Abstract and Keywords

Besides its impact on poverty, inequality, and economic security, social policy also bears crucial significance for the meaning and quality of citizenship in a political community. Historical research on American political development has revealed that ideas about citizenship played a central role in the development of social policy. Throughout U.S. history, policy makers have often justified social policies on the basis that they would develop Americans' civic capacity and inculcate participatory norms. In addition, U.S. social policy has shaped citizens' experiences of government and their political participation and attitudes. Established social policies have influenced citizens' ability to practice their political rights, the extent of solidarity or division in society, and people's inclination to engage in civic life. In sum, American civil and political rights cannot be fully understood apart from their interaction with social rights and provision. This essay offers an introduction to thinking about the relationship between citizenship and social policy. It considers the place of social policy in different theoretical understandings of citizenship in social science research. It explores the mechanisms through which social policies can influence citizenship, tracing their impact on: membership, identity, and belonging; political attitudes; and political participation and other forms of civic involvement. Finally, it considers the contemporary relationship between social policy and citizenship and offer directions for future research on this relationship.

Keywords: citizenship, social citizenship, social rights, civic engagement, political participation, American political development

1 Introduction

IN American public discourse, the concept of citizenship typically evokes images such as people casting their votes at the ballot box, immigrants being sworn in as citizens by a judge, soldiers serving their country, or members of civic associations performing good works in their communities. Social policy may seem irrelevant to citizenship when it is
Citizenship portrayed in these ways, yet the earliest forms of American social provision were rooted in rationales pertaining to citizenship. Late 18th century and 19th century lawmakers sought to reward those who served the nation in the military and to promote and nurture “good citizenship” through education. Major 20th century expansions of the welfare state were deeply consequential for citizenship, influencing the status and integration of social groups and the extent to which they participated in public affairs. Amid changing conceptions of the role of the public and private sectors in the early 21st century, the design of social policies influences how Americans think about and relate to government, how they view its appropriate role in society, and how they perceive their own social status and that of others.

Welfare states are usually judged by the extent to which they alleviate or exacerbate poverty and economic inequality, with quantitative measures offering comparisons across welfare states. But social policy bears crucial significance for citizenship as well, often in ways that are not as easily quantified. Historical research on American political development has revealed that ideas about citizenship played a central role in the development of social policy. Throughout U.S. history, policymakers have often justified social policies on the basis that they would develop Americans’ civic capacity and inculcate participatory norms. In addition, research spanning the realms of political behavior and public policy, including both quantitative and qualitative methods, have found that U.S. social policy has shaped citizens’ experiences of government and their political participation and attitudes. Established social policies have influenced citizens’ ability to practice their political rights, the extent of solidarity or division in society, and people’s inclination to engage in civic life. In sum, American civil and political rights cannot be fully understood apart from their interaction with social rights and provision.

This essay offers an introduction to thinking about the relationship between citizenship and social policy. First we consider the place of social policy in different theoretical understandings of citizenship in social science research. The body of the chapter explores the mechanisms through which social policies can influence citizenship, tracing their impact on membership, identity, and belonging; political attitudes; and political participation and other forms of civic involvement. The final sections consider the contemporary relationship between social policy and citizenship and offer directions for future research.

2 Conceptualizing Citizenship and Social Policy

In American scholarship on citizenship, social policy is typically more conspicuous by its absence than by how it is considered. Citizenship has usually been conceptualized as: (1) specific civil and political rights, and (2) the practice of exercising those rights. Using these traditional lenses, the concept has been used as a tool for assessing and measuring the quality of U.S. democracy. Social scientists to a large degree have reinforced these understandings of citizenship through their efforts to categorize and track over time the
expansion or retraction of civil and political rights and to measure the extent and
effectiveness of civic engagement as a means of assessing the quality of our democracy.

Researchers who focus on law and public policy have concentrated on citizenship as it is
conveyed by the state through civil and political rights, and they have examined the
history of expansion and denial of these rights. At its most basic, citizenship is a legal
status bestowed by the state. Thus, immigration scholars have tracked the history of
immigration laws that denied or admitted new citizens (Motomura 2006; Tichenor 2002).
Others, like Rogers Smith (1997), have explored how the civil and political rights
attendant with the legal status of citizenship have been bestowed and denied over the
course of American history. In these works, citizenship is a formal status that is gained
through the granting of rights by the state.

