

Introduction

Stefan Svallfors

Political sociology seeks to understand the relation between social and political life. Its aim is to map variations in the relationship between social structure, political orientations, and political action, and to explain the patterns that arise. Thus broadly conceived, the field will include analyses of issues as different as the rise and fall of political parties, the development and effects of political institutions, or the orientations and action patterns of mass publics. In this volume, a group of political scientists and sociologists, in various ways, try to describe variations and untangle mechanisms in the links between political institutions, social cleavages, and orientations among citizens in the advanced industrial societies.

Political and societal developments over the course of the last few decades highly warrant a return to the classic questions within political sociology. As will be described in this chapter, welfare states in Western capitalist societies have undergone considerable change since their “maturation” a quarter of a century ago. Public policies have been restructured, decision-making structures have become increasingly complex, and the level and patterns of inequality have changed to a considerable extent. Such processes of change have varied considerably across countries and different types of political economies. However, none of the countries in the Western hemisphere have entered the twenty-first century with institutions and social cleavages intact from the 1970s.

The many reasons behind these changes are intertwined in complex patterns. Comparative research has revealed that the simplistic picture of state regulation and welfare state provisions undergoing a “race to the bottom,” as a result of increased international competition and “globalization,” is

simply false (Scharpf and Schmidt 2000; Huber and Stephens 2001a; Pierson 2001b; Swank 2002). There are no signs of convergence among Western political economies; if anything, the reverse is true. We may therefore speak of “diverse responses to common challenges” (Scharpf and Schmidt 2000).

Nevertheless, as pointed out by Pierson, the mature welfare states have entered a stage of “permanent austerity” in which it has become increasingly difficult to sustain levels of provision (Pierson 2001a). In this process, “globalization” is actually a less important driving force than factors found within the advanced industrial nation-states themselves. Aging populations, post-industrialism, and the problems of financing welfare services are considerably more important than international economic competition or financial deregulation in explaining the rise of a more austere environment for welfare policies.

The aim of this volume is not to add still more analyses that attempt to chart and explain changes in welfare states and decision-making arrangements. Rather, these developments motivate and form the backdrop to our own attempts to grapple with variations of and mechanisms behind individual-level political orientations and identity formation. In what ways have various sociopolitical orientations changed in recent years in the advanced capitalist political economies? How do national institutions impact the ways in which such orientations are formed? What attitudinal correlates are found in the wake of changing stratification patterns? How do attitudes become translated into action under various institutional arrangements? How does “permanent austerity” impinge on views about government and policies? What impact do new supranational institutions have on the orientations of mass publics?

These are themes that have received less attention than many other aspects of welfare states in comparative perspective.¹ In spite of considerable progress over the last few years, comparative research on orientations, values, and attitudes has still not reached the status of a mature research field. If we take as a point of comparison the sophisticated comparative research on the determinants of welfare state development (for example, Scharpf and Schmidt 2000; Pierson 2001b; Huber and Stephens 2001a; Korpi and Palme 2003), or comparative studies of electoral behavior (for example, van der Eijk et al. 1996; Evans 1999; Norris 2004; Thomassen 2005; see summaries in Brooks et al. 2003; Manza et al. 2005), it is obvious that comparative research on orientations and attitudes still has some way

to go. The extensive high-quality databases that have been created over the last decade or so are still underutilized. One aim of the present volume is to make a contribution to the growing literature that uses such databases in order to conduct theoretically informed comparative work.

My purpose in this chapter is to set the scene for the empirical contributions that follow. First, I provide an outline of the basic parameters of change. What are the current main patterns of change in welfare states and decision-making structures, which form the backdrop to our analyses? Next, I present our conceptual framework of analysis, including key concepts such as *orientations*, *social cleavages*, *institutions*, *moral economy*, *feedback effects*, and *political articulation*. This is followed by a discussion of our methodological strategies and the data materials on which our analyses build. As the analyses are mainly based on large-scale comparative survey data, I consider the possibilities and limitations of such data. The chapter concludes with a chapter-by-chapter overview of the contributions of the six authors in relation to the main issues of the volume.

