

The American Welfare State: Two Narratives¹

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Narrative is an important element in the development of any society. Society members use narrative to organise knowledge and connect it to their basic values, so that a society's narratives shape the choices people make and the actions they take. Governments play a central role in shaping societies' narratives, and it is therefore important to ask whether or not the government is taken to be capable and reliable in its service of the common interest. However, the general perception of the government does not depend on any one particular event, but rather on the long-term reputation which develops over time.

From this perspective, the present article looks at the major narratives which have helped shape today's social welfare policy in the United States. We take a broad view of this discourse and show how the narratives affected, but did not succeed, in shaping the political context leading to policy changes. We take a historical perspective, examining critical stages in the shaping of American welfare policy, with an emphasis on trends and critical junctures.

Our major argument is that there was a general shift to the right, following a rejection of the government as a constructive tool in the solution of social problems. The continuous claims by conservatives against the government did not meet an adequate liberal response, mainly because the latter were too involved in trying to "improve the welfare state." The liberals assumed that there was only one direction possible for welfare policy, and that questioning its basic assumptions was inconceivable. Had there been a more consistent defence of the welfare state, it is possible that a strong welfare policy could more easily have been maintained. The conservative narrative, which challenged the basic assumption that a central

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role of the state was in the defence of weaker members of society and their social integration, could and should have been tackled more resolutely. Rather than focussing on the details of particular policies, such a response would have offered a constant reminder of the central role of the state in society and that the commitment to welfare was based on the belief that the well-being of all society's members is the mark of a good society.