these discussions divert attention away from the study of specific social welfare policies.

The boundaries of social welfare policy are indeed fuzzy, but clarifying subjects of concern and interest can be viewed as a challenge, not an obstacle. Specifically, this book addresses major government programs in

#### Income maintenance

- Social Security

- Unemployment compensation

- Workers' compensation

- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

- Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)

- General Assistance

#### Nutrition

- Food stamps

- School lunches and breakfasts

- Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

- Congregate meals

- Meals-on-wheels

#### Health

- Medicaid

- Medicare

- Public health

#### Social services

- Child protective services

- Family preservation services

- Community mental health services

- Day care and preschool education for children

- Employment services

- Job training

- Independent living and long-term care services for persons who are elderly or disabled

- Vocational rehabilitation



Some of these social welfare programs are called **public assistance** 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 (what most people simply call “welfare”) include AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid, SSL, school lunches and breakfasts, and General Assistance. Other social welfare programs are called **social insurance** because they are designed to prevent poverty. Workers, as well as their employers, pay into these programs; then, upon retirement or disability, these former workers are entitled to benefits, regardless of their wealth. Social insurance programs include Social Security, Medicare, unemployment compensation, and workers’ compensation. Still other social welfare programs are labeled **social services** because they provide care, counseling, education, or other forms of assistance to children, elderly individuals, those with disabilities, and others with particular needs. Child protective services, day care, early education, homemaker services, job training, mental health care, and vocational rehabilitation are all examples of social services. I shall also consider a number of issues that affect the provision of social welfare services, such as civil rights legislation, the status of women and certain ethnic or racial groups in society, and the influx of immigrants to the United States.

This book seeks, first of all, to describe the country’s major social welfare programs. But it is also concerned with the causes of social welfare policy—why policy is what it is. In order to understand contemporary social welfare policy, it is necessary to learn about some of the social, economic, and political forces that have shaped social welfare policy in America. This book is concerned with how social welfare policies have developed and changed over time. It is also concerned with the consequences of social welfare policies—their effects on target groups and on society in general. Furthermore, the chapters that follow consider some alternative policies—possible changes, “reforms,” improvements, or phaseouts. Finally, this book is concerned with political conflict over the nature and causes of poverty and other social problems—and conflict over what, if anything, should be done about them.

### *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. Although this might be viewed as a strictly economic (cost-benefit) approach, we should not measure benefits and costs only in a narrow dollar-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.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that rationalism provides a single “model of choice” that can be applied to all kinds of problems, large and small, public and private.<sup>6</sup> Most government policies are far from being entirely