CHANGING WELFARE STATES

It seems there are several main components in the ways welfare states have shifted over the last decades—some relating to changes in decision-making structures, others to changes in stratification patterns. The first tendency is summarized in the catch-word “governance” (Pierre 2000; Pierre and Peters 2000). The concept of governance is “notoriously slippery” (Pierre and Peters 2000: 7), but what we intend to focus upon are the ways in which the complexity of political decision making and political steering has increased over time. It seems there are at least three interconnected aspects of these changes in democratic politics. The first is the drive toward decentralization of the welfare state, which has been clearly present in most Western countries. It has become a widespread belief among political decision makers that democratic accountability and efficiency in service delivery are enhanced by delegating authority to subnational levels.

Furthermore, the so-called new public management school, whose advice has been widely adopted by implementing bodies, argues that efficiency in the public sector is enhanced by delegating budgetary responsibility to the lowest possible level and by creating “internal markets” through which organizational subunits interact (Lawson and Taylor-Gooby 1993;

Hood 1995; Pierre 1995). We may therefore speak of a double decentralization of the implementation of welfare policies, from the national to the subnational level and from central to peripheral units within organizations (Peters and Pierre 2000).

Second, at the same time the central state has shifted responsibilities downward, competencies have also been shifted upward to political bodies at a higher level than the nation-state. The most important development in this respect is, of course, the establishment and expansion of the European Union (EU). The expansion of the EU has taken place both in a geographical sense, with the incorporation first of a number of smaller countries on the periphery of Western Europe and then the enlargement eastward, and in a policy sense, with the influence of the European political level growing slowly but steadily.

Third, more informal and issue-specific forms of policy making and attempts to influence politics have been growing. These forms are many and variegated, ranging from poor people's grassroots organizations, to highly professionalized issue interest groups with a middle-class basis, to elite networks manifested, for example, in the World Economic Forum (www.weforum.org) or the European Round Table of Industrialists (www.ert.be). Furthermore, lobby groups constantly attempt to influence decision making through informal contacts with political elites, both at the national and international level (Naurin 2001, 2004). The decline in political party memberships and the partial demise of formalized cooperation between trade unions, employers, and the state is a concomitant to this growing informalization of politics. More politics is now conducted within loose networks of power and is less evident at the bargaining table than was the case 20 years ago. This development might well be particularly pronounced within the political institutions of the European Union (Jachtenfuchs 2001: 253–5), something that makes a growing Europeanization a driving force for a further informalization of politics.

What are the implications for political preferences, attitudes, and values of these combined changes in welfare state governance? One thing we should expect is that when the system for decision making becomes more complex, politics will become less visible and political accountability more diffuse (Hirst 2000). It has become harder and harder for the ordinary citizen to decide exactly who is to praise or blame for various political outcomes (Kumlin 2003). Responsibility is shifted between various levels

(subnational, national, international) and between various agencies (legislatures, implementing bodies, subunits of organizations) in ways that are not easily traced, even for highly sophisticated observers.

This development is particularly interesting to analyze since it coincides with a general rise in educational levels and ensuing political efficacy among the population of Western nations (Inglehart 1997: Ch. 10; Goul Andersen and Hoff 2001: Ch 2). More people nowadays feel competent about their own political abilities, but the political landscape they try to make sense of has become more complex and diffuse.

A particularly important question in this respect is what kinds of institutional arrangements are particularly conducive to citizens' "empowerment"—that is, their autonomy of power and their ability to affect decisions taken by public authorities (Hoff 1993; Kumlin 2004). Some institutional arrangements are likely to increase efficacy and participation while others are likely to decrease them.

We might also expect conceptions of *demos* to change as a result of changes in governance, but the direction of this change is very hard to predict. On the one hand, we could expect a widening conception of *demos* to result from increasing supranational political integration. The slowly emerging European public resulting from European political integration is a case in point, as are also the borderless social movements sometimes transcending boundaries even between the rich North and the poor South.

