

Name:

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WINS Seminar

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Title of presentation: The New Party Politics of Welfare State Sustainability: The Case of Public Pensions

Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how the intensity of electoral competition affects parties' willingness to recalibrate the most traditional social insurance program: contributory public pensions. This paper is part of a growing body of research that analyzes how changing constituencies in post-industrial societies affect the role that political parties play for welfare state developments. On our view, transformations of the electorate create a tension between parties' vote-maximizing strategies and their traditional ideology. We argue that the intensity of electoral competition and the dynamics of party competition are the central factors moderating this conflict. As electoral competition becomes more intense, parties have an increasing incentive to follow their vote maximizing strategy. Hence, under conditions of increased electoral competition, left-of-center governments have an incentive to target new constituencies, such as middle-class public service professionals, with pension recalibration, while right-of-center governments will shy away from appearing too tough on welfare issues, as they increasingly appeal to the traditional working class on cultural issues. However, for low levels of competition, both types of parties prefer to satisfy party activists and to protect their reputation by sticking to their traditional ideological positions on policies, i.e. right-of-center government will retrench, and left-of-center governments will block retrenchment. In addition, this relationship is moderated by the presence of a credible radical-right challenger. If a radical-right party can successfully compete for the working class vote then this will increase the electoral risks resulting from welfare state recalibration.

We test these hypotheses using a new measure of the competitive pressure on parties and can demonstrate that the intensity of electoral competition as well as the presence of a radical right challenger does indeed impact parties' willingness to engage in welfare state reforms and it does so in the hypothesized direction.

For the WINS Seminar, the presentation will present a more general discussion about how institutions affect the sustainability of public policies, which will include examples from other policy areas, including migration and agricultural policies.

This presentation is based on a paper co-authored with Tarik Abou-Chadi.

Short bio

Ellen M. Immergut is Professor of Comparative Politics at Humboldt University Berlin. She received her PhD in Sociology at Harvard University in 1987, and has been Assistant and Associate Professor at MIT, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Konstanz, and is now Scientific Coordinator of the NORFACE Welfare State Futures Programme. Her research focuses on how institutions affect the politics of the welfare state and welfare state outcomes. She is author of *Health Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), "The Theoretical Core of the New Institutionalism" (*Politics & Society*, 1998) and co-editor of *The Handbook of West European Pension Politics* (with Karen M. Anderson and Isabelle Schulze, Oxford University Press, 2007).