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Abstract

*Dismantling the Welfare State* is a modern classic in the welfare state literature. Yet although the book is widely known, the ‘Piersonian argument’ as it is typically referred to today bears limited resemblance with the book’s highly nuanced and thought-provoking ideas. This review revisits the book and explores some of the lessons it still holds for the research community.
Paul Pierson’s *Dismantling the Welfare State?* (hereafter DWS) is undoubtedly one of the best known books in the study of the welfare state. When it was published back in 1994, it ignited a new strand of research on ‘the new politics of the welfare state’; one of the most fruitful and lively debates in the field in the past few decades. The more than 5,000 quotes on Google Scholar testify to this. 25 years later, there is now an obvious opportunity to take a step back and consider the lasting impact of the book on the welfare state literature.

Given that virtually all welfare state scholars probably know DWS (or shame on them!), it is striking how little of the rich theoretical apparatus has actually been consistently adopted, let alone empirically tested. This may seem like a weird claim about a book with many thousand citations, but it is nevertheless the case: there is a stark contrast between what we (think we) have learned and what we ought to learn. As such, Pierson’s book remains highly relevant for modern-day scholars.

An important reason for this neglect presumably is the two journal articles Pierson published in the years after DWS, and which presented very condensed versions of two core aspects of the book’s argument. *The New Politics of the Welfare State* (Pierson 1996) pitches itself against the then-dominant power resource theory by arguing that the ideological color of governments and the strength of labor movements more broadly no longer affect policy making: welfare states are immovable objects that even willful ideologues cannot retrench. *Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics* (Pierson 2000) presents a forceful theory about how policies become ever-more institutionalized as time goes by. The mere fact that welfare states in western democracies are old means that reforming them is close-to-impossible.

In our reading, DWS has to a large extent been confused with these two much shorter and pointed articles (see also Pierson 2001). The ‘Piersonian argument’ as referred to today can be boiled down to two inter-connected propositions: (1) Increasing returns make reforms
highly unlikely; (2) for this reason government ideology no longer matters for the
development of the welfare state. Both propositions have received a lot of critique from other
scholars who show empirically that welfare states in fact do change a lot and that these
changes appear to be correlated with the composition of the government (e.g. Clayton and
Pontusson 1998; Korpi and Palme 2003; Allan and Scruggs 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005;
Palier 2010; Finseraas and Vernby 2011).

In this review article, we revisit DWS. We deliberately do not review the wellspring of
research on partisanship and path dependence, including Pierson’s own, that emerged in the
years after 1994. Instead, we go ad fontes because we believe that the original work holds
powerful lessons for today’s researchers. As we will show, some of these lessons fit well with
where the literature is heading, others less so. We start out by presenting the most important
assumptions upon which DWS is built; afterwards we discuss where welfare state research
still can learn substantially from Pierson’s book.

Analytical background and assumptions

DWS is firmly rooted in historical institutionalism and draws on many of the key assumptions
of this theoretical approach (for comparison, see Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Hall and Taylor
1996). Broadly, individuals are viewed as bounded rational satisficers with context-dependent
preferences. Individuals engage in satisficing in the sense that they try to maximize either
their material gains or power, though their ability to do so often is severely constrained by
their own cognitive limitations and the institutional setting they happen to be in. Yet
institutions not only constrain individuals; they also shape their preferences as individuals
learn and adapt their expectations to the institutional environment. Hence, DWS is directly
related to the concept of policy-feedback which is at the core of historical institutionalist
theory and to which Pierson’s work has greatly contributed (for the most recent overview, see
Béland/Schlager 2019). In fact, policy-feedback is directly referred to in DWS as one of the major impediments against welfare state change. The sources of such positive feedback are to be found at the level of interest groups and at the level of voters both of which affect the strategic calculation of politicians in charge of reforming the welfare state.