On the other hand, we could also in some groups expect a shrinking of the conception of *demos*, as a defensive reaction against perceived (cultural and economic) threats from the "outside." Reactionary attempts to draw sharp boundaries against "others" of various kinds are present not only among the extreme right-wing movements but also among mainstream political parties. Furthermore, tendencies toward decentralization of decision making and devolution might nurture a narrower and geographically more circumscribed conception of *demos*. This is clearly evident in several attempts to create larger local or regional autonomy or even national independence for subunits of the current European nation-states (Keating and Loughlin 1997; Keating 1998).

The implications of changes in governance might be given a pessimistic or optimistic interpretation, depending on assumptions and point of departure. The pessimistic scenario is that we are moving into a "post-democratic" stage, where all the formally democratic institutions are still in

place but where democracy has become an empty shell with decisions being taken in other places than in democratically elected bodies, and witnessed by an increasingly apathetic public. The optimistic scenario is that we are moving into a more diversified democracy, with a plethora of possibilities for democratic participation emerging in local, national, and supranational arenas (Held and McGrew 2002; Held 2002, 2004: Part II).

Regarding the output side of politics, new market-emulating reforms may at the same time increase choice and empower citizens; this must be judged as a positive democratic development, and make political accountability harder to assess—which is quite problematic from a democratic point of view.

Comparative politico-sociological research can hardly be expected to judge how far the real world of democracy resembles a dystopia or utopia. Where it can make a contribution, however, is in saying something about which institutional arrangements are likely to have which democratic effects. What kinds of institutional arrangements are likely to increase participation, trust, and inclusion? Which ones are likely to have the opposite effects? How do people make sense of the increased political complexity and what effects does that action have on political participation and trust?

Changing stratification is the second main aspect of recent welfare state changes. Stratification patterns have gone through considerable changes in recent times, partly as a result of welfare state restructuring. Such changes in stratification are likely to affect the maintenance of social cleavages and thereby the formation of identities and interests.

Recent changes in this respect may be summarized under the heading “recommodification.” Recommodification is a process through which individuals become more dependent on market forces for their life chances and living conditions (Breen 1997). It is therefore a process that reverses the trend toward “decommodification,” which Esping-Andersen (1990) and others have seen as a fundamental achievement of the welfare state. The weakening of “risk-hedging” institutions such as the family and the welfare state has meant that individuals in the Western world are now more exposed to the play of market forces than they were a couple of decades ago.

Recommodification is clearly visible both in markets and in public policies; it takes expression both in the restructuring of institutions and in effects among individuals. Among the key factors we find a stronger dominance of global financial markets at the expense of national labor market

regulation and welfare policies. Even if no “race to the bottom” can be detected, it is nevertheless the case that public policies have become more circumscribed by the need to pay attention to volatile financial markets, and that this has made some of the measures used for enhancing growth and welfare more or less obsolete (Huber and Stephens 2001b).

Recommodification is also apparent in the form of more precarious employment relationships. This is due both to the increased and persistent unemployment levels in the Western world from the 1970s onward and to more irregular and temporary forms of employment that have proliferated in many Western economies in the last decades (Korpi 2002; Gallie and Paugam 2000).

Also, in terms of industrial relations, recommodification is clearly discernible in the decline of union membership, institutions for collective wage bargaining, and corporatist settlements (Western 1997). However, this development has been highly uneven in the Western world and has not implied any institutional convergence since the breakup of collective bargaining and corporatist structures have been most pronounced in the liberal market countries such as the United States and Britain (Wallerstein and Western 2000; Traxler 2003). The combined effect of increasing market exposure and decline of collective institutions for wage setting has been a clear increase in wage and income inequality in virtually all Western countries since the 1980s (Rueda and Pontusson 2000; Smeeding 2002). Scattered evidence suggests that for the liberal market economies this has been combined with sharply increased volatility of earnings and incomes (Gustavsson 2004; Hacker et al. 2005).

