

Research Statement

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My research program is comprised of interrelated projects that examine the partisan politics of social policy and income inequality. I have broad research interests that cross the boundaries of political institutions, political behavior, and public policy.

My first project, a recently published book, examines how political party power affects changes to the divided social system, and subsequently, the level of income inequality in the United States. My second book project, funded by a Russell Sage Foundation grant, examines how citizens develop attitudes towards social tax expenditures, and more broadly, studies the relationship between public opinion and government spending.

My work blends theories of American politics with insights from public policy to examine how both political parties and public opinion shape the social welfare state. There is a common theme to my work. I reevaluate and contribute to basic theories of American political parties and public opinion through conceptualizing public policy as a choice between public spending and private subsidies. In the following sections, I explain my contributions to social welfare policy, distributive politics, partisan influences on income inequality and public opinions towards social spending.

The Politics of Social Welfare Policy

I have published four articles and one book that relates directly to the politics of social welfare policy in the United States. My book *Welfare for the Wealthy* offers a party-centered theory of the divided social welfare state. This work builds upon extant work by Jacob Hacker, Christopher Howard, Suzanne Mettler and others on the historical development of the American social welfare state. I theorize and demonstrate that both Republican and Democrats have political incentives to increase federal social spending albeit using different policy tools that distribute money to divergent socioeconomic groups, and consequently, result in opposing policy effects on the level of income inequality.

Specifically, I find that Republican presidents and increased Republican legislative power produces decreases in public social spending, increases in social welfare tax expenditures, and this spending trade off results in higher levels of income inequality. While both political parties have their favorite tax subsidies, the Republican Party has systematically moved the divided social welfare states balance of power to the private side. This shift in the ratio of public to private welfare has implications for who provides social services, who receives welfare benefits, and the balance of power in the economy. For example, the United States government is less directly involved in providing citizens social insurance now than in the past and spends more money on economic security for wealthier citizens than other post-industrial nations.

Next, my analysis in *Welfare for the Wealthy* shows that political polarization has contributed to an increase in social welfare tax expenditures and higher levels of inequality. I argue and show that asymmetric political polarization, with greater shifts to the right, create a legislative pivot point that is right of center, and therefore, favors the increased use of social welfare tax expenditures. My analysis finds this to be true even when accounting for political party control of the federal government.

This analysis has implications for understanding the U.S. welfare regime in a comparative perspective. The United States has long been considered a liberal welfare state that promotes individualism - where the free market is dominant in the social system. However, my analysis shows that the degree to which the U.S. is a liberal welfare regime at any one point in time is, in part, a function of political party power. Democrats and Republicans push and pull the social system toward more or less reliance on the state or the market. The cumulative result of party power over the last four decades has been a deepening of the liberal welfare regime over time punctuated by some efforts to extend popular public programs.

The analysis in *Welfare for the Wealthy* also has implications for studies of welfare state retrenchment. The literature on social welfare retrenchment examines how conservative efforts to reduce the welfare state largely failed. However, the inclusion of social tax expenditures changes some of the story of welfare state retrenchment. I demonstrate that conservatives have been successful in creating and expanding a parallel private social welfare state that restricts the growth of public programs by reducing federal revenues and meeting citizen demands for economic security through private means. The next step in this project is to extend my theoretical argument and analysis to the U.S. states and the European welfare states. I expect that a shift to right-wing party power at both levels will produce more tax expenditures, less public spending, and higher levels of income inequality. There are forty-three states and at least thirteen OECD countries that currently report an annual list of tax expenditures. I'm in the process of writing a grant application for the collection, cleaning, and public storing of state-level and international tax expenditure data. I am currently an associate faculty member on the Comparative Policy Agendas Project and donated my federal-level tax expenditure data to the U.S. project.