Alternately, scholars of political participation and public opinion have viewed citizenship
and democracy through the lens of civic engagement. The position held by Sidney Verba,
Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady (1995, 1) that “[c]itizen participation is at
the heart of democracy” is a guiding belief among many of the political scientists
studying these topics. Civic engagement is thought to be the glue that holds democracy
together by connecting citizens to their government. Americans take part as full citizens
when they formulate opinions on political matters; interact and connect with their fellow
citizens; and exercise their voice through voting and other forms of participation. Thus,
public opinion scholars try to assess the degree of political knowledge Americans
possess (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lupia and McCubbins 1998;
Zaller 1992), sociologists and others study the form and vibrancy of American civic
organizations (Putnam 2000, Skocpol 2003), and political participation scholars seek to
understand what motivates Americans to participate and to explain variation in rates of
doing so (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Skocpol 2003; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba,
Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Citizenship, in this view, is
developed in practice through active engagement in our polity.

These two currents of citizenship research in American political science fit the
distinction, noted by Kymlicka and Norman (1995, 284), between “citizenship-as-legal-
status, that is, as full membership in a particular political community; and citizenship-as-
desirable-activity, where the extent and quality of one’s citizenship is a function of one’s
participation in that community”. Both understandings of citizenship offer a valuable
foundation for exploring the concept, but they come up short for several reasons. First,
neither current gives attention to social rights, without which civil and political rights can
be meaningless, and citizens may remain incapable of practicing active civic engagement.
As Robert Dahl writes, “In order to exercise the fundamental rights to which citizens in a
democratic order are entitled—to vote, speak, publish, protest, assemble, organize,
among others—citizens must also possess the minimal resources that are necessary in
order to take advantage of the opportunities and to exercise their rights” (Dahl 2003,
152). Considering the availability of such resources requires attention to social policy.
Second, whether citizenship is regarded as either rights or practice, neither of these
conceptions pays attention to how people experience government, whether they perceive
themselves to be excluded or included as citizens, and the implications for their civic status and identity. Finally, these two types of citizenship suggest two separate and unrelated processes, failing to examine how legal rights, political practice, and experience may be interrelated. Indeed, being a legal member of a community does not guarantee that one is treated as a fully incorporated citizen. For example, even today, long after civil and political rights have been extended to African Americans, severe racial inequalities persist as evidenced by numerous social and economic indicators (King and Smith 2011). Social policies have failed to close these gaps, and thus many African Americans likely have yet to experience full inclusion as citizens.

The concepts of citizenship-as-legal-status and citizenship-as-desirable-activity have overshadowed a third strain of thought examining citizenship and social rights. In this third strain, political theorists have been equally active as more empirical social scientists in discussing social policy. As is evident in T. H. Marshall’s 1950 seminal essay “Citizenship and Social Class,” a longstanding European intellectual tradition links social rights to full citizenship. For Marshall, social rights are an expansive concept from “the right to a modicum of economic security and welfare to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (1998, 94). By envisioning financial stability and inclusion in a community as a right of full citizenship, Marshall was conceptualizing citizenship as much more than just legal inclusion and political participation.

Marshall’s work was groundbreaking because he identified social rights as equally important to full citizenship as civil and political rights. Civil rights ensured individual freedom, political rights enabled one to participate in the political process, but for Marshall it was through social rights that one could exercise one’s political and civil rights on equal footing with one’s fellow citizens. In other words, social citizenship is “the right to defend and assert all one’s rights on terms of equality with others” (Marshall 1998, 94). For Marshall, the substance of political and civil rights was diminished by gross inequalities in society, particularly divisions along class lines, and, thus, he believed nations, in the forward march of progress, would advance beyond the stage of extreme inequality. He considered advanced nations to develop through predictable stages, extending first civil rights, then political rights, and finally social rights to all citizens.