Turning to public policies, we have witnessed at least some level of retrenchment of welfare state programs, making them less effective in countering market inequalities. Social rights are more circumscribed now than was the case in the 1980s in that replacement levels in the social insurances have declined, exposing individuals more strongly to the vagaries of the market (Korpi and Palme 2003; Allan and Scruggs 2004).

Finally, recommodification is not only visible in the distribution of incomes and benefits, but also in the very production of goods and services. This is typified by the increased roles for “internal markets” and “outsourcing” within both the public sector and private corporations, making employees more directly exposed to market forces than a quarter-century ago (Lawson and Taylor-Gooby 1993; Pierre 1995; Coriat 1997).

While the major aspects of this recommodification are common to Western capitalist countries, national variations have nevertheless been substantial. In general, there are no clear signs of any institutional convergence between different policy regimes, since the impact of market-driven reforms has been greatest in those countries that were the most market-oriented to begin with, such as the UK and the United States (Huber and Stephens 2001a; Pierson 2001b; Scharpf and Schmidt 2000; Swank 2002). In short, the trend toward recommodification has been uneven and varied, yet common among Western countries.

Recommodifying processes might result in the strengthening of social cleavages, rooted in the division of labor and ensuing market situations. Hence, we could expect class and gender patterns of distribution to strengthen. There is, however, considerable disagreement about whether increased exposure to market forces leads to a hardening of class structuration or to a gradual dissolution of class relations and their replacement by an individualized inequality (Goldthorpe 2000; Sørensen 2000). A similar argument might be made for gender relations. On the one hand, recommodification might increase differences between men and women, recognizing that men often have better market positions than women. We could then expect gender to become a more important social cleavage. On the other hand, recommodification is likely to increase heterogeneity *among* women and men, thus making gender a less clear-cut dividing line.

Recommodification might also result in the rise or rebirth of social cleavages grounded outside the division of labor. For example, nationality and ethnicity might—almost paradoxically in a presumed “age of globalization”—become more important markers of belonging and identity for groups as they become more exposed to market forces, in particular if such exposure has very different consequences for different ethnic populations within the same polity (Smith 2001: 137–9; Chua 2003).

The themes of changes in governance and changes in stratification patterns are addressed in various ways and to different extents in the empirical chapters that follow. Some of them focus on changes in stratification and ensuing patterns of attitudes and identities; others are mainly concerned with the mechanisms behind political accountability and political action. Although some of the empirical chapters do include comparisons over time, our main aim is not to chart change, but to analyze variations and mechanisms behind the formation of orientations and their consequences. What

unites the chapters is thus not a focus on attitudinal change and persistence but a joint conceptual framework that is presented in the next section.

ORIENTATIONS, SOCIAL CLEAVAGES, AND
INSTITUTIONS—THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The three main concepts of our analytical framework are *orientations*, *social cleavages*, and *political institutions*. We use *orientations* as an “umbrella concept” that covers a broad set of attitudinal and political components. Orientations refer to attitudes and identities directed toward any aspect of social or political issues. The contributors to this volume tend to focus on different aspects of orientations: sociopolitical attitudes (normative orientations toward social arrangements), social and political identities (sense of belonging and allegiance), and political trust and efficacy (beliefs about the honesty and integrity of political actors and about the opportunities to influence politics) are among the key indicators.

Cleavages should be understood as borders between social categories of various kinds. Examples of such categories are different classes, different ethnic groups, men and women, young and old. Orientations may vary among groups either because such groups may be more or less endowed with crucial resources and more or less exposed to risks, or because groups are differently placed in networks of interaction and communication. The first set of factors tends to give rise to different *interests* while the second set of factors tends to create different *norms* about what is proper, just, and acceptable (Svallfors 2006: Ch. 2). Such interests and norms may, in turn, give rise to different orientations toward social and political issues.

