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# Dismantling the Welfare State? after Twenty-five years: What have we learned and what should we learn?

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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 to 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.

## Keywords

Paul Pierson, the new politics of the welfare state, Dismantling the welfare state?

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 5000 quotes on Google Scholar testify to this. Twenty-five 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 to be a weird claim

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about a book with many thousands of 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 colour of governments and the strength of labour movements more broadly no longer affect policymaking: 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; for this reason, (2) 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. Allan and Scruggs, 2004; Clayton and Pontusson, 1998; Finseraas and Vernby, 2011; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Palier, 2010; Streeck and Thelen, 2005).

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 can still 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 Hall and Taylor, 1996; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). 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 but 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 and 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 scepticism 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 favour 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 (Zohlnhöfer and Bandau, 2020), the voter side of Pierson's argument has been critiqued as overly simplistic (see, for example, Giger and Nelson, 2013). For one thing, the majority of voters does not unconditionally support the welfare state, that is, 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, for example, 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., 2013; but see Lee et al., 2017).

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 which governments may have applied when they cut social policy (Giger and Nelson, 2011: fn. 1). On the other hand, and more importantly, there is convincing evidence that policymakers indeed mostly behaved as if welfare state retrenchment could harm them significantly at the next election (Wenzelburger, 2014). So Pierson's main argument can be sustained despite the mixed 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 policies,<sup>3</sup> 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* and *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 effect. 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.

Second, in line with Esping-Andersen's critique of spending data, Pierson also emphasizes that *programme 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, for example, 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. Third, governments may try to change the institutional rules governing the welfare state, for example, 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 and 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', that is, 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 programmes, 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 programmes but also 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 analyse policymakers' (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; see 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) argues that 'the changes I describe fall between systemic and programmatic retrenchment' (p. 244, fn. 2), that is, 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 programme 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 programmes 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 United States 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 United Kingdom, *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 areas. [...] 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 healthcare. (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 programme 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, for example, 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.<sup>4</sup> Many different lists and categorizations of political strategies have been put forward building on this case study evidence (for a summary: König and Wenzelburger, 2014), but most of them are related either to 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 (McGraw, 1991; Marx and Schumacher, 2016; 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 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 programmes and the institutional setup of political systems. While Thatcher was successful in retrenching public pensions in the United Kingdom because the existing programme had not yet matured, Reagan's efforts at curbing pensions were facilitated by concerns by 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 policymaking processes to a substantial degree. Apparently negligible details of welfare programmes can make a difference as some allow for applying a specific blame avoidance strategy while others do not. Programme details thus matter a lot for policymaking 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 programmes within a sector. That also means that when studying welfare state retrenchment we might need to compare apples and oranges, that is, 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 extant 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 programmes in the era of expansion had been in the centre 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 centred 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 programmes 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 policymaking processes. That is true not only with regard to the enormous role of details of social policy programmes for the possibility (or otherwise) of welfare cuts, but also with regard to the question as to how existing programmes and the popularity of the welfare state shape the role ideology plays in policymaking 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 vary greatly from one area to another. On some – like pensions and healthcare – 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. Healthcare is home to powerful industrial actors and patient groups, pensions to strong associations of retirees and the labour market to unions and employers associations; though the exact strength of these varies over time and between countries.

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 moulded 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. Despite 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 programme 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 to the previous point – details of specific programmes matter in policy processes because they provide actors with windows of opportunity for reform. Hence, we should not expect retrenchment advocates to cut all programmes equally. Rather, retrenchment will only take place where programme 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 places 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 programmes. Rather, the various programmes are likely to be shaped by distinct dynamics that might need to be analysed 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 eminent book, which will help improve welfare scholarship also for the years to come.

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### Notes

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 (see also Béland, 2016). For an example of how ideas shape social policy, see Bleses and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2004.
2. The concept of ‘blame avoidance’ was developed by Kent Weaver (1986) – as a contrasting concept to David Mayhew’s ‘credit-claiming’ – and Pierson explicitly took over Weaver’s concept in *DWS*.
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).
4. 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).

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.

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