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Framing Welfare Reform in Affluent Societies: Rendering Restructuring More Palatable?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the conditions under which political framing can render welfare restructuring more palatable. I start by asking two research questions. What are the necessary (albeit perhaps insufficient) conditions that allow leaders successfully to frame welfare reform? To what extent are these conditions evident across welfare regimes? I identify four variables that affect leaders' opportunities for framing social policy: (1) extant frames, (ii) actors, (iii) institutions and (iv) policy arena. After examining the four dominant types of frames found across affluent societies, I review the discursive politics surrounding *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* as a case where all four conditions for framing welfare reform coalesced.

The "new politics of the welfare state" is a term coined by Paul Pierson (1996) to differentiate between the popular politics of welfare state expansion and the unpopular politics of reform. In contrast to the distributive and legitimising politics of welfare state enlargement, in the current era of austerity political leaders are sandwiched between economic and demographic pressures threatening the foundations of their post-industrial welfare states and broad public support for social programs, entrenched interests and sticky, path dependent institutions (Pierson, 1996; 2000). Forced to govern under conditions of continuous constraint, leaders are impelled to reformulate their costly and inefficient welfare states while minimising the risks of electoral defeat. The new politics, therefore, is primarily one of blame-avoidance (Pierson, 1994, 1996; Ross, 1997, 1999).

Leaders in many affluent societies, however, have sought to implement increasingly adventurous welfare reforms since the early 1990s. Assisted by the intervention of "new actors", including policy experts, networks and think tanks (Barker and Peters, 1993; King, 1999), elected officials are taking a more proactive role in crafting welfare reform than has been allowed for in the new politics literature. Despite

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continuing public attachment to welfare institutions, leaders on the left and right reveal a growing scepticism towards state provision and an increasing acceptance of market-based approaches to social problems (see Rhodes, 1996:308). Pressure from bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation help to define the importance of globalisation and post-industrial transformations, and thereby re-define the range of 'thinkable' political ideas among policy elites. Moreover, far from being confined to a politics of blame-avoidance, in some notable cases, leaders are gaining political credit for implementing seemingly contentious initiatives. Nowhere has this been more clear than in the abolition of AFDC by the Clinton administration and Republican-controlled Congress in the United States and New Labour's New Deal in Britain (King, 1999).

Yet, the new politics' heavily "bottom-up" and institutionalised perspective has dismissed elite influence over institutions, ideas and public opinion. Consequently, we have little understanding of how symbolic politics, the strategic deployment of political discourse, and policy framing can serve as strategies of agenda control. While Jonah Levy (1999) suggests that social democratic leaders in continental Europe could pursue a "vice into virtue" reform strategy by stressing the inequalities and exclusions embedded within existing programmes, the mechanisms by which leaders might implement such a strategy by shaping public opinion and aggregating interests remain unclear.

These issues are particularly pressing in that new (or recycled) ideas concerning the welfare state seem to be triumphing over deeply entrenched welfare institutions, especially in the English-speaking world (see King, 1999). Political agendas are proving to be more than an amalgam of institutional habits, vested interests and public opinion. Ideas and their political advocacy do not simply serve as constraints in the welfare restructuring process, buttressing the status quo and locking-in popular welfare institutions. They also drive the reform process.

The power of new and recycled ideas, however, in large measure depends upon how successfully they can be diffused among pivotal electoral constituencies. Framing and the selective application of political discourse, the process whereby the advantages of a policy are styled and communicated, is one means by which leaders attempt to compensate for the disappointment and loss of legitimacy that usually accompany the attrition of popular social supports.

In this paper I investigate the conditions under which political framing can render welfare restucturing more palatable. I start by asking two research questions. First, what are the requisite conditions for

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framing welfare reform? Can we specify a set of necessary (albeit perhaps insufficient) conditions that allow leaders to successfully frame restructuring initiatives? Second, to what extent are these conditions evident across welfare regimes?[1] The paper is divided into four sections. Following the introduction, section two reviews the concept of framing and identifies four variables that condition the opportunities leaders enjoy for framing social policy: (i) extant frames, (ii) actors, (iii) institutions and (iv) policy arena. Section three illustrates how these four parameters vary across welfare regimes. Section four surveys the discursive politics surrounding *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA) as a case where all four conditions for framing welfare reform coalesced.

The Concept of Framing

Defining the Framing Exercise

The concept of framing is predicated on the familiar assumptions of cognitive psychology: compounding time, energy and interest constraints, individuals are cognitively impaired and, therefore, resort to shortcuts when approaching the political world. The aim of the framer is to exploit these weaknesses in the hope of either reinforcing or changing the audience's choices. By specifying a policy's benefits, linking it with popular symbols, and effectively communicating with the audience, the framer seeks to control the process of evaluation (Kenski, 1996; Hacker, 1996).

The principal features of the cognitive framing exercise are well documented (see Entman, 1993; Chomsky and Herman, 1988). Some definitions include an element of priming, while others emphasise the conveyance of information. Iyengar, for example, defines framing as "subtle alternations in the statement or presentation of judgement and choice problems . . .", whereas Just and Cigler incorporate both communication and interpretation processes; frames amount to "conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information" (cited in Kenski, 1996:73–75).

While definitions of the *cognitive* framing exercise generate much consensus, the literature does use the term in a second, fundamentally different way. Rather than depicting the framing process as an active means of shaping discourse with the aim to reinforce or convert, the concept is also used to capture prevailing cultural perspectives, predispositions and prejudices that condition the way individuals, organisations and states interpret and approach the political world (Rein and Schon, 1994). This use of the concept is vitally important for under-

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standing how existing frames serve as powerful defensive mechanisms to new frames. Indeed, to comprehend the conditionally of new frames they must be examined in tandem with entrenched cultural predispositions.