More recent scholarship has developed the concept of social citizenship further, first in elucidating variation in ways that different nations incorporate citizens. Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) criticized Marshall’s assumption that universalism is the norm in advanced welfare states. He pointed out that, in fact, nations vary considerably in the ways that they structure social citizenship: “One may cultivate hierarchy and status, another dualisms, and a third universalism” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 58). He proceeded to identify three ideal types of stratification pursued by different nations: conservative, liberal, and social democratic. Each one, through its public policies, promotes a different approach to what he terms decommodification, meaning “when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market” because they are somewhat insulated from
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market forces and, in times of need, like illness or old age, not forced to sell their labor on the market (Esping-Andersen 1990, 21–22).

Even within a single nation, furthermore, different groups of citizens are often incorporated on different terms and at different points in time. Ann Orloff (1993) observed such variation pertaining to gender. She argued that, for many women, full decommodification comes not only from the ability to leave the labor market to fulfill parenting responsibilities without repercussions, but also through the ability to enter the labor market by having choice and support for “private-sphere” responsibilities like child care. Nations vary considerably in these respects.

Scholars of the American welfare state have shown that in the United States, the relationship between social policy and citizenship has developed in a far different way than Marshall expected to be the norm. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1992) argued that civil and political rights have not necessarily led to social rights: rather, the property- and contract-centered understanding of civil rights has contributed to an aversion by the American public to the very term social rights and to a preference for social policies based on those who have earned such benefits versus the underserving who only receive charity.

Nor did the development of rights in the United States follow such a straightforward trajectory as Marshall would have expected. On one hand, most white male Americans—regardless of whether they owned property—gained political rights in advance of their European counterparts, yet gained social rights well after them. Furthermore, other groups of Americans gained rights far later on, and sometimes through a different sequence than Marshall anticipated (Quadagno 1994, 8). Social rights were not only extended more slowly and sporadically than Marshall anticipated (p. 627) but also in ways that defied classification into any of the three major types of stratification identified by Esping-Andersen, those pertaining to work, status, or universal principles (Mettler 1998). For example, during the first century-and-a-half of American history, most social policies were extended on the basis of republican ideals: either citizens were to be rewarded for their fulfillment of civic duties, as in the case of benefits for military veterans; or good citizens should be cultivated through social provision, as in the case of educational policy (Skocpol 1992; Orloff 1991; Macedo 2003).

In recent decades, scholars have begun exploring the relationship between social policy and citizenship in the United States. Some examine the relationship between social rights and membership, status, and civic identity in the political community. Political rights may serve as the formal basis for full citizenship, but it is often through social rights that an individual becomes meaningfully incorporated as such. Other scholars investigate the links between social policy and civic engagement or political participation—for instance, the ways in which social programs can provide citizens with the capacity for the full exercise of political rights by promoting education, health, and community. Still others look at how social policy influences citizens’ knowledge of and views about government and of their responsibilities in relation to it.
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Thus, the incorporation of social policies into our understanding of citizenship helps further develop the two currents of citizenship that have dominated American social science to date. This new area of research has pushed us to consider citizenship as composed not only of civil and political rights but also of social rights. Moreover, status is formally composed of not only possessing rights but also of lived experiences of government that shape one’s identity, sense of membership in a community, and willingness and ability to participate in politics. Formal rights, status, experience, and practice interact to create citizenship, and, as emerging scholarship is finding, social policies play a unique role in shaping each of these elements of citizenship in the United States.

3 How Social Policy Influences Citizenship

Over the past quarter-century, a pair of analytical approaches emerged that have provided scholars with tools for thinking more systematically about how social policy may influence citizenship. First, policy scholars Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram argued that policy makers inscribe social constructions of target populations in policy design, favoring different tools for different groups. These policies, in turn, convey messages to citizens about “what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which not), and what kinds of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society” (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334). Citizens shape their orientation to government and the style and frequency of their participation in response to policy messages. Advantaged groups receive positive messages that convey to them that government is responsive and that encourage them to engage in conventional forms of political participation. Groups construed as dependents or deviants, by contrast, receive negative messages that prompt withdrawal from participation.

