

# Commissioned Book Review

Political Studies Review  
2022, Vol. 20(4) NPI3–NPI4

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**Reforming the Welfare State** by **Carsten Jensen and Georg Wenzelburger**. London and New York: Routledge, 2020, 134pp., 120 pound (hardback); 33.29 pound (e-book), ISBN 9781138482227.

Welfare state reforms are a continuously reemerging area of debate in the media, by politicians and the general population. Such debates are usually about reforms like a higher pension age or lower benefit levels: reforms that are easy to detect, or visible. Conversely, there is hardly ever debate about largely invisible reforms, like changes in indexation rules (e.g. abolishing the link between nominal benefits and the minimum wage) or in qualification periods (e.g. extending how long it takes for someone to be eligible). These are all examples of the different legislative measures by which governments can, and do, change social policies: the policy instruments. Different instruments adversely affect different groups, so their choice matters.

While perhaps not using this terminology, the welfare state literature has long acknowledged the use of different instruments in welfare reforms (e.g. Pierson, 1994). There is also no dearth of comparative data about welfare reforms in general (e.g. OECD, 2020; Scruggs et al., 2017). However, the field lacked systematic, comparative data on policy instruments. With Carsten Jensen and Georg Wenzelburger's *Reforming the Welfare State*, this has changed. This book introduces the *Welfare State Reform Dataset*: an original dataset with > 1500 reform events for 13 policy instruments in an institutionally diverse set of five countries (Finland, France, Germany, the UK and Denmark) in the domains of old age pensions and unemployment protection over a 40-year period (1974–2014).

This new dataset – presented informatively in Ch. 3 – enables Jensen and Wenzelburger to revisit three sets of still unresolved questions from Pierson's (1994) classic and the ensuing so-called new politics debate (identified in Ch. 2). *First*: how much and what sort of welfare state change has there been in the past decades?

The authors demonstrate in Ch. 4 that, contra the notion of permanent austerity, the entire 40-year period has seen cutbacks *as well as* expansions in all five countries. The reform pattern was one of stability punctuated by radical change, contra path dependency and in line with punctuated equilibrium theory. The repertoire of policy instruments in all countries is wide (Ch. 5).

The *second* question is whether governments – in line with the notion of blame avoidance – use different policy instruments for expansion than they do for cutbacks. Ch. 6 shows that the answer is *yes*. The findings help solve a conundrum in the literature, namely why at least some governments are not electorally punished for cutbacks. Jensen and Wenzelburger indicate that governments strategically select policy instruments so that blame for cutbacks is minimized and credit for expansions is maximized. Another question about the visibility of reforms is its timing. Ch. 7 shows that governments time cutbacks and expansions strategically in the electoral cycle, albeit differently for governments that have pledged to expand the welfare state (a U-shaped trajectory, with expansions early in the election cycle, then some levelling off, and again expansions late in the cycle) and those that have pledged to retrench it (cutbacks early in the cycle, expansions late).

The *third* question is whether partisan differences matter for welfare state reforms – a seminal question – and for specific policy instruments also a novel one. Ch. 8's analyses show that the answer to both questions is *no*.


These questions are answered in a concise book. The authors' choice to concentrate on presenting the new dataset and demonstrating its value by revisiting core questions is effective and useful. However, this choice also means that the book's contribution is mainly empirical. Readers interested in new theories or who look for a study bringing together everything about welfare state reform should thus turn to one of the many monographs in the field or consult a handbook. While its conciseness and focus generally is one of the book's

strengths, the concluding chapter is overly short. Especially the lack of an extensive discussion of avenues for future research is a missed opportunity.

These minor caveats aside, *Reforming the Welfare State* is a must-read for everyone interested in welfare state development. The new dataset is an invaluable asset for current and future students of the welfare state and is likely to be widely used. It would be great if either this book's authors or other researchers would extend the dataset's coverage, for instance to Southern European countries and Central and Eastern European ones. However, also with its current coverage, the dataset offers numerous opportunities for further research. Scholars can address questions like: does the choice of policy instruments influence key socio-economic outcomes, like inequality, and/or adversely affect specific groups? In addition to revisiting a range of existing questions – regularly debunking the extant findings – this book is thus also the perfect starting point for exploring a range of novel research questions. Also for this contribution, this concise book can only be applauded.

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