The Impact of Framing

The cognitive framing literature often appears extravagant in its claims regarding the power of framing (see Druckman, 1998 for a useful overview). The general thrust of framing studies often seems to be that artful leaders can manipulate a naive and trusting public with slim resistance so long as they deploy a cogent set of frames. In Druckman's (1998:2–3) words, "a common depiction of elite framing is that many citizens follow whichever frames they hear most frequently and or most recently. The implication is that nearly any elite can potentially use a frame to manipulate public opinion." Thus, if leaders repeat (frequently and recently) that welfare cuts are really a hidden blessing then sooner or later the unsuspecting public is apt to see some virtue in the reform exercise. By this calculation, had Tony Blair spent more time and energy trying to convince the British public and parliamentarians that cuts in lone parents' and disability benefits were really just and wise policy, then both measures would have received far wider support.

If framing possessed such power the notion of unpopular politicies would hinge solely on leaders' framing abilities. Charismatic and telegenic leaders could exert control over both the saliency and interpretation of any social issue. Though framing does tend to be more effective where an issue is either distant or new, or where the listener is ambivalent (Druckman, 1998), none of these criteria apply to welfare restructuring. Indeed, one of the more immediate problems with framing new welfare initiatives is the breadth of interested parties. New frames, therefore, must target broad sections of society not just a narrow band of immediately injured parties. This is especially true for universal benefits and services incorporating the middle classes. However, it is also the case for targeted policies, albeit to a lesser extent. Pierson (1994) draws on the "logic of collective action" to explain the inherent dangers of withdrawing resources even from targeted groups: losers incur clear, high, concentrated costs, while winners receive unclear, small, thinly spread benefits. Moreover, voters' "negativity bias" renders them more sensitive to the loss of public services than to the potential gains of reduced taxation levels (Pierson, 1994).

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Framing as a Conditional Variable

Like most political variables it is doubtful whether framing matters in a direct, unmediated fashion. It is more plausible to expect an interactive relationship between the effective use of discourse and the broader partisan, cultural and institutional context within which meanings are embedded. Although the constraining effects of welfare institutions have surely been over-stated, the institutionalisation of old ideas affects leaders' options for framing new ideas in a fashion that both legislators and the mass public are likely to find compelling. This is not to say that new ideas cannot permeate hostile institutional and ideational settings. Leaders have been known to make an art of "thinking the unthinkable". The framing process is more likely to be successful, however, where underlying ideas, frames and policy structures are not wildly incongruous with new initiatives.

Below, I consider four variables that condition the possibilities for framing social policy: extant frames, actors, institutions and policy arena. I conceive of these as necessary not sufficient conditions for successful framing. Together these parameters provide a preliminary model or ideal type against which empirical opportunities for framing welfare reform may be evaluated. Given a conducive set of circumstances, the framing effort may help summon support (or dampen opposition) for an issue that might otherwise fail to assemble the necessary coalition of adherents.

Extant Frames

An intimated earlier, framing is a misnomer. With the exception of new issues, framing involves *reframing*. This is not a mere quibble over terminology. Rather, it reflects a flaw in the standard conceptualisation of the cognitive framing process; namely, its failure to account for the influence of extant frames. Not only are the public often assumed to be a trifle gullible, they are also portrayed as empty vessels.

As cognitive misers, humans already have an elaborate constellation of cognitive short cuts that serve as barriers to new information. The assumption that skillful elites can override long-standing referents such as partisan identification or deep-seated values regarding what constitutes just and equitable policy underestimates human's loyalty and dependence upon prevailing cognitive tools. As powerful defensive mechanisms, standing frames insulate the welfare state against reframing initiatives. Especially important in this regard are what Rein and Schon (1994) refer to as "metacultural" frames. Symbols and meanings are communicated at different "levels of abstractness". Metacultural

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frames are cultural predispositions founded upon common norms and values. Cultural differences in attachments to values of efficiency and equity, rights and responsibilities produce identifiable patterns of welfare discourse.

Nested within metacultural frames are "institutional action frames" (Rein and Schon, 1994). These are the policy-specific frames that decision-makers use when appraising, selecting and packaging policy alternatives. While actors are more likely to re-evaluate policy frames than cultural predispositions, both frames serve to reinforce prevailing welfare values and bind the range of acceptable policy options. To muster support, therefore, new frames must respond to those already operative. Liberal welfare regimes, with their stronger emphasis on values of residualism, individual responsibility and means-testing, are most conducive to reframing welfare reform.[2]

Actors

The framing literature does not differentiate between partisan actors in their capacity to frame. For the most part, anyone who can command an audience can, in principle, frame with some success. It is not implausible to suggest, however, an interactive framing effect between partisan actors and issues, with the left commanding greater authority to frame on welfare than the right. This helps explain one of the processes by which partisan issue-associations take effect (Ross, 1999) and why crafting a new consensus on the welfare state may be heavily dependent upon leftist parties (Green-Pedersen, 1998).[3]

Druckman (1998) contends that successful framing depends on two issues relating to the credibility of the source. The first pertains to the source's knowledge of the subject matter. There is little reason to expect this criterion to discriminate between parties of the left and right, although it is possible that because the public perceives the left to care more about alleviating poverty, they may believe them to be more knowledgeable about welfare. The second criterion for successful framing relates to the trustworthiness of the speaker. This would seem to be the critical factor affecting the public's response to welfare restructuring efforts by the left and right. Very simply, voters do not trust rightist parties to reform the welfare state whereas they assume that social democratic parties will engage in genuine reform rather than indiscriminate and harsh retrenchment.

There is a second important issue relating to the actors involved in the framing exercise. Framing necessitates transmitting ideas *about* groups, e.g. the 'type' of people associated with the issue. For example, those reliant on non-contributory benefits are a comparatively easy

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target for negative framing. It is certainly less difficult to frame in divisive terms where programs are heavily means-tested and where the normative role of the state corresponds to the liberal idea than where it embraces social equality or even state paternalism.