Separately, several historical institutionalists developed the theory of policy feedback, of how policies established at an earlier period of time may shape subsequent politics. Skocpol (1992) observed how policies can affect the capacity, identity, and goals of social groups, as Civil War veterans’ benefits did for veterans, and the achievement of maternalist policies did for the federated women’s associations that mobilized on their behalf. Building on this approach, Paul Pierson (1993) argued that policies may generate both resource effects, generating resources and incentives that promote some political strategies over others, and interpretive effects, acting as sources of information and meaning.

This approach has been adapted to studying effects on citizenship through a synthesis of Pierson’s conceptual apparatus with Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady’s Civic Voluntarism model and also aspects of Schneider and Ingram’s approach (Mettler 2002). The resulting framework features two distinct pathways. First, through the payments, goods, and services they offer, policies may have resource effects on individuals that enhance or diminish their civic capacity. Second, the rules and procedures of policy design may bestow messages on citizens, conveying interpretive
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effect that shape their civic predisposition or inclination for involvement and attitudes about government and politics. Both may ultimately affect their likelihood of civic engagement.

Through these sorts of mechanisms and other related ones, social policies may have a wide array of effects on citizenship. In the following section, we offer a brief overview of the dynamic and emergent scholarship in this area. A more comprehensive inventory appears in Mettler and Soss, 2004.

3.1 Membership, Identity, and Belonging

Social policies define, first and foremost, who is and who is not included as a member of the political community. They operate through cognitive mechanisms, by conveying what Ingram and Schneider have called “messages” or what Pierson has called “interpretive effects” to beneficiaries and possibly to other citizens, as well (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Pierson 1993).

The political philosopher Judith Shklar examined how a wide array of policies, including those shaping the right to work, affect citizens’ “standing” in the political community, whether they enjoy public respect, and thus whether they experience full inclusion (Shklar 1991). For Shklar, Americans lose their standing when they cannot work and thus the right to work—and the social policies that promote the ability to work like job training programs, educational policies that foster employability, labor regulations, public works programs, and incentives to businesses to create jobs— influence citizenship (Shklar 1991, 99–102). In the United States, employment status has long been associated with independence and freedom (Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Foner 1995). Employment is the basis on which individuals acquire eligibility for a wide array of other social benefits, ranging from unemployment insurance to the Earned Income Tax Credit and Social Security.

In addition, social policies can influence citizens’ sense of their own or others’ civic status, conveying notions of deservingness (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Some policies, such as the World War II G.I. Bill, have treated recipients as honored citizens, bestowing generous benefits on them and delivering them in a manner that conveys dignity and respect (Mettler 2005b). Other policies, such as public assistance, have stigmatized beneficiaries and conveyed the message that government is not responsive to people like them (Soss 1999a, 1999b). Through programs like Old Age Insurance (Social Security), New Deal social policies incorporated men, particularly whites, into benefits administered by the national government in a uniform manner and according to bureaucratic norms, whereas most women and men of color were left to the highly variable policies at the state level, for which eligibility more often depended on local social and cultural norms. This differentiation in policies fostered different forms of civic status (Mettler 1998).

Some social roles are sanctioned by social policies that endow them with the legitimacy of the state and indicate that they constitute acceptable and valued identities with public worth. The long history of veterans’ benefits in the United States, beginning well in
advance of other social-welfare policies, helped to enshrine the role of the citizen soldier in American political culture. Questions about deservingness have loomed over many other types of social provision, but the established connection between social benefits and veteran status places their legitimacy—and the honor of beneficiaries—beyond reproach (Mettler 2005a). Policies ranging from spouse and survivors’ benefits in Social Security to advantages in the tax code for married couples who file jointly have bestowed legitimacy on heterosexual marriage and particularly on the role of women within it. In addition, in many ways they have treated women who remained outside of the paid workforce more preferably than those who work intermittently and/or for low wages (Canaday 2009; Harrington Meyer 1996; Nelson 1990; Sainsbury 1999).

