Rethinking Party Politics and the Welfare State: Recent Advances in the Literature

April 6, 2010

- first draft -
comments welcome

Paper prepared for the
17th International Conference of the Council for European Studies
Montréal, April 15-17, 2010

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Abstract

This paper surveys recent studies that analyse the relation between party politics and the welfare state in terms different from traditional ‘partisan politics’ theory. This traditional approach – most clearly embodied in the power resources literature – sees parties as representatives of social constituencies mostly defined in terms of industrial classes and as advocates of well-defined liberal, social-democratic or conservative welfare policies. Recent theorizing has criticised or complemented this theory in mainly three ways. First, several theorists argue that party systems and competition between parties matter. Second, some studies have highlighted the influence of different kinds of linkages between parties and electorates (particularistic versus programmatic) on policies. Finally, yet other scholars emphasize the fact that electoral constituencies have changed and do not correspond to those of the industrial age any more. Each of these contributions has implications for the politics of the welfare state that diverge from the predictions of partisan theory. By bringing together these criticisms and new approaches we engage in a theoretical discussion of ‘partisan politics’ and power resource theory. We show that the three groups of contributions differ in their consequences for the traditional partisan politics approach: some of the criticisms are motivated by historical changes in recent decades and call for updating the traditional approach without challenging its basic premises. Others, however, apply also to the politics of earlier phases in welfare state development and require a more paradigmatic rethinking of why and how parties matter for the development, size and design of welfare policies. We discuss the consequences of these criticisms both by proposing scope conditions for partisan theory and by indicating how it may be necessary to adjust partisan theory outside the realm of these scope conditions.
1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to highlight and discuss new approaches in analysing the relation between party politics and the welfare state. These approaches can be qualified as ‘new’ because they differ from traditional ‘partisan politics’ theory. The latter is a well-established theoretical strand in comparative welfare state research and, more broadly, in comparative political economy. In a nutshell, it sees parties – or “party families” (Mair and Mudde 1998) – as representatives of social constituencies mostly defined in terms of industrial classes and as bearers of clear ideological stances for liberal, social-democratic or conservative welfare policies. The partisan politics literature also argues that (welfare) policy output depends on the partisan composition of governments.

In this essay we bring together recent studies that have analysed party politics and the welfare state in terms different from traditional partisan theory. New ways of conceptualizing the role and impact of political parties on social and economic policies have been thriving over the last years, but to our knowledge, the different strands of theorizing have largely developed separately from each other and not been put into context so far. This is what we do in this paper. We identify three ways in which these recent studies depart from traditional theory. First, some authors argue that party systems and the interaction between parties within these systems (i.e. patterns of party competition) matter. Second, others highlight the different kinds of linkages between parties and electorates (particularistic versus programmatic). Third, yet other works emphasise that electoral constituencies have changed and do not correspond to those of the industrial age any more.

Each of these aspects has implications for the politics of the welfare state that diverge from the predictions of partisan theory. In short, partisan politics theory assumes a very linear and direct relationship between the type of party in power (e.g. social democratic, liberal or conservative parties) and the policy output. Each of the three kinds of criticism that we are going to address in this paper questions this linear relationship in its own way: if we take party competition seriously...
(e.g. Ferrera 1993, Kitschelt 2001, Green-Pedersen 2001, Watson 2008 and Picot 2009), the expected policy preference of a party is not “given” by its ideological party family, but it also depends on the kind of competition the party faces. We must e.g. expect different policies from a social democratic party that faces a radical left competitor than from a social democratic party in a two-party system. Similarly, acknowledging the importance of voter-party linkages (e.g. Skocpol 1992, Lynch 2006 and Estévez-Abe 2008), reminds us that parties often use policies in a particularistic way, rather than the programmatic orientation implied by partisan theory. Hence, under particularistic competition the choices of parties differ from partisan theory even if the ideological labels are the same. Finally, the empirical analysis of changing socio-structural electoral constituencies (as in Kitschelt 1994, Kitschelt and Rehm 2006, Rueda 2006, King and Rueda 2009 and Häusermann 2010) quite fundamentally alters our expectations of partisan policies, because it means that parties represent different interests from the ones that marked their ideological profiles in the early decades of welfare state growth. Hence, each strand of theorizing has distinctive implications. All of them, however, imply that we cannot adequately grasp the complex relation between party politics and the welfare state unless we update and expand – but not abandon – our model of party politics. Some of these criticisms are motivated by historical changes in recent decades, others apply also to the politics of earlier phases in welfare state development. Yet, in many respects partisan theory remains, of course, valuable. Consequently, we propose scope conditions for the applicability of partisan theory. But we also discuss which of the new approaches are most promising for further research.

When discussing these contributions to the literature, we do not aim at an exhaustive review of research on political parties and political economy, an endeavour that would be doomed to failure given the scope of the topic. We do, however, want to highlight three strands of research that satisfy two criteria: first, we focus on the literature in comparative welfare state research. That is to say, we do not discuss similar contributions