DWS’ analytical universe is populated by re-election motivated politicians and welfare-loving voters. At its core, DWS postulates that politicians trade votes for welfare. The argument is not that re-election is the only thing politicians care about – in fact, Thatcher, Reagan and their governments are portrayed as holding strong ideological beliefs regarding social policy. Nevertheless, a precondition for pursuing more ideologically motivated policy preferences is to get enough votes. In the process of winning these votes, politicians need to carefully consider the preferences of the potential voters. Doing so, they are able to employ a selection of so-called blame avoidance strategies, discussed below, that allow them to navigate between the various and partly contradicting demands of the electorate and the economy.

Compared to the strategizing and re-election seeking politicians, the picture drawn of the voters is even more bleak. They are self-serving, largely ignorant about politics, and exhibit strong and unwarranted skepticism about change (known as negativity bias). Voters are self-serving in the sense that they care about the benefits they get from the welfare state, either in the form of transfers and services (as citizens claiming benefits) or as wage income (as employees in the public sector). This is a central assumption in DWS: As the welfare state has grown so big that it distributes benefits to almost everyone, the majority of voters is in

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1 The role of ideas is not an explicit part of the theoretical framework of DWS, but is central to the analysis. Thatcher and Reagan are depicted as deeply motivated by the new conservative policy ideas of the late 1970s and 1980s, which inspired them in their quest for retrenchment. As such, DWS is an analysis of the conditions under which policy ideas become successful in a context of highly institutionalized interests (cf. also Béland 2016). For an example of how ideas shape social policy, cf. Bleses and Seeleib-Kaiser 2004.

2 The concept of ‘blame avoidance’ was developed by Kent Weaver (1986) – as an contrasting concept to David Mayhew’s ‘credit-claiming’ – and Pierson explicitly took over Weaver’s concept in DWS.
favor of a generous welfare state, and feels so intensely about it, that it is willing to let their vote choice depend on it.

Voters are also largely ignorant about politics. Ordinary people have many things to care about other than politics, which at any rate is very complicated to comprehend when we move from the headlines to the details that often really matter. Inspired by Arnold (1990), Pierson talks about the causal chain of responsibility linking individual politicians via policy-decisions about the welfare state to the everyday lives of citizens. It takes substantial attention and insights to reconstruct the link between, say, a declining income and a concrete policy-decision of the government. This fact is something that politicians can use actively, employing blame avoidance strategies. Yet the viability of such strategies is founded upon the limitations of voters’ knowledge and attention.

Voters are, finally, characterized by negativity bias. This implies that they pay more attention to what is done against them than what is done for them. In the context of the welfare state, the result is that voters tend to react strongly to cutbacks and less strongly to expansions – even if the expansions are as generous as the cuts are deep. The point about negativity bias is not that people do not like to be deprived of their material wealth, which is a trivial point. The point is rather that people tend to ignore when the government is expanding benefits, while paying attention when benefits are cut. This creates a climate of electoral punishment where governments can only do something wrong, never something right.

The scholarly literature has been slow in empirically assessing these assumptions. While there is evidence that – as presumed by Pierson – pursuit of office often takes precedence over policy considerations (Zohnhöfer and Bandau 2019), the voter side of Pierson’s argument has been critiqued as overly simplistic (see e.g. Giger and Nelson 2013). For one thing, the majority of voters does not unconditionally support the welfare state, i.e.
many voters are willing to accept some welfare cuts for the benefit of economic stability. At the same time, welfare state development is only one among many factors that affects individual vote choice and thus even people unhappy with a government’s social policies might nonetheless vote for the governing party, e.g. because of party identification, the candidate(s) or other issues. Consequently, several studies do not find that voters systematically punish parties at the ballot box that had retrenched the welfare state in the previous electoral period (Giger and Nelson 2011; Schumacher et al. 2012; but see Lee et al. 2019).