Institutions

Parties are not free-floating actors who can roam the ideological spectrum with instrumentality and frame with liberty. They operate within a set of institutional rules and norms that provide varied incentives and possibilities for framing. Leaders must command the institutional authority as well as the credibility (based on trust) to frame. A key issue in this respect is the presence of a credible source of counter-framing. The multiparty systems of continental Europe with significant "far" left parties or where social partners play an integral role in the policy process retain higher degrees of frame-conflict, in turn, lessening the impact of reframing initiatives. In the case of minority (often coalition) governments, characteristic of the Nordic countries, leaders' reliance upon a broad-based cross-party parliamentary (and extra-parliamentary) consensus precludes significant reframing in the short term. Consensus-building strategies may depoliticise a modest cost-cutting program, yet almost by definition they rely upon leaders framing issues around the status quo. Not surprisingly, the two-party systems of the English-speaking countries have reframed social policy more significantly than their counterparts on the left or right elsewhere.

While two-party competition has served to reduce frame-conflict, some types of institutional power-sharing can facilitate reframing. The "decentralised" federal structure of the United States has provided national and sub-national leaders with a number of possibilities.[4] First, reframing welfare in terms of state autonomy serves to eclipse the principle of national standards. Second, institutional power-sharing between levels of government has proved to be a highly interactive process, not simply a devolutionary one. Key states have effectively propelled their welfare frames onto the national agenda. The Southern states have been particularly successful both in hampering the emergence of a more extensive welfare system and in retrenching social policy (King, 1996).[5]

Policy Arena

Policies are located in combinations of political arena, each with a different constellation of interests attached to them. To change the reach

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of welfare provision, leaders may shift services to the private sector, devolve them to non-national governments or other state and semi-state bodies, or dismantle them (Staeheli et al., 1997; Koras, 1979). Each mode of restructuring involves recasting the political advantages and disadvantages associated with old and new policy arena. Dismantling, for example, demands that either the family or voluntary sector be framed as the optimal location for the execution of traditional welfare functions. Privatisation requires that leaders frame the market as the most effective realm for the provision of services. Devolution demands that non-national governments are framed as best able to formulate and administer social policy.

A government's capacity to adopt each strategy, of course, is partially conditioned by existing institutional and policy arrangements, and, as alluded to earlier, countries differ in their normative attachments to different policy arena. Framing the market as the optimal policy location, for example, is less arduous where private provision is already well established. Devolution is facilitated by a decentralized federal structure. Likewise, diversity in programmatic structure eases shifting the balance between arenas in a way that universalism resists.

These four variables provide a preliminary framework for analysing leaders' reframing capabilities whilst exploring broad departures in welfare frames across affluent societies. The optimal conditions for reframing welfare are found in the United States where cultural and programmatic attachments to welfare residualism, individual responsibility and means-testing are already well-established, and the two-party system is combined with a decentralized mode of federalism. In the United States the market already enjoys a much elevated status in society and a bipartisan consensus has legitimated restructuring and marginalised voices of dissent, especially since the mid-1990s. In return to explore the American case in section four. To provide a comparative context for this discussion, I first identify four dominant types of welfare frames.

Reframing Across "Worlds of Welfare"

Table 1 shows the four main types of reform discourse found across welfare regimes and illustrates how extant frames, actors, institutions, and policy arena facilitate and impede the reframing exercise in each case. The four discourses are empirical clusters. They are identified and conceptualised via an analysis of the rich comparative case-based literature on the welfare state. While these discursive groupings are inevitably loose configurations, they capture some important differences in how welfare reforms are being framed cross-nationally.

Despite the burst of scholarly works decrying the globalisation thesis,

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TABLE 1: *Reframing Welfare Across Regimes*

	Social Democratic Regimes	Conservative Regimes	Liberal Regimes	
	Exogenous-Systemic Frames	Exogenous-Defensive Frames	Exogenous-Proactive Frames	Exogenous-Inherent Frames
Cases	Nordic countries	continental Europe	English-speaking left	English-speaking right & the USA
Extant frames	weak	weak	moderate	conducive in the USA; moderate elsewhere
Actors*	(a) mild benefits from issue-associations for the left b) weak victimisation potential	a) mild benefits from issue-associations for the left b) weak victimisation potential	a) beneficial issue-associations for leftist parties b) strong victimisation potential	a) problematic issue-associations for rightist parties b)strong victimisation potential
Institutions	modest: centripetal multiparty systems; important TUs	weak: multiparty systems; important TUs	good: two-party systems; weak TUs	good: two-party systems; weak TUs USA: decentralised federalism
Arena	state-based pluralism	state	market-based pluralism	non-state pluralism

*(a): who can frame
(b): who can be framed

most leaders have resorted to exogenous frames, stressing the inevitably of reform under the constraints of economic competition. Yet they have done so in varying ways, reflecting their different reform agenda and distinct possibilities for reframing. The Nordic countries, for example, have extended to frame welfare reform in terms of a combination of exogenous pressures and programmatic imbalances within the existing system. Hence I label these frames 'exogenous-systemic'. The countries of continental Europe have also framed restructuring in terms of exogenous stresses. However, for the most part, they have emphasised the need to defend existing programs and protect social rights to the greatest extent that exogenous pressures will permit. These frames, therefore, are referred to as 'exogenous-defensive'.

With respect to the English-speaking world, table 1 differentiates between the framing efforts of the left and right. Parties of the left have predominately framed welfare reform in terms of the imperatives of globalisation. They have stressed the need to work proactively with these 'irresistible' developments rather than defend old institutions. These frames, therefore, may be thought of as 'exogenous-

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proactive'. This distinction between parties of the left and right is less useful where the left has sought to moralize welfare, as in Britain. This moralization of welfare, of course, is in no sense integral to exogenous-proactive frames. On the contrary, it is logically associated with frames deployed by the right (and both the Republicans and Democrats in the USA), that point to the innate flaws afflicting any generous system of social provision. This discourse is labeled 'endogenous-inherent'.