Social policies may also, by extension, influence how some citizens view other groups of citizens—whether they consider them to be deserving of government benefits. Being associated with a stigmatized policy can promote a marginalized status for a particular social group (Soss 1999b). Women on public assistance, particularly African Americans, became subject to such dynamics during the mid-20th century, as the policy they utilized fell from its respected status in 1935 to a disparaged one within the space of about 20 years (Mettler 1998, chap. 6) and then retained that negative image over subsequent decades (Gilens 1999). Conversely, recipients of the Earned Income Tax Credit, though drawn from much of the same demographic group as those on welfare, benefit from a positive social perception (Jacobs and Page 2009, 63).

These dynamics, in combination, influence how social policies affect stratification within a society. Some policies may foster solidarity, a sense of social cohesiveness, and shared interests across class and other divisions, whereas other policies may reinforce or exacerbate differences and inequality (Esping-Anderson 1990, chap. 3.) Universal policies may help incorporate less advantaged citizens as full members, and prompt others to view them as such, whereas targeted policies may reinforce their separateness (Skocpol 1991; Wilson 1991).

### 3.2 Political Participation and Other Forms of Civic Involvement

The vast literature on political behavior pertains directly to matters of participatory citizenship, and yet it proceeded for decades without probing how social policy might influence involvement. In part, this likely emanated from the lack of survey data that includes both indicators of individuals’ rates of participation, on the one hand, and their usage of social programs, on the other. Finally, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady included both types of questions in their comprehensive Civic Participation Study of 1990, and they investigated the relationship in their classic book, *Voice and Equality*. They found that beneficiaries of more inclusive programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, were much more likely to get involved in advocating on behalf of their programs than were beneficiaries of means-tested programs such as Food Stamps, AFDC, Medicaid, and subsidized housing (1995, 208–210). An exception was the Welfare Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was spurred by the activism of poor mothers receiving welfare that briefly defied research predictions and became vocal proponent for the poor.
(Nadasen 2005). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady also found that beneficiaries of the means-tested programs, like parents of school-aged children, did become significantly more active in political activity pertaining to the particular policy issues that benefited their families, but this heightened issue activity was still not enough to make up for their overall lower levels of participation relative to the rest of the public (1995, 394–398). In other words, experiences of social policy bore a relationship to how much and toward what end beneficiaries took part as citizens.

Subsequent analyses, primarily involving case studies, have delved into explaining the mechanisms through which social policy usage influences political participation or other forms of civic involvement. Some emphasize how citizenship is shaped through interpretive or cognitive messages. Soss found that controlling for several factors, recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were significantly less likely to vote than recipients of a social insurance program, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). He hypothesized that policy experiences engendered political learning, as individuals gained distinct experiences of government and took away unique messages about the value of political action. His in-depth interviews with program respondents revealed that SSDI recipients encountered a responsive agency and thus developed a greater sense of external political efficacy, which could explain their higher voter turnout. Conversely, AFDC recipients found the agencies they dealt with to be unresponsive or even hostile to their claims, thereby diminishing their sense of external efficacy (Soss 1999a). Such inhibiting effects can be mitigated, however. In the same study, Soss found that AFDC recipients whose children were enrolled in Head Start—a program that encourages parental involvement and assertiveness—were more willing to voice grievances at the welfare office and displayed higher levels of external political efficacy. The exception of Head Start lends credence to Soss’s claim that it is not just poverty and education levels that are stifling turnout, and it further illustrates the role social policies can play in reinforcing or challenging participatory inequalities.

Similarly, in a study of the World War II G.I. Bill’s education and training benefits, Mettler found that beneficiaries later participated as members of a greater number of civic organizations and political activities than veterans with similar characteristics who did not use the benefits. The results were not attributable to veterans’ level of education, and thus were not primarily a resource effect; rather, they emanated from the interpretive effects of the experience of program usage that helped fund veterans’ education. Through survey and interview data, Mettler found that those who experienced the G.I. Bill perceived themselves to be treated with dignity and respect through the course of program delivery. They also gained a level of education most could not have afforded and some would not even have considered (Mettler 2005a). The impact on civic involvement endured for the first 15 years after program usage, and disappeared after that, suggesting that the effects of social policy on citizenship through cognitive effects may be time-limited (Mettler and Welch 2004).
Examinations of other social policies have suggested a more prominent role for resource effects on civic engagement. Andrea Campbell’s study of Social Security and Medicare showed that seniors have not always been as active in politics as they came to be by the latter 20th century; rather, as program beneficiaries they acquired a more tangible sense of their interests and took action to protect the benefits on which they relied. Lower-income beneficiaries, who depended more heavily on the benefits, experienced the strongest boost in their civic engagement. Besides isolating resource effects, Campbell also found that program beneficiaries were more likely than others to be mobilized by parties and groups. Looking across a wider array of programs, she observed that recipients of means-tested programs were deprived of the policy experiences that could have helped to propel their greater involvement (Campbell 2003).