These findings challenge some of Pierson’s assumptions. They do not, however, invalidate Pierson’s analysis. On the one hand, studies on the electoral effects of welfare state retrenchment were unable to control for blame avoidance efforts governments may have applied when they cut social policy (Giger and Nelson 2011: footnote 1). On the other hand, and more importantly, there is convincing evidence that policy-makers indeed mostly behaved as if welfare state retrenchment could harm them significantly at the next elections (Wenzelburger 2014). So Pierson’s main argument can be sustained despite the empirical findings on the electoral consequences of welfare retrenchment.

On the concept of welfare state change

The second half of the 2000s saw a major advance in comparative welfare state research, as two datasets measuring welfare state generosity on the basis of individual’s benefits were released: First came the Comparative Welfare States Entitlements Dataset (CWED) by Scruggs and colleagues (Scruggs 2004; Scruggs et al. 2013) followed by the public release of the data collected in the Social Citizenship Indicator Program (SCIP) by the SOFI-Institute (Korpi and Palme 2008). The public availability of the new data that measures how much (replacement rate) an average wage earner (or a family) receives from a country’s welfare
state for how long and under what conditions seemed to finally resolve the big debate on the “dependent variable problem” within welfare state research (Clasen and Siegel 2007; Green-Pedersen 2004; Kühner 2007). In fact, until the mid-2000s, scholars studying welfare state change over a larger set of nations often relied on public spending as a proxy for the welfare state effort (see for instance Castles 2004; Huber and Stephens 2001), although they knew that aggregate spending was “theoretically unsatisfactory” (Castles 2002: 616) because “by scoring welfare states on spending, we assume that all spending counts equally” (Esping-Andersen 1990: 19). However, due to the lack of data, spending was simply the only game in town.

Nonetheless, while most researchers agree that the availability of data on welfare state generosity was a major advance for the study of social policies3, Pierson’s work reminds us to be not too quick in filing the issue away of how to conceptualize and measure welfare state change. In fact, the nuanced discussion of the challenges in measuring welfare state change in DWS shows that the debate on the “dependent variable problem” is far from settled. Pierson argues that three “ground rules” have to be taken into account if we want to study welfare state change (Pierson 1994: 14). First, it is important to distinguish between long-term as well as short-term spending cuts. If Parliament adopts a bill today, cutting back benefits in 10 years, the visibility of the retrenchment for the individual is very different from a cutback that takes immediate effects. Hence, studying welfare state change has to take into account when cutbacks (as well as expansions) actually materialize. This clearly refers to his concept of political strategies and the possibility of political actors to obfuscate the visibility of cutbacks by postponing the immediate effects to future generations.

3 However, we have to keep in mind that using generosity data has also certain conceptual drawbacks (Jensen 2011; Starke 2008: 18) and that the two most prominent datasets are far from being congruent (Bolukbasi and Öktem 2018; Wenzelburger et al. 2013).
Second, in line with Esping-Andersen’s critique of spending data, Pierson also emphasizes that program structures can change while spending levels remain similar. While certainly being a better proxy than spending, generosity data does not necessarily take up such structural changes, either. If governments increasingly impose tougher working conditions on benefit eligibility – as many governments have during the late 1980s and 1990s (on Germany, see Wenzelburger et al. 2018) – indicators based on replacement rates will not take into account these structural shifts. Similarly, structural changes between different pillars of pension schemes are usually not taken into account, although many states in the 1990s used public money to incentivize workers to invest in private or occupational pension schemes while, at the same time, downsizing the public pillar of the pension system (Ebbinghaus and Wiß 2011; Wiß 2011). Hence, while acknowledging that the new replacement rate data has been an enormous progress for welfare state studies, Pierson’s call to focus on “structure as well as size” (Pierson 1994: 15) has not lost its relevance, even 25 years later.