The Nordic Countries: Exogenous-Systemic Frames

As noted above, the Nordic countries have tended to frame welfare reform in exogenous-systemic terms. According to this line of argument, exogenous shifts have resulted in a range of economic tensions (retarded growth, debilitating expenditure levels, unemployment, deficits, heightened competition) that preclude further expansion of the welfare state. These new economic challenges demand modest cutbacks in selective areas, whilst systemic problems, notably growing imbalances in the welfare system, require some redistribution; increased affluence has alleviated the plight of traditional welfare clients while the new poor are without adequate coverage (Ploug, 1994). Thus, the reform process is framed in terms of a combination of exogenously-induced economic tensions and more minor internal (systemic) flaws. The latter, of course, favour benefit increases (not simply cuts) where feasible e.g. in the stronger performing economies of Norway and Denmark (see Eitrheim and Kuhnle, 1999; Lodemel, 1994:62). The pure retrenchments that have occurred (for example, in replacement rates for sickness insurance), are largely confined to Finland and Sweden – the two Nordic cases which have suffered the most severe economic stress (Eitrheim and Kuhnle, 1994:4, 7–8).

Metacultural frames in these cases emphasise the state's obligation for public welfare and have served to insulate the welfare state against an infusion of market-liberal ideas. Despite the unique challenges that Finland has confronted, where shifts in the international system have brought unusually harsh economic pressures, public opinion remains firmly supportive of the state as the principal welfare provider (Ploug, 1994:16). Even minor parties on the far right have resorted to what Eitrheim and Kuhnle (1999:9) term "a strong welfare populism".

With policy frames emphasizing universal and comprehensive coverage and social rights attached to residence there are few programmatic cleavages along which "deserving" recipients may be separated

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from "undeserving" ones (Eitrheim and Kuhnle, 1999:1). Indeed, these regimes are notable for not moralizing welfare – something that would be starkly at odds with prevailing conceptions of equality not to mention dominant family patterns.[6]

With respect to the framing powers of political actors, perhaps most interesting in the Nordic cases has been the cross-party convergence in welfare frames, especially evident in countries that have suffered the worst economic challenges (Eitrheim and Kuhnle, 1999:8–9). This has resulted in a distinct lack of frame-conflict, but in a direction that has locked-in existing welfare paths. Part of the explanation for this depoliticisation around the status quo is the effect that economic stress places upon traditional party politics and part appears to be explicable in terms of the Nordic countries institutional proclivity towards minority government (Eitrheim and Kuhnle, 1999:26). Depoliticisation of welfare discourse is essential for aggregating parliamentary (and extra-parliamentary) support behind minor reforms. To craft such broad coalitions, leaders must appeal to prevailing frames. Indeed, the strategic dependence of minority governments on intra and extra-parliamentary coalitions largely precludes significant reframing by the left or right in the short term. This institutional vulnerability, of course, also tends to deprive the left of the benefits that might be reaped from partisan issue-associations. Moreover, the possibility of voter-flight in even relatively centripetal multiparty systems has discouraged the major parties from adopting a more market-oriented rhetoric of reform.

The less extensive use and weak normative attachment to the market in the Nordic world have also protected the welfare state against privatising initiatives. This is not to imply that the relationship between arena has remained constant and, while still peripheral, the private sector has become increasingly visible in welfare provision. As indicated in Table 1, a reform of "state-based pluralism" has emerged, signalling greater use of the market but in a manner that is heavily circumscribed by a dominant state. Some parties on the centre-right of the ideological spectrum have emphasized a greater role for the family in social welfare provisions. However, these new responsibilities are envisioned to be firmly embedded within a state financed welfare system (see Eitrheim and Kuhnle, 1999:10; Palme, 1994:42).

An overall evaluation of the social democratic regimes illustrates the comparatively weak opportunities leaders on either side of the political spectrum enjoy for significantly reframing the programs and principles of the Nordic welfare state.

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Continental Europe: Exogenous-Defensive Frames

The catholic-conservative regimes of continental Europe, with strong leftist parties and powerful trade unions, have deployed exogenous-defensive frames in reforming their welfare states. According to this line of argument, deeply entrenched welfare institutions should be preserved to the greatest extent that exogenous imperatives will permit. Despite compelling pressures for modernisation in terms of policy coverage and the paternalistic values embedded within existing programs, these regimes have framed comparatively modest reforms (especially in social security) in terms of defending existing programs (see Charbonnel, 1994:121). Exogenous pressures are deemed to be real in the sense of immediate budgetary and fiscal tensions, but not so crucifying that all manner of social protection must be eroded in anticipation of further global competition (see Esping-Andersen, 1996).

The combination of a multiparty system with significant far-left parties and strong trade unions has played a critical role in defining the defensive tenor of this discourse. Powerful interests tied to the status quo discourage leaders from embracing Levy's (1999) "vice into virtue" reform strategy. Fractious labour movements continue to ensure that traditional leftist frames remain the basic reference point in any reform dialogue. More than left-right partisan conflict, antagonism between the parties and the trade unions, especially in France, keeps the welfare debate solidly grounded in a discourse of social rights.[7]

For this reason issue-associations offer parties of the left very modest padding, although rightist parties have proved to be more vulnerable in their reform initiatives. Even limited reframing attempts by the right have brought a sweep of leftist parties to power across continental Europe. Moreover, with benefits founded on the principle of status maintenance, isolating deserving recipients from undeserving ones does not naturally divide along programmatic lines. Indeed, exogenous-defensive frames have displayed relatively little victimisation of welfare dependants as being fraud-prone or lazy – although second-tier social assistance recipients have, as elsewhere, fared worse.

Extant frames and policy arena are likewise hostile to reframing initiatives. Standing conceptions of justice favour a system of status maintenance and state paternalism guards against benefit residualisation. The heavy role for the state (and the family as supported through state institutions) casts scepticism over privatised provision. Actors on both the left and right have decried what Prodi has called "sadist liberalism" (Magara, 1997: 11).