Political Parties and Distributive Politics

The extant theories of distributive politics focus on how political parties use the formal budget process to distribute government resources to their home districts or favored constituencies. Since the 1970s, there has been a change in how the federal government finances public policy that has been missed by American politics scholars but studied widely in public policy.

I argue that theories of distributive politics need to account for the many methods that the federal government uses to finance policy goals that exist outside of the normal budget process. A more accurate and expansive theory of distribute politics is created through the inclusion of the concept of policy tools from the public policy literature. In *Welfare for the Wealthy*, I argue that political parties select and tradeoff from a menu of policy tools when distributing government resources to their constituencies. A party in power increases their preferred form of spending and pays for this increase through decreasing the level of spending preferred by the out party. This tradeoff can be sold to voters as an example of responsible governing and it takes away resources from the out

partys voters.

In my *Politics, Groups, and Identities* article, I argue and find that both Democrats and Republicans use social tax expenditures to distribute federal money to politically important but generally disliked groups such as the poor and the rich. The popularity of tax subsidies, generally, allows political parties to distribute federal money to constituencies that are central to their particular electoral strategy but unpopular with the average voter. My analysis highlights how the Republican Party distributes federal money using off-budget policy tools that have been missed in previous research on the partisan politics of distribution.

The Politics of Income Inequality

My collective research project has contributed to the politics of income inequality by theorizing and testing how political parties use various types of government spending to influence changes in the level of income inequality and how public opinion incentivizes upwardly-distributive social welfare policies. I have also assisted in creating a new APSA section on Class and Inequality.

The rise in U.S. income inequality has been driven primarily by increases to income at the very top of the income ladder. My work creates a theoretical and empirical link among changes to political power, upwardly distributing policies, and changes to income inequality.

There are a number of studies that show a relationship between Republican Party power and increases in the level of income inequality. However, these works suggest but do not systematically examine which Republican policies are responsible for more of the national income going to wealthier households. I show that greater Republican control of the federal government produces a higher level of social tax expenditures and less discretionary social spending and that these social policy changes, as represented by the social expenditure ratio, correlate with rising levels of income inequality.

The inclusion of social tax expenditures highlights a mechanism whereby the federal government distributes income toward wealthier households all in the name of economic security. My analysis of social tax expenditures and changes to the level of income inequality provides a tangible policy mechanism for what other scholars have categorized as market effects.

Next, my work with Chris Ellis on public opinion has a number of implications for the study of the politics of inequality. Generally, our work helps explain why policymakers favor social welfare policies that are upwardly distributive. First, we theorize and show that the mass public, on average, is more favorable towards social tax subsidies than identically described direct social programs. A social tax expenditure reduces public ambivalence about social spending by priming both egalitarian values and attitudes that favor a smaller government. Second, voters are generally unaware of the upward distribution effects of social welfare tax expenditures. We find that voters misidentify the middle-class as the primary beneficiaries of tax subsidies that clearly provide disproportionate assistance to the rich.

Next, social tax expenditures do not prime racial considerations among voters. In addition, social tax expenditures do not prime a survey respondents partisanship and ideology in the same manner as public social welfare programs. These last two points taken together mean that a voter can not rely on racial and partisan signaling to form their preferences for social tax expenditures in the same way they might for public social

programs. We theorize that in the absence of these signaling devices that voters assign deservingness traits to beneficiaries of tax benefits and therefore report stronger preferences for social tax expenditures as compared to similarly designed public programs.

Public Opinion and Social Spending

My project with Christopher Ellis on public opinion and social spending has produced two articles in quality journals, a Russell Sage Foundation Grant, and a working book manuscript. The underpinning of the line of study is similar to *Welfare for the Wealthy*; if we consider multiple types of policy tools than how might that alter our understanding of public opinion and social spending.

In our first article, we find that macro public opinion responds to changes in public social spending and federal tax subsidies for private programs as distinct concepts. Specifically, an increase in traditional public spending produces a subsequent rise in the level of public mood conservatism and increases in the level of tax expenditures for private benefits results in greater levels of public liberalism. A main implication of the study is that while many citizens are unaware of the submerged welfare state, the mass public is able to recognize significant changes to federal tax expenditures and react accordingly.