In a study that showcases the impact of social policy on citizenship, Deondra Rose examined the effect of federal student aid programs on social and participatory citizenship. She found that usage of the policies enabled Americans—especially women—to acquire higher levels of education than they would have otherwise, enhancing their social citizenship. Then, in turn, those with more education participated at higher levels in politics. The experience of program usage itself, controlling for educational level, did not affect participation, suggesting that the resources following from heightened educational attainment, rather than cognitive responses to program usage, were primarily responsible for the higher rates of subsequent political involvement (Rose 2012).

Recent studies have further expanded our understanding of how social policy influences participatory citizenship. Some of the advances come as responses to methodological criticisms, namely the charge of endogeneity: that there is something distinctive that leads some populations to utilize a program and it is this unique trait, rather than program usage, that accounts for different rates of participation (Mead 2004). Scholars have made a variety of efforts to grapple with this charge, including a two-stage model approach (Mettler and Welch 2004) and more recently, longitudinal panel data that include a wide array of control variables (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Morgan and Campbell 2011, chap. 7). Some newer studies have also made substantive advances, incorporating analysis of a larger number of polices (Mettler and Stonecash 2008) or by exploring new and different policy areas, such as contemporary welfare to work programs (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011) and Medicare prescription-drug coverage (Morgan and Campbell 2011). Much work remains to be done, but scholars have made headway in developing analytical frameworks and testing hypotheses.

3.3 Effect on Attitudes

Compared to the scholarship on participatory outcomes, less research to date has probed how social policies influence attitudes associated with citizenship. In a few instances, attitudes receive some attention in studies that focus more directly on participation. For instance, in work described earlier, Soss finds that heightened external efficacy results
from positive experiences of policy usage, and Campbell and Rose each discern an impact on political interest (Soss 1999a, Campbell 2003, Rose 2012).

Examining how social policy influences civic attitudes offers a promising direction for understanding more about the effects of the American welfare state, particularly in its contemporary form. Howard and Hacker have observed that U.S. social policy, compared to that of other nations, features a much greater proportion of provision that is either hidden in the tax code or are administered by private organizations, such as employers (Howard 1997; Hacker 2002). This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about how such policies, compared to more direct and visible ones, may influence citizens’ views of government and their roles and responsibilities in relation to it. Studies focusing on the creation and subsequent development of these hidden forms of social policy indicate that, although interest groups appear to have been mobilized by them, ordinary citizens have not been (Howard 1997; Hacker 2002).

Recent survey research has permitted empirical investigation of the impact of policies on civic attitudes. Controlling for several factors such as income and education, Mettler found that the greater the number of direct visible social programs individuals had used, including Social Security, Medicare, the G.I. Bill, public assistance, and others, the more likely they were to agree both that government had helped them in times of need and that it had provided opportunities for them. Conversely, usage of greater numbers of tax expenditures and other hidden programs had no impact on perceptions that government had helped and even made beneficiaries significantly more likely to disagree that it had provided opportunities for them. Recipients of hidden policies were also much less likely to take action to influence them than were those who used the more visible policies. Such policies can be said to constitute a “submerged state” because of their immense size and scope paired with most citizens’ lack of awareness of them (Mettler 2011).