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Although the most severe tensions afflict the conservative regimes of continental Europe where a combination of onerous payroll taxes, a heavy, skewed pension burden, high unemployment, low birth rates, and the exclusion of women from the labour market place immense stresses upon social programs, exogenous-defensive frames do not signal a major re-definition of the continental welfare state in the near future.

The English-Speaking Left: Exogenous-Proactive Frames

The English-speaking left (outside the USA) has framed welfare reform in exogenous-proactive terms. This argument reflects the logic of structural dependency theses and embraces reform on the premise of its inevitability (Hay and Watson, 1998; Wickham-Jones, 1999). Changed global conditions require new welfare institutions, infused with fresh values to meet future global challenges. The successful countries of the next millennium will be those that have adapted to the inevitable and gained the competitive edge. While the principal diagnosis of the welfare dilemma centres on economic requisites, in several cases, Britain included, an emphasis on labour market obligations has served to define claimants as socially irresponsible.

Particularly interesting here is the extent to which leftist parties have had to reframe their social and economic values. In the case of Britain's New Labour, for example, the party has gone to great lengths to renounce class politics and replace its traditional commitment to social and economic equality with a depoliticised discourse of economic and social pragmatism. To disassociate itself from its socialist past, New Labour has issued proclamations such as "no return to past failures" and "the function of modern government is not to second-guess the market" (cited in Hay and Watson, 1998:14). Reviewing Blair's transformation, Seyd (1997: 49) reports, 'in his leaders speech to the 1995 Labour Party Conference, Tony Blair used the word new on fifty-nine occasions, 16 of them with reference to "New Labour". In contrast, he referred to socialist just once and to the working class not at all.'

The left's success in reframing its welfare agenda with considerable rapidity owes much to the interaction of the two-party system, crippled labour movements and favourable issue-associations. The two-party system and disempowered unions have removed a significant source of counter-framing from actors further to the left. In the absence of counter-frames protecting existing welfare values, issue associations have offered the left considerable cushioning. The

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unusual popularity of New Labour, despite pursuing some remarkably similar initiatives to those tabled by previous Tory governments, is testimony to the authority the party can command on social policy reform.

Extant cultural and policy frames have also contributed to the relative success of reframing initiatives by the English-speaking left. While cultural attachments to the welfare state are much more deeply embedded in liberal regimes outside the United States and policy structures are less exclusionary than in America, the principle and practice of targeting are well-established. These countries' historical affinity with classical liberal values has encouraged an acceptance of neo-liberal precepts that is lacking in social democratic and conservative regimes. Blending nineteenth and twentieth century welfare values, the English-speaking left has promoted a form of market-based pluralism with the state retaining welfare functions in key areas. It is worth noting that the left's emphasis on labour market obligations for women as well as men discourages a system of family-based welfare provision.

Despite the fact that liberal regimes have confronted the least severe post-industrial stresses, parties of the left in these countries have reframed the values and institutions of the welfare state in significant ways.

The English-Speaking Right and the USA; Endogenous-Inherent Frames

The English-speaking right and both the Republicans and the Democrats in the USA have framed welfare reform in primarily endogenous-inherent terms. The thrust of this rhetoric is that elaborate welfare systems are *inherently* misguided and, far from ameliorating poverty, they are apt to induce social ills by rewarding indolence and discouraging individual responsibility. In Cope's (1997:190) words, "The underlying message is that the causes of poverty lie with the *individual* – not with economic shifts, exploitation, race or gender discrimination, disinvestment in education and social supports, or a lack of available jobs."

Framed in such individualistic terms, welfare recipients must have their labour market responsibilities thrust upon them. In Peter Lilley's terms, the government must "close down the something for nothing society".[8] State welfare functions should be residualised, allowing a much greater role for private provision and charitable giving through the local community. Devolving functions to the family is less desirable

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simply because curtailing women's employment possibilities destabilises the labour market.

As noted above, extant frames and policy arena in the English-speaking world tend to be comparatively conducive to welfare restructuring. Likewise, the two-party system and enfeebled trade unions reduce counter-framing from the far-left. Issue-associations, however, have had an important constraining impact on the right and its vilification of welfare recipients has invited backlash. This was evident during the Tories eighteen year reign in Britain. The Conservatives' fiery oratorical assault on the welfare state, combined with their institutional dominance, left the British public with a deep fear that their popular welfare services would be residualised at best or dismantled at worst.

While the most conducive parameters for reframing welfare are found in the liberal regimes of the English-speaking world, in America extant frames, institutions, actors and policy arena combine to provide leaders with considerable opportunities to transform potentially contentious welfare reforms into broadly popular initiatives. While institutionalist accounts portray the American system as prohibitive of major policy change owing to the separation of powers, checks and balances, decentralised federal structure, as well as the partisan proclivity for divided government, the US has restructured its safety net more dramatically than any other affluent country.

The following section offers an overview of how the chief federal cash entitlement in the United States, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was dismantled by the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).[9] This account seeks to illustrate why the farming exercise that accompanied the PRWORA proved to be so effective; specifically, why dismantling AFDC managed to attract widespread support from such diverse constituencies. Irrespective of how one evaluates the results of this initiative – and accounts vary dramatically – the PRWORA represents one of the most significant breaks in welfare provision in the recent history of the United States.[10] Whatever the faults with AFDC, it is politically "difficult to simply do away with systems of benefits and long-standing entitlements for poor mothers and their children" (Cope, 1997:183). This simple truth has been painfully evident to a number of Republican presidents, not least Ronald Reagan.[11]

The argument presented is not that framing *alone* can explain the fate of AFDC. The PRWORA was a complex initiative. AFDC never enjoyed the popularity of many European welfare programs, growing increasingly controversial in recent years. The Administration implemented a number of progressive developments in terms of anointing social security with cabinet status, raising the minimum wage, increas-

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ing the flexibility of health insurance, the earned income tax credit, and the Family and Medical Leave Act. Yet none of the above can fully explain why by 1996 diverse segments of American society, including the American poor, became convinced that AFDC was responsible for their plight (Staeheli et al., 1997; Lake, 1997).