Some authors argue that the concept of cleavage can be applied only where such cleavages exist not only at the level of social structure but also as bases for group identification and conflict, and where cleavages have taken political organizational form (Manza and Brooks 1999: 33–5; see also Bartolini and Mair 1990). We tend to take a more circumscribed view of the cleavage concept and restrict it to socially significant differences in material circumstances between different social categories. The extent to which such cleavages form the basis for identification, conflict, and organization is, in our view, an issue to be settled at the empirical rather than definitional level.

One of the issues we raise in this volume, therefore, is in what ways such cleavages have formed the bases for different orientations among the populations of different Western countries. In this regard, we assume that the relation between social cleavages and their correlates in the form of orientations is a contingent one, a relation affected both by the institutional frameworks in which people are embedded and by the forms of political articulation prevalent in different polities. Political institutions and political articulation function to establish, strengthen, or dissolve the links between social cleavages and orientations (Svallfors 2006: Ch. 2).

Political institutions may be defined as “the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy” (Hall 1992: 96). They are systems of rules and procedures that are embodied in, for example, social insurance systems, electoral systems, or family law. Political institutions are the result of human design in the form of political decisions and their implementation (Rothstein 1996; Rothstein and Steinmo 2002).

Political institutions affect human action in a number of ways. First, institutions modify the structure of rewards and costs. For example, welfare state intervention and labor market legislation modify the structure of rewards and costs. Second, institutions structure possibilities and incentives. Competition, recruitment, and social mobility are structured by political institutions, which therefore impinge on the incentives of social actors. Institutions also affect perceptions and norms in a more direct way: (a) they affect the *visibility* of social phenomena; (b) they affect what is considered politically *possible* to achieve in a given setting; and (c) they embody, and hence create, *norms* about what is fair and just (Rothstein 1998: 134–43; Svallfors 2003; Mau 2003: Ch. 3–4; Mettler and Soss 2004).

To assume that there is a relation between institutions and orientations does not imply that institutions determine orientations. Within some boundary limits, the relationship is instead a probabilistic one as well as one of mutual dependency and development. Certain institutions tend to make some orientations more likely than others; given a certain set of orientations, some institutions are more easily implemented or changed than others.

Institutions tend to be “bundled” into configurations, or “regimes.” This is because there is a degree of internal logic by which some institutions are highly compatible with other institutions while others are less easily combined. These institutional configurations have been conceptualized as

“production regimes” and “welfare regimes.” The first denotes “the organization of production through markets and market-related institutions” (Soskice 1999: 101). An important distinction in this respect is between “liberal market economies” (such as those of the UK and the United States) on the one hand and “coordinated market economies” (such as those of Germany and Sweden) on the other (Soskice 1999; see also Hall and Soskice 2001: Ch. 1).

The second categorization indicates different types of institutional configurations related to welfare policies in the broad sense, the most famous one being Esping-Andersen’s distinction between “three worlds of welfare capitalism” (Esping-Andersen 1990; see also Castles and Mitchell 1992; Korpi and Palme 1998). The welfare regimes distinguished by Esping-Andersen are characterized by the ways in which welfare policies, and in particular social insurance, have been organized in different countries. As noted by Huber and Stephens, “the same welfare regime is compatible with different—but not any—labour market institutions and policies” (Huber and Stephens 2001b: 109). The liberal market economies, due to the imperative to keep labor costs down and sustain managerial prerogatives, tend to have less extensive welfare policies. The welfare state is rudimentary and leaves most of the safeguarding against labor market and life cycle risks to private or company-based insurance (Esping-Andersen 1990: 26–7; Huber and Stephens 2001b). The coordinated market economies are more dependent on welfare state arrangements that may keep the social partnership going and allow the reproduction of a skilled work force. The welfare state is extensive and seeks to safeguard (at least) the working population from various risks connected to market dependency and the life course (Huber and Stephens 2001b).