Finally, Pierson introduces an important differentiation between two types of retrenchment: programmatic retrenchment, mainly used to reduce spending in the short term e.g. via cuts to benefit levels or duration periods; and systemic retrenchment, directed at undermining the very foundations of the welfare state. While we have learned a lot more since DWS about programmatic retrenchment, systemic retrenchment has remained a much more understudied field. This is a pity given that the concept points to forceful dynamics that destabilize the foundations of the welfare state. Pierson distinguishes four forms of systemic retrenchment. One way of systemic retrenchment is to defund the welfare state, that is, to change fiscal policies in a way that jeopardizes the generation of high revenues necessary to pay for generous social policies. A second option is to change public opinion by emphasizing goals of free entrepreneurship, individual responsibilities or free choice. This would, in the
long run, weaken the support of a large welfare state. Thirdly, governments may try to change the institutional rules governing the welfare state, e.g. by decentralizing policies to lower levels of government. And finally, weakening important pro-welfare interest groups may also result in welfare state retrenchment in the long run as the rules of the game have changed.

Many of these mechanisms have been at work in Western industrialized countries over recent years. However, they have been largely studied as distinct phenomena – such as the decline of trade unionism (Bryson et al. 2011; Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000) or the changing politics of taxation (Ganghof 2006; Genschel/Schwarz 2011). Re-reading *DWS* 25 years later reminds us of the relevance of systemic retrenchment in current welfare state politics. In fact, it would be a great opportunity to revisit systemic retrenchment in a more systematic way and to link these underlying dynamics to the more immediate outcomes of programmatic cutbacks in more recent years. After a quarter of a century, the consequences of defunding, institutional changes or the systematic weakening of trade unions should be strongly visible in terms of welfare state outcomes.

Pierson’s discussion of the dependent variable problem has been criticized in the literature sometimes. Starke (2008: 13) finds that DWS “fails to offer a definition of its central concept”, i.e. welfare state retrenchment, and takes issue with the concept of systemic retrenchment because “it elides explanans and explanandum and […] it is based on a rather ambiguous judgment of likely future cuts” (Starke 2008: 20). While this criticism is certainly plausible if one is interested in the politics of specific social programs, from a more long-term perspective on the welfare state the concept of systemic retrenchment is very revealing: Retrenchment advocates may not only attack specific programs but make the factors that protect the welfare state from cuts the object of political interference – a strategy that, if successful, is likely to make retrenchment much easier next time around.
Hacker’s (2004) account of risk privatization in the United States has also been read as a criticism of DWS because Pierson did not analyze policy-makers’ (intentional) failure to adapt the welfare state to changing social risks. Even if one were to concede that the non-decisions regarding new social risks count as retrenchment (which by no means all scholars do; cf. Starke 2008: 14), Pierson’s failure to investigate this issue is at most an empirical weakness of DWS but not an analytical one. Hacker himself (2004: 244, Fn. 2) argues “the changes I describe fall between systemic and programmatic retrenchment”, i.e. they can very well be investigated with Pierson’s conceptual groundwork.

In sum, revisiting the arguments of DWS on the conceptualization of welfare state change shows that the dependent variable problem still merits our attention. While important steps forward have been made in terms of measurement, none of the “ground rules” formulated by Pierson 25 years ago have lost their significance. To understand the dynamics of welfare state change, we have to know more about long-term and short-term retrenchment, need to collect more detailed information about how program structures have changed and investigate how systemic retrenchment plays out in the long run.

**Agency and welfare state change**

In current accounts of welfare state politics, DWS is usually cited when scholars refer to the welfare state as resilient to change and strongly path dependent (Van Kersbergen and Vis 2014: 14). Indeed, the idea of positive feedback and path dependent trajectories are prominent in Pierson’s work (see also Pierson 1993, 1998) and have spurred a lively debate within and beyond the historical institutionalist school about policy change (Streeck and Thelen 2005). In DWS, Pierson’s theoretical framework relies on two main forces that reduce the probability of radical change: Institutional inertia on the one hand and public support for the welfare state on the other. On the first point, Pierson argues that the institutions that were
built around the welfare state during the phase of expansion can be expected to militate against radical retrenchment. Path dependent policy development and, at best, incremental change within the existing institutional framework are the results. On the second point, vote-seeking politicians, according to Pierson, will refrain from introducing far-reaching welfare state reforms, as social policy programs are supported by a large majority of the voters. Hence, electoral politics protect welfare states from retrenchment.