Experimental analysis has revealed that providing citizens with a very small amount of information about social policies in the tax code enabled them to formulate opinions about them at much higher rates and to do so in ways that made sense, given their values and interests. Once informed about the distributive effects of policies, individuals became less supportive of those that favored more affluent Americans and more supportive of those favoring the less well-off (Mettler 2011, chap. 3). As it stands, however, the vast and growing submerged state undermines democratic citizenship because it hinders’ citizens’ ability to recognize the actual role of government and to take meaningful positions on its actions. Such attitudinal effects are ripe for further study, particularly because the presence of the federal government in citizens’ lives has varied greatly over time (Mettler and Milstein 2007).

4 Contemporary Issues and Developments

The United States has a tradition of welfare state development based on particular notions of citizenship, especially adopting social policy to reward good citizens and to promote virtuous citizenship in others. This history has often led the nation to adopt
Citizenship policies designed differently than those in other nations. For instance, Skocpol (1992) has documented how, after the Civil War, at a time when European nations were developing social provision targeted to workers and their families, the United States singled out Union soldiers and their families for assistance. By rewarding veterans for their service, these pension programs offered a fuller and more inclusive social citizenship to their beneficiaries than the rest of the public. Veterans’ benefits after World War II further promoted veterans’ political identity and subsequent political involvement as a unified, mobilized constituency (Mettler 2005b). Other policies, such as K-12 education, were developed for the purpose of promoting the development of good citizens.

A full analysis of the different conceptions of citizenship incorporated into social policies over the course of American history lies beyond the scope of this analysis. Instead, we offer some reflections on the relationship between these matters in the contemporary period.

Since the 1970s, the United States—like many other nations—has experienced growing market-based inequality in incomes. The majority of Americans in this period have seen their wages stagnate, after-tax incomes that have failed to keep up with the rising cost of living, and increasing economic insecurity. For those in the highest income brackets, the last 40 years has enabled the acquisition of a staggering amount of wealth: “In short, the United States now possesses a small class of very rich Americans who are much richer than other Americans, than the affluent of other nations, and than American elites in historical perspective” (Soss, Hacker, and Mettler 2007, 7).

Over this same time period of rising income inequality, compared to many other western nations, the United States has done less to try to mitigate such disparities. The distinctive social policies of the U.S. welfare state have been fairly ineffective in alleviating the rise in economic inequality and the accompanying increase in political inequality. In fact, government deregulation, tax policy and other policy decisions have exacerbated both trends (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

Although senior citizens continue to enjoy access to programs that extend social citizenship—Social Security and Medicare, which have maintained their real value—working-age Americans have, in many ways, seen their social rights atrophy, as the value of many benefits have deteriorated in real terms. Benefits in policies such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and Pell Grants have deteriorated in real terms. Aside from the policies for the elderly and Medicaid, the main social policies that have increased in real value are those channeled largely through the tax code or other mechanisms. Examples of tax expenditures include the Earned Income Tax Credit, home mortgage interest deduction, and employer-provided health benefits, which are excluded from taxable income (Mettler and Milstein 2007). Many of these policies were created in the distant past, but they can increase automatically as market conditions or other factors change, and unlike regular spending programs, they are not subject to scrutiny as part of the annual budget process. In addition, as presidents from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama have sought to create new social policies or to expand existing ones, tax expenditures
have provided their vehicle of choice, presumed to offer the best chance of winning bipartisan support.

These trends, in combination, have several effects on Americans’ relationship to government and how they experience citizenship. Just as economic inequalities have increased, many of the social programs that could help to mitigate its effects—and fostered political engagement—have deteriorated. Meanwhile, the policies that have become more commonly utilized are those that obscure government’s role, tend to shower their largest benefits on the affluent, and make the role of the market appear to be more prominent—even if it is heavily subsidized by government.

The consequences for citizenship in the contemporary period are troubling because, as Marshall feared, rising inequality is proving to be a growing threat to civil, political, and social citizenship. The extreme amount of wealth held by a small group of elites threatens American citizens’ ability to have a meaningful voice in government. As Marshall emphasized over half a century ago, a modicum of economic equality helps promote civic and political engagement and vibrant democracy (1998, 94). Moreover, the turn to more submerged policies has fostered a growing sense of alienation, as citizens no longer see the state as a beneficial presence in their lives (Mettler 2011). The success of the Tea Party movement, which vilifies the welfare state even as many of its members are receiving or close to receiving Social Security (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), and the approval rating of Congress sinking into the single digits are better understood in light of these developments. Rising inequality combined with the prevalence of submerged policies creates resentment toward the state while obfuscating who or what policies to hold responsible, thus threatening democratic accountability.