The interaction between institutions, cleavages, and orientations is of fundamental importance in forging a particular “moral economy,” in which the mutual rights and obligations in a society are condensed (Svallfors 1996b; Mau 2003). The notion of a “moral economy” is useful for complementing a purely self-interest perspective on preferences and attitudes, in that people’s notions of social relations are guided by normative ideas of reciprocity, obligation, and responsibility, which cannot be reduced to merely a question about who is benefiting in different processes of distribution.

In forging this moral economy, the role of public policies in the broad sense is paramount. Public policies may be seen as concrete manifestations

of political institutions, and they “influence the ways individuals understand their rights and responsibilities as members of a political community” (Mettler and Soss 2004: 61). Our particular focus is on the feedback effects of public policies on mass publics, something that “policy-feedback scholarship still pays insufficient attention to” (Mettler and Soss 2004: 60; see also Pierson 1993).

Political institutions are not only significant for their modifying effect on orientations. Their role in the translation of such orientations into social and political action is perhaps of even greater significance. By modifying the opportunity structure, political institutions are paramount in making or breaking the link between attitudes and action. Simply put, the available choices determine what may be chosen. Even short of actually limiting the range of available choices, the institutional framework may render some choices harder to make than others and thus affect the link between orientations and social/political action (Mettler and Soss 2004: 63). Also in this respect we may speak of feedback effects from public policies on mass publics. As noted by Manza et al. (2005: 208), not only does political participation influence the political process, but the outcomes of the political process affect who participates and how they participate.

A final complication to consider is the importance of political articulation for forging the link between specific cleavages, institutions, and orientations. To “articulate” something is to link it to something else—in this case, particular social cleavages to politics. Such articulation, as conducted by political parties and other organized interests and often played out in the mass media, is by its very nature an attempt to change the orientations of target populations. It aims at connecting and disconnecting interpretive frameworks and distributive outcomes. The importance of political articulation arises because “actors may have trouble identifying their interests clearly” so that “those interests have to be derived via a process of interpretation” (Hall 1997: 197). Hence, political articulation is a source of contingency in the relation between institutions, cleavages, and orientations. By using various forms of “symbolic politics,” political actors hope to change or even create perceptions and attitudes (Edelman 1964; 1971; Svallfors 1996b: Ch. 3). Such “symbolic politics” always has to be conducted in particular institutional settings, which may make some forms of articulation harder and others easier to accomplish.

Political articulation also plays an important role in modifying the link between attitudes and action. One of the simplest and most widespread forms of social action is voting. As has been repeatedly stressed, voting is not only determined by values, attitudes, and preferences but also by the options available to voters. If parties do not present themselves in their manifestos and policies as representing particular groups, there is no reason to expect the association between social cleavages and voting behavior to be strong, regardless of how strongly such cleavages impinge on the orientations of mass publics.

THE COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

Why do we compare the public's orientations across countries? What might be achieved by getting involved in the notoriously difficult task of conducting cross-national research? The purpose of comparative research is sometimes stated as that of finding sociological "laws" or, more modestly, "rules." If one sticks to such notions, we contend, comparative research is likely to be an eternal disappointment. The "laws" or "rules" we could find that would be both timeless and context-free are most likely to be sociologically trivial. In relation to our analytic framework, the fruitfulness of comparative research should be sought elsewhere, in an analysis of the way in which time- and space-bound institutions influence orientations and action among mass publics. In our particular case we attempt to analyze how the institutional framework affects orientations in a broad sense, and since the most important institutional variation is still found between countries, we conjecture that a cross-national comparative framework will allow us to elicit our research questions in a particularly pertinent way.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that the most relevant explanatory unit may not always be the nation-state. Important work has shown that considerable institutional variation is found within the same nation-state, and that this has considerable impact on the beliefs and behavior of the public (Soss 2004; Kumlin 2004). Nevertheless, for our purposes it seems essential to apply a country-comparative framework.

Although comparative research is thus potentially very fruitful, comparative research on orientations is fraught with difficulties that may make results and interpretations fragile (Kuechler 1987, 1998; Jowell 1998).