

Interview with David Brady

Social Policies, Effectiveness, Popularity

Why is the connection between social policies and public opinion important? The classical research question is: Are social policies effective in reducing poverty? But there's more to it. We want to know about the politics of social policies, asking: Who are the beneficiaries? Who are the stakeholders in this field? Can a set of policies be maintained? **So your question is about legitimacy?** Actually we look at effects of policies and ask whether a policy is popular. This has consequences for subsequent policies. **Politicians must be interested in this question.** They should be. We used to think that effective policies automatically are popular. We tested this assumption. **How did you go about?** We analyzed social and political data and surveys in 39 countries, both rich/developed and developing and middle-income countries, including China, Eastern Europe, many Latin American countries. **And what was your result?** Universal policies from which everybody benefits are not as popular as we had assumed so far, even though they are rather effective. In contrast, non-universal social policies that are targeted at the poor are effective. But these policies tend to be unpopular. **This is not attractive for politicians.** Yes, we see the danger of effective targeted policies are being undermined by lack of popular support. The lesson is: it's difficult to have harmony between effectiveness and popularity. **Are there differences between the countries you looked at?** The issue of this delicate balance is basically the same across this broad set of countries. It's a universal struggle: effectiveness vs. popularity. **What are the consequences?** Effective social policies run the risk of not being kept up, let alone being expanded. Every government has to find a way to deal with this danger of effective policies being undermined.



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Photo: Udo Borchert

Reference: David Brady/Amie Bostic: „Paradoxes of Social Policy. Welfare Transfers, Relative Poverty, and Redistribution Preferences“. In: *American Sociological Review*, 2015, Vol. 80, No. 2, pp. 268–298.