Nonetheless, while it is true that Pierson concludes his 1996 article stating that it is hard “to find radical changes in advanced welfare states” (Pierson 1996, 150) and argues in DWS that “retrenchment is a distinctive and difficult enterprise” (Pierson 1994: 1), limiting his work to the resilience-argument is not doing justice to his book, and to the empirical findings on the Thatcher and Reagan governments in particular. In fact, important parts of the book (Pierson 1994: 19-26, 171-175) actually describe how political actors in Britain and the US have succeeded in adopting welfare state cutbacks in spite of the powerful forces that work against far-reaching change. Especially in Britain, Pierson identifies “a considerable erosion of universal programs” (Pierson 1994: 145) particularly in the realm of pensions and housing – two cornerstones of the British welfare state. Similarly, although less substantial than in the UK, DWS also points out considerable cutbacks to unemployment insurance, Medicare and Medicaid during the Reagan years and emphasizes the long-term “systemic retrenchment” that occurred by means of defunding the American welfare state. Hence, the case study evidence provided actually paints a much more nuanced picture than the post-DWS literature acknowledges:

“[T]he results of programmatic-retrenchment efforts have varied significantly, both within and across policy arenas. (…) Housing programs and unemployment-insurance benefits have undergone extensive retrenchment in both countries. In Britain, the state pensions system has also been radically reformed. Retrenchment has been less extensive in other income-transfer programs and in health care.” (Pierson 1994: 5)
The fact that DWS provides empirical evidence for welfare state change in spite of a theoretical approach mostly predicting resilience raises the question of how pathways of change are integrated in the theoretical framework of institutional stickiness and electoral politics. For Pierson, strategic agency is the key. If political actors use strategic manoeuvres, they may pursue a much more ambitious program of policy change – and succeed in adopting substantial retrenchment in certain parts of the welfare state. Pierson distinguishes between three “strategies that retrenchment advocates can use to minimize political resistance: obfuscation, division, and compensation” (Pierson 1994: 19). Obfuscation strategies aim at manipulating information about policy changes. This can be done by choosing invisible instruments for cutbacks (Jensen et al. 2018), increasing the complexity of reforms or obfuscate who is responsible for cutbacks e.g. by delaying reforms to the future. Strategies of division work via targeting cutbacks on specific groups whereas others are exempted. As a result, the formation of a common, unified mobilization against retrenchment is less probable. Finally, if a government resorts to compensation strategies, it mixes welfare state retrenchment with expansions of benefits for certain groups. Again, this aims at reducing the risk of unified resistance against the cuts, because some groups actually gain (at least relatively) from the reforms.

Pierson’s ideas about how political actors can use strategies to overcome the forces of resilience has inspired an important body of research on blame avoidance strategies (Vis 2016), which mostly consists of case studies showing how political actors use different strategies while retrenching the welfare state. A parallel strand of the blame avoidance literature has developed in public administration (Hood 2011) and was recently systematically linked to the research on political strategies and welfare state reform (Hinterleitner and Sager 2016).
organizational strategies, such as obfuscation, division and compensation (and many more, see Weaver (1986) or Vis and Van Kersbergen (2007)), or to communication strategies, which means to influence the perceptions of voters about the necessity or justification of unpopular cutbacks (Marx and Schumacher 2016; McGraw 1991; Slothuus 2007; Wenzelburger and Hörisch 2016).

From this strand of research, it is quite clear that although political actors are constrained by institutional inertia and electoral considerations, they do actively use political strategies to overcome these forces of resilience and do adopt far-reaching reforms of the welfare state. In our reading, these findings do by no means run contrary to Pierson’s analysis, but they are, instead, confirming the expectation of strategic action developed in DWS. Hence, the critique of Pierson’s emphasis on resilience by scholars like Korpi and Palme (2003) or Allan and Scruggs (2004), who pointed to the substantial decrease in the generosity of the welfare state, seems to neglect the agency-related part of Pierson’s argument. As a close reading reveals, DWS does not at all rule out the possibility of substantial welfare state retrenchment. Instead, it says under what conditions such retrenchment is probable. Hence, DWS does not only tell us how institutions and electoral politics make radical retrenchment less likely, but it also provides an indication about how strategic agency can overcome these constraints to policy change.