Optimal Conditions for Reframing Welfare: The USA

In the year leading up to the PRWORA, state and national leaders pieced together an unlikely coalition of groups who, experiencing a flush of economic anxiety, were willing to direct their disaffection towards government (Staeheli et al, 1997; Lake, 1997). At the core of this temporary alliance were "Reagan Democrats", the white working poor who felt especially hard-hit (in expectations if not real income) by a slowing economy (Lake, 1997). Leaders successfully linked the anxieties of these volatile voters to the concerns of the lower middle classes and American business in a spectacular framing initiative that blamed the troubles of these materially antagonistic interests on an intrusive federal government that squeezed working families, stifled fair competition with a plethora of regulation and rewarded idleness (Lake, 1997). These arguments were legitimised by anointed 'experts' and conservative think tanks who mustered scientific evidence to support their claims (see King, 1999).

The four parameters for successful framing discussed above help explain why this framing initiative proved to be so effective.

Extant Frames

Though losing the battle over constitutional ratification in 1789, many of the core concerns of the anti-federalists remain deeply rooted within the American value system.[12] Recurrent fears of a remote federal government, impervious to the concerns of the common people, intensify during times of stress. Staeheli (1997:60) observes how "the anxiety created by economic and social restructuring has created a climate in which citizens return to long-standing debates over the nature of the Republic and the role of citizenship and community in self-government."

Indeed, perceptions of citizenship and community may be especially important in understanding the success of this framing initiative. Six months prior to the PRWORA's enactment, a survey by the Washington Post, Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University revealed growing levels of political mistrust and disaffection.[13] Why these anti-government sentiments were explicitly directed towards AFDC recipi-

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ents can be accounted for by the fact that political mistrust in America is primarily a function of social mistrust. As the survey reported; "nearly two in three Americans believe that most can't be trusted. . . . Half say most people would cheat others if they had the chance, and an equal proportion agree that "most people are looking out for themselves"'.[14] Citizens classed as "economically anxious", who constituted over one third of all Americans in the months leading up to the PRWORA's enactment, were particularly prone to these opinions.[15]

With these sentiments intensifying during the mid-1990s, it is hardly surprising that diverse sections of the public were so receptive to a discourse that emphasised the personal failings of welfare claimants. More than cultural stereotypes, the values of individual responsibility and economic individualism remain deeply embedded within the American value system.[16]

Policy frames in the United States were also congenial to dismantling AFDC. Long described as a welfare "laggard", American social policy never matured to the same extent as its European counterparts. When other welfare states were expanding and entrenching during the second half of the 1960s, access to benefits was being incrementally tightened in the United States.[17] The passage of the Work Incentives Program in 1967 signalled that women without pre-school infants should assume work or training in exchange for benefits. By the time Reagan signed the Family Support Act in 1988 workfare was already established in principle and the FSA broadened its application. The Bush administration granted a comparatively small number of federal waivers, allowing the states to innovate with their own welfare arrangements – a practice massively extended by President Clinton. Indeed, by granting waivers so freely, Clinton collaborated in undercutting the very principle of a federal entitlement.

Actors and Institutions

The success of the framing initiative that accompanied the PRWORA was in many respects the result of a distinct partisan and institutional power-sharing dynamic. Consequently, it makes most sense to examine the second and third framing parameter together. The discourse supporting the abolition of AFDC was initially propounded by the Republicans during their 1994 Congressional campaign and aggressively continued by speaker Gingrich after the party gained control of both Houses of Congress for the first time in forty years. However, the Democrats' shock at losing both the House and Senate in 1994, combined with their preparations for the 1996 elections, led the President to dramatically lurch to the right on welfare reform, collaborating in

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the highly punitive discourse of welfare dependency. Despite the excuses some Democrats proffered on Clinton's behalf, including his inability to capture the welfare agenda owing to the burdens of health care reform, the Republicans' electoral success in 1994 sent the President an unambiguous signal that there were electoral benefits to be reaped in embracing a conservative vision.

By 1995 the Democrats as well as the Republicans had introduced a welfare reform bill seeking to dismantle AFDC. The Democrats softened their version with a number of provisions, including child care for mothers moving off welfare and into work, and the cost of the two bills differed to the tune of $41 billion.[18] The cost differentials, however, were a function of Republican cuts in food stamps and support for legal immigrants, not the termination of AFDC. Clinton himself argued that these differences were of peripheral importance to the PRWORA's principal aim and he never requested the retention of AFDC as an entitlement.[19] Thus, although the PRWORA predominantly reflected the Republicans' welfare agenda (partially owing to the tardiness of the Clinton administration in presenting its plan before July 1994), it passed with bi-partisan support in the House and Senate. And, although President Clinton twice vetoed earlier versions, he declared the third compromised measure, "ending welfare as we know it", to be largely consistent with his own agenda.

Dismantling AFDC cannot be reduced to the power of Republican rhetoric alone. The Democratic President also assumed a critical role. First, it is questionable whether a Republican president could have pursued such a measure without incurring a major electoral risk. Note how Dole lost two traditionally Republican states, Florida and Arizona, in the 1996 election due to fears of pension and Medicare reform. While these two programmes have always enjoyed considerably higher approval ratings than AFDC, the public's perception of the Republicans as hostile to any social spending, coupled with the severity of a purely conservative approach, seems likely to have incited public concerns that AFDC was the beginning of a 'slippery slope' in social spending.[20] Indeed, reacting to the rhetorical extremity of the 104th Congress, the public returned a much reduced Republican majority at the 1996 elections (which came back promising to be altogether more moderate).