In the second article, we theorize about public opinion for different types of social welfare spending and use a survey experiment to study how voters respond to both program frames and income distribution effects. We conducted an experiment that described social welfare programs either as tax subsidies or as direct grants from the government. We also described each program as either beneficial to wealthier workers or did not mention this. We find that respondents are generally favorable towards social programs run through the tax code but downgrade their support when informed about the upwardly distributive benefits. However, Republican voters are relatively more supportive of social tax expenditure programs than are Democrats. Additionally, we found that including information about the regressive distributive effects of tax expenditure programs diminished support among Democrats and Independents but had no effect on the level of support for Republican respondents. This study helps explain why more policymakers, especially Republicans, are turning to tax expenditures to fund popular social goals but we also find that these programs are susceptible to framing effects concerning income distribution.

The book project examines how citizens develop attitudes towards social tax expenditures and the implications of these attitudes for politics and policy. Our book manuscript advances a general theory of tax expenditure policy opinion through analyzing data gathered from four nationally representative surveys. We seek to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to provide a better overview of the factors that lead people to support or oppose prominent tax expenditure programs. We address the following questions: how do voters view tax expenditures for social welfare? How can the delivery mechanism of a social program alter voters' perceptions of the recipients? Are opinions toward tax expenditures driven by the same sorts of attitudes, values, and stereotypes that drive opinion toward direct spending programs? More broadly, do the results suggest citizens are aware enough of the intent and consequences of tax expenditure programs to be able to form reasoned opinions on them? Does information about the redistributive effects of federal social programs alter support for them among the public? How do voters use racial attitudes in forming preferences for social spending? How do citizens view social welfare policies that mainly help the wealthy?

We examine the relationship between public opinion and government spending through

illustrating how the predictors of support for specific social tax expenditures differs from the predictors of support for both traditional social spending and tax policy more generally. Next, we analyze the role that tax expenditures play in conditioning how citizens view recipients of government aid. We use survey experiments to find that, all else equal, citizens view recipients of social tax expenditures both more positively and more deserving of the aid than benefits received through nearly identical public programs. These attributes are, in part, a function of tax expenditure recipients being viewed as mainly white and middle-class. Republican voters are particularly likely to hold these perceptions of tax expenditure recipients, even for programs with low-income and racially diverse clientele such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

We are currently exploring the role that racism and other forms of prejudice play in conditioning support for social spending. Our results suggest that attitudes toward tax expenditures (unlike attitudes toward downward-redistributing direct spending) do not prime racially-charged considerations in the minds of citizens. Finally, we study how voters form attitudes towards upwardly distributing social tax expenditures like the home mortgage interest deduction. The initially results suggest that citizens view the average recipient of these programs as being a white middle-class household and therefore deserving of government assistance. We hope that our study will also have implications for understanding how tax expenditures are used to either exacerbate or ameliorate income inequality in the United States.

Race, Public Policy, and Income Inequality

This is project with Zoltan Hajnal (University of California, San Diego) and is in the early stages of development (i.e. data collection and theory formation). In *Welfare for the Wealthy*, my descriptive analysis shows that social tax expenditures disproportionately assist white wealthy professionals while public social spending accrues more benefits to households of color. I find partisan patterns to social spending with the proportion of social tax expenditures to overall social spending going up during Republican administrations. Hajnal and Horowitz (2014) demonstrate that when Democrats are in power, blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans economic fortunes improve dramatically, as measured by income, unemployment, and poverty metrics. Conversely, under Republican Party power, racial and ethnic minorities generally experience economic losses. Our plan is to examine how changes to political party power influence public social spending and social welfare tax expenditures and how in turn these policy changes affect racial and ethnic income inequality in the United States.