American social policies have promoted full citizenship and active and engaged citizens in the past—resulting in redistribution not just of wealth but also an equalization of political voice. Lawmakers can look back in American history to find inspiration for addressing contemporary economic and political inequality. American social policy has defined deservingness in a multitude of ways and, although using the concept of citizenship to animate social policy making has not traditionally promoted universal policies; it has promoted welfare-state expansions and could do so again in the future.

For social-policy researchers, the task of understanding the links between social policy and citizenship are crucial in the face of rising economic and political inequality. We cannot understand the role social policy has played in creating the current economic situation without understanding how citizenship ideals have animated social-policy making and led to such distinctive policy choices. Nor can we fully understand how to tackle the current situation without appreciating how the American welfare state not only influences poverty rates and inequality, but also the meaning and measure of citizenship.
5 Conclusion—A Social Science Research Agenda on Social Policy and Citizenship

Traditional social-science scholarship has underexplored the relationship between social policy and citizenship in American politics. Emergent scholarship is shedding new light on the subject and the area is ripe for further inquiry. Building on the work of early trailblazers, there are several new and exciting directions researchers should pursue in exploring the links between social policy and citizenship. One direction for further research is to expand which policies we examine. Extending the scope of policies that fall under the social-policy rubric to include a broader range of policies—especially regulatory, education, and labor policies like minimum wage laws and laws pertaining to labor unions—will further enrich our understanding of the government’s role in citizen’s lives.

The second direction for further research is expanding which groups we study and the ways we understand group effects. Past research has identified the ways social policy can have distinct effects for specific classes, races, and genders. Other identities have received less attention including age cohorts, geographic distinctions, and sexual orientation. For instance, Canaday (2009) explores how enforcement of heterosexual norms and the creation of the category of homosexuality shaped U.S. social policy and, in turn, homosexual identity. Likewise, future research should be attentive to the possibility of intersectional relationships as group identities can overlap creating effects that are different or greater than any single-group identity (for example, Hancock 2007, Weldon 2008).

The third direction for further research is to move beyond individual policies. Given the findings by several scholars that policies like the G.I. Bill, Social Security, and AFDC (p. 636) can have important consequences for recipients’ participation, the next step is to start thinking more cumulatively about how these experiences with programs may overlap, cancel each other out, or otherwise interact. For example, Mettler and Stonecash (2008) find that the larger the number of programs individuals used, the stronger the policy feedback effect. Another way research should try to move beyond examining individual policies is to explore mass political behavior rather than just recipient populations (see Mettler and Soss 2004 for a research agenda). Social policies can have consequential effects not just for those who are included but also for those who are excluded, or for mass publics generally (e.g. Flavin and Griffin 2009).

Finally, as has been noted in this essay, the linkages between social policy and citizenship in the United States diverge from those found in other advanced industrial nations. Understanding the relationship between social policy and citizenship in the United States could be improved by more comparative analysis. The processes existing research has uncovered, like the cognitive and resource effects identified by policy feedback scholars, are likely occurring in other nations. Comparative work, like O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver’s (1999) examination of how liberalism and gender play out differently in four
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similar nations, can help us better identify similar processes as well as the consequences of distinctive policy choices across nations.

These new avenues of research should enrich what is already an exciting area of social science research. By pushing us to rethink our traditional understanding of social policy as simply an output in the political process, and citizenship as constituted solely by civil and political rights, this research offers us a new lens for understanding the effects of the state in citizens’ lives. For social scientists, exploring the ways citizenship and social policy interact is proving crucial to helping us better understand what binds citizens and the state and the ways these binds are constituted and reconstituted every day through Americans’ experiences with the U.S. welfare state.

References

*Indicates recommending reading.


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