Likewise, a united Republican administration risked inviting far more ferocious criticism from Congressional Democrats than emerged under conditions of divided government. While institutional and partisan power-sharing in the United States occurs within the context of the two-party system, thus limiting opportunities for significant counter-framing, voices of dissent were noticeably quietened as social liberals tempered their opposition to the President. Indeed, Clinton's 'big

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spending liberal' image and his compensatory policies (increases in the minimum wage, the earned income tax credit, the Family and Medical Leave Act, the 'portability' of health insurance), helped excuse his collusion in dismantling AFDC among social liberals.

Of course, a legacy of divisive AFDC stereotypes laid much of the groundwork for this framing initiative. Quadagno (1994) has documented the unusually explicit racism plaguing welfare in America. Myths of the black 'welfare queen', so successfully propagated by the Reagan administration, played an integral part in framing workfare as a necessary corrective to the un-American values held by minority communities. In part, these stereotypes are perpetuated by policymakers' failure to hear directly from politically marginalised claimants, allowing the welfare debate to assume "an exaggerated ideological form" (King, 1999:272). Americans' receptivity to these arguments may also have something to do with their high levels of political ignorance.[21]

Policy Arena

The rhetoric that sustained the PRWORA maligned big government, or more accurately the federal government, while emphasising the merits of three alternative policy arena: devolved state and local government, the market and the charitable sector (see Staeheli et al, 1997; Kodras, 1997). A discourse of favouritism and unfairness framed each of these arena: robbed of their constitutional and political authority by a bloated and distant federal government, the states, and by extension the American people, had endured anxiety and hardship; a welfare system that corrupted market principles, drove up labour costs and thwarted US competitiveness, had discriminated against American business; American society at large bore the suffering of a welfare system that fuelled community breakdown by displacing social institutions, such as the church, family and charitable sector, leading to a host of social ills, including divorce, drugs, crime, illegitimacy and an inter-generational culture of dependency (see Staeheli et al, 1997).

The rhetoric linking these injustices was populist in orientation, returning power to the people and acclaiming the virtues of self-determination. Devolution would take government out of the hands of professional Washington politicians. Removing barriers to the market and encouraging private provision would encourage individual responsibility and entrepreneurship. Reviving a role for charitable giving would allow localities to assume responsibility for their own needs and integrate the socially excluded.

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Far from being called into question, the importance of the market for ensuring social and economic justice received further approbation (Staeheli et al, 1997). The fact that Americans, including poor Americans, could readily accept that their economic anxieties derived from societal rather than market changes, indicates, in Staeheli's (1997:xxviii) words, "the porousness of the boundaries between capital and civil society and the ability of politicians to discursively manipulate those boundaries".

In sum, America's deep normative attachment to the concept of the free market, community and the role of charitable giving were discursively exploited by national and sub-national leaders to renew hostility towards the federal government and dignify a fragmented system of workfare. Ironically, despite the celebration of local diversity, state policymakers have sustained a discourse of dependency based on "deeply aspatial assumptions" (Cope, 1997:186). Almost without exception, the overarching principle driving state welfare programs is a logic of individual responsibility, regardless of whether claimants reside in an urban metropolis or rural outpost, in the north-east or in the south-west. Cope (1997:204) makes note of this fact by pointing to the title of state initiatives, such as Colorado's "Personal Responsibility Project", Missouri's "Families Mutual Responsibility Plan" and Georgia's "Personal Accountability and Responsibility Project".

Conclusion

It is difficult to estimate the precise impact of political framing. While many cognitive studies have tended to exaggerate its importance (Druckman, 1998), the importance of framing is illustrated by the host of 'spin doctors' and media personnel employed in the political arena (Campbell, 1998). Politics is essentially about ideas, irrespective of whether these ideas are driven by material interests. Ideas matter to the extent they are successfully diffused and capture the imagination of important sections of the voting public. To do so they must be framed in a manner that is compelling. Whether or not ideas can be framed in a convincing fashion, however, does not simply hinge upon leaders' framing abilities or their talents in courting the media, but also on whether extant cultural and policy frames, institutions, policy arena and an actor's own issue-associations are conducive. While it is increasingly evident that an overly static and institutionalised portrait of welfare restructuring requires revision, framing does not occur in an institutional and political vacuum. Indeed, just as the reform process is not simply

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one of institutional and public constraint, neither is it as 'top-down' as might be expected from framing studies.

The four framing parameters considered here illustrate both top-down influences on the welfare reform process and the limitations to elite control. Where cultural, institutional and policy legacies are conducive to reframing welfare, political leaders can hope, in Levy's (1999) words, to turn "vice into virtue", especially if they enjoy public trust on the issue. A fruitful way forward, therefore, may lie in probing the relationship between elite-driven agenda politics (whereby processes such as globalisation and post-industrial stresses are framed as more or less pressing) and public-driven approval politics (whereby elite frames are accepted as more or less convincing).

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NOTES

1. Esping-Andersen (1990) identifies three types of welfare regimes: liberal (characteristic of the English-speaking world), social democratic (associated with the Nordic countries) and conservative (typical of continental Europe). This categorisation of "worlds of welfare" has attracted a number of critics owing to its neglect of gender and extra-labour market relations (Langan and Ostner, 1991; Lewis, 1992, 1997), its weak characterisation of the Southern European welfare states (Moreno, 2000) and its controversial handling of the Antipodes and Britain (Castles and Mitchell, 1992). Despite these widely acknowledged shortcomings, it continues to provide the principal means by which scholars distinguish systems of social provision. Allan and Scruggs (2000) present a preliminary study up-dating Esping-Andersen's data. Their findings reveal remarkable continuity in welfare regimes over the last twenty years of so-called austerity politics, globalisation and post-industrial stresses. Indeed, the three worlds of welfare now cluster somewhat more neatly than in Esping-Anderson's research based on 1979/80 data (Allan and Scruggs, 2000:24).
2. The social movement literature has been considerably more sensitive to the importance of existing frames that much of the cognitive literature. See Gamson, 1992; Snow and Benford, 1992; Tarrow, 1992; Glenn, 1999. The distinction between metacultural and institutional action frames corresponds to the one drawn in the agenda setting literature between the

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broad systemic agenda and the narrower institutional agenda (see Cobb and Elder, 1983). The cognitive literature focuses on how the institutional agenda is framed. Thus, it tends to portray the framing process as subsequent to institutional agenda setting in accordance with a "stages" model of policy-making. Conversely, the broad systemic agenda shifts that often precede institutional agenda change by moving the core parameters of the policy debate are akin to shifts in metacultural frames. Margaret Thatcher, for example, is often accredited with fundamentally reframing the broad contours of British social policy debate far more successfully than she was able to frame her substantive policy agenda. The concept of framing, therefore, captures both the appraisal and packaging of specific policy items (institutional action frames) and the much broader process of systemic agenda setting (metacultural frames).