**Policy processes**

Pierson’s argument also provides a lot of food for thought for the study of policy processes. As argued above, retrenchment advocates’ (blame avoidance) strategies play an important role for the success of efforts to scale back the welfare state. Which strategies are suitable, however, is to a substantial degree driven by characteristics of individual welfare state programs and the institutional setup of political systems. While Thatcher was successful in
retrenching public pensions in the UK because the existing program had not yet matured, Reagan’s efforts at curbing pensions were facilitated by concerns in the public about the financial situation of social security. Similarly, the federal US system would have allowed Reagan a strategy of decentralization, which was infeasible for Thatcher in unitary Britain.

Therefore, the opportunities to avoid blame for retrenching the welfare state shape policy-making processes to a substantial degree. Apparently negligible details of welfare programs can make a difference as some allow applying a specific blame avoidance strategy while others do not. Program details thus matter a lot for policy-making processes and retrenchment may simply take place where the opportunity structure for cuts is most promising. Moreover, this opportunity structure may vary between countries, between sectors and even between programs within a sector. That also means that when studying welfare state retrenchment we might need to compare apples and oranges, i.e. we might need to resort to a “contextualized comparison” where “apparently different struggles in fact capture the particular way that common challenges have been translated into specific conflicts in the various national settings“ (Locke and Thelen 1995: 344).

The idea that retrenchment advocates may simply seek to dismantle the welfare state where obstacles are smallest has also important implications for the study of partisan politics and ideology. DWS is often (mis)understood as a claim that parties do not matter anymore. It seems to us that this is not entirely the case. In contrast, Pierson’s main argument rests on the assumption that the Thatcher and Reagan administrations were ideologically committed to welfare state retrenchment: “For the first time since before World War II, political executives in Britain and the United States were now openly critical of central features of social policy” (Pierson 1994: 4). So, as neither the US Democrats nor the British Labour Party wished to retrench the welfare state, ideology clearly mattered programmatically. What is more, although Thatcher’s and Reagan’s successes in dismantling the welfare state were clearly
limited, retrenchment did occur – while it would be difficult to imagine that the then
opposition in both countries would have adopted comparable legislation. Pierson’s book is
thus clearly *not* about partisan convergence and the end of ideology. Rather, it discusses how
extent policies and the popularity of the welfare state shape partisan differences.

The literature has taken up both of these ideas only infrequently so far – but with
interesting insights. Frank Bandau (2015), for example, has shown that while the design of
welfare programs in the era of expansion had been in the center of heated partisan conflict,
the matured welfare state institutions were increasingly taken as a given by all parties. Thus,
partisan conflicts moved away from the large questions of policy design and centered around
issues within the given institutions. Consequently, while partisan differences still exist in all
countries, the precise issues about which parties disagree differ between countries and
welfare programs according to the specific institutional setup of the welfare state (for a
similar argument, see Garritzmann 2016).

Similarly, only a few studies have taken a closer look at the conditions under which
the popularity of the welfare state and party competition keep right parties from retrenching –
and when that does not happen. For example, Green-Pedersen (2001) and Kitschelt (2001)
discuss how the constellation of party competition can insulate governments from voters’
discontent about welfare cuts – which in turn makes retrenchment easier. Similarly, Jensen
and Seeberg (2015) have shown that right parties tend to differ less from their left
competitors in social policy when the latter emphasize the welfare state a lot – which
suggests that retrenchment becomes easier when left opposition parties focus on other issues.