3. The concept of partisan issue-associations reflects the logic of the 'Nixon goes to China' thesis: leaders who are perceived to be closest to a politically delicate issue are likely to find themselves most constrained. When unpopular policies are on the agenda, the latitude for leadership is largely reserved for those who seem least likely to act, e.g. it took a vehement anti-Communist such as Nixon to open diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1972. According to the logic of the Nixon goes to China thesis, party issue-associations interact with policy problems to limit and expand the scope for leadership. When issue-associations become a liability, the possibilities for leadership grow increasingly slim (Ross, 1999).
4. Pierson (1995) draws a useful distinction between types of federal system. Rather than simply implementing national mandates, decentralised federations enjoy considerable autonomy over the substance of policy.
5. Veto points may only limit the scope of reform where they encourage veto players to mobilise on the left. Federalism does not exhibit any obvious relationship to the mobilisation of left-wing interests and thus can enhance rather than weaken leaders' restructuring capabilities in the manner described above. Two institutional factors appear to be responsible for the presence of leftist veto players: the multiparty system and mechanisms for integrating trade union movements.
6. New Right arguments regarding the negative behavioural effects of generous welfare benefits have gained some currency in the Nordic world. As Plovsing (1994:31–2) observes in the Danish case, the "active line" approach has been accompanied by 'slogans, such as "there is a need for everyone", "from passive to active" and "give and take"', indicating important shifts in the ideology of social policy. Similar changes have been occurring in Norway, with a move away from "passive" to "active" welfare (Lodemel, 1994:61 see also Ploug, 1994; Plovsing, 1994).
7. I am grateful to Bruno Palier for stressing the primacy of union-party conflict when I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute.
8. Peter Lilley, then social security secretary for the UK, made this announcement at the 1992 Conservative Party Conference. Cited in Sinfield, 1994:130.
9. Providing for limited exemptions, the PRWORA's main conditions specify that any individual can only receive welfare assistance for five years during their entire adult lifetime; within two years of receiving welfare, claimants must work; participation in community service is mandatory after two months of receiving benefits; no person between the ages of 18 and 50 (without children) may receive food stamps for more than three months in a three year period; to qualify for TANF funding, any parent under the age of 18 must live in an adult-supervised setting; states may impose family cap policies on recipients; illegal immigrants and many post-PRWORA legal immigrants cannot qualify for either TANF benefits of Medicaid.
10. There is some dispute over whether the PRWORA has retrenched the US safety net given that federal spending on the needy has not been cut in the short term. However, the new array of behavioural regulations linked to the receipt of benefits has led the Congressional Budget Office to estimate that the states will suffer a $12 billion shortfall if they implement the PRWORA's work-participation mandates over the 1996–2002 period (before childcare costs) (see Super, Parrott, Steinmetz and Mann, 1996 cited in WRNN, April 1997). It is important to note that the following case does not seek to investigate the budgetary or social consequences of dismantling AFDC. Widely varying (and probably premature) projections on this score are all too available.
11. At the peak of his legislative achievements in 1981, Reagan only managed to extract very

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modest adjustments in the eligibility criterion for AFDC from Congress and reductions worth around 1 percent in food stamps (Peterson and Rom, 1988:226). Even the widely flagged Family Support Act 1988 was a significantly weaker measure than that preferred by the administration.

12. The negative label of "anti-federalist" was pinned to those who opposed ratification of the constitution during the debates of 1787–88, especially its provision for a more powerful national government.
13. R. Morin and D. Balz, "In America, Loss of Confidence Seeps into All Institutions." The Washington Post, Sunday January 28th, 1996.
14. Ibid.
15. The economically anxious are defined as "people who see the economy worsening, their own financial future deteriorating and who doubt their children will fare better than they have." Ibid.
16. For example, a recent survey conducted by the Washington Post, the Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University reported; 'seven in 10 agreed that people who don't succeed in life "have only themselves to blame"'. R. Morin and Claudia Deane, "Patterns of Beliefs Fray Party Seams," Washington Post, Sunday October 4th, 1998; page A01.
17. While the amount of money spent on welfare grew in absolute terms, eligibility became increasingly conditional and subject to a number of behavioural requirements.
18. "Changes in New Law Hinge on Budget Deal", *Congressional Quarterly*, November 23 1996, p.3311.
19. Ibid, p.3310.
20. Ronald Reagan's reform efforts were certainly hampered by this perception during the 1980s. Peterson and Rom (1988:226–7) argue that Reagan chose not to exercise a presidential veto on safety net policy due to his vulnerability on social issues, especially accusations that he sought to "balance the budget on the backs of the poor".
21. Morin and Balz, *In America, Loss of Confidence Seeps into All Institutions.* Reviewing the findings of one survey by the Washington Post/Kaiser Foundation/Harvard University, the authors report, "The overwhelming majority of those surveyed don't know the names of their elected representatives, don't know that Robert J. Dole (R. Kan.) is the Senate Majority Leader, don't know that the country spends more on Medicare than it does on foreign aid. A third of all Americans . . . thinks that Congress has already passed health care reform – or aren't sure; four in 10 don't know that the Republicans control Congress; and half either think the Democratic Party is more conservative politically than the GOP or don't feel they know enough to offer a guess."

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