In sum, there is still a lot to learn from *DWS* with regard to policy-making processes.
That is true with regard to the enormous role of details of social policy programs for the
possibility (or otherwise) of welfare cuts, but also with regard to the question as to how
existing programs and the popularity of the welfare state shape the role ideology plays in policy-making processes.

**Policy areas**

As noted, Pierson’s argument about the welfare state is often referred to under the headline of “the new politics of the welfare state”. In a sense, this headline is a misnomer because *DWS* explicitly emphasizes that it makes no sense to talk about *the* welfare state. Countries are frequently categorized as belonging to a certain regime (Esping-Andersen 1990) or family of nations (Castles 1993) in the welfare state literature, suggesting that different countries have different welfare state politics. Pierson, however, underscores another and arguably more fundamental point: even within individual countries, we cannot meaningfully talk about a single type of welfare state politics. Each policy area has its own distinct politics with distinct outcomes.5

The argument that the politics of policy areas are distinct from each other even within countries follows directly from the previous outline of *DWS*. For one thing, the configurations of interests varies greatly from one area to another. On some – like pensions and health care – large majorities of citizens either enjoy or expect to enjoy benefits sometime in the future. On others – like unemployment protection – much fewer individuals are (potential) recipients (Jensen 2012; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2013). Beyond the voter level, areas also vary according to the strength and density of organized interests. Health care is home to powerful industrial actors and patient groups, pensions to strong associations of retirees, and the labor market to unions and employers associations; though the exact strength of these varies over time and between countries.

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5 This is, of course, not a unique argument of Pierson, but dates at least back to Lowi’s notion that “policy determines politics” (Lowi 1972: 299). Still, *DWS* provides an analytical framework to understand such cross-area variation within the context of the welfare state.
Because of these varied configurations, the political settlements on an area will vary too; and will subsequently tend to lock-in, thereby creating strong path-dependencies. The opportunities for reform-minded politicians are molded by these past policy decisions, which then again tend to enhance the distinct trajectory of the area. In a nutshell, policy is said to determine politics. To understand the politics of the welfare state, one needs to understand the specific characteristics and history of the policy area in question rather than to assume that the same political logic rules across-the-board within a country.

**Conclusion**

Paul Pierson’s *Dismantling the Welfare State?* has become a classic in welfare state scholarship. The book has influenced welfare state research massively in the past 25 years, documented by literally thousands of citations. In spite of this broad reception in the scholarly literature, we have argued in this review article that important insights of Pierson’s groundbreaking study have not received the attention they deserve.

First, Pierson’s conceptualization of welfare state change is still relevant for today’s welfare state research. Despite remarkable progress in the measurement of welfare state change, the conceptual challenges regarding the time horizon of changes, regarding changes in program structures (rather than, for example, benefits) and regarding systemic retrenchment have not yet been fully solved.

Second, Pierson’s ‘new politics of the welfare state’ is not entirely about welfare state resilience due to path dependence and the welfare state’s popularity. Rather, these two factors constitute the context under which retrenchment advocates have to act. In turn, it depends on welfare state reformers’ strategies whether or not retrenchment becomes possible. Thus, agency matters even under conditions of path dependence and welfare state popularity!
Third – and related with the previous point –, details of specific programs matter in policy processes because they provide actors with windows of opportunity for reform. Hence, we should not expect retrenchment advocates to cut all programs equally. Rather, retrenchment will only take place where program structures and the constellation of electoral competition allow. That also means that partisan differences will depend upon these factors. So parties may matter in different place in international comparison – but that does not mean that they do not matter at all anymore.

Fourth, scholars should not forget that the politics of the welfare state are not the same across all welfare state programs. Rather, the various programs are likely to be shaped by distinct dynamics that might need to be analyzed in distinct ways. Thus, we should be very careful when talking about ‘the welfare state’.

In sum, we argue that DWS is worth a re-read for students of the welfare state because there are still a lot of lessons to learn from Pierson’s imminent book, which will help improve welfare scholarship also for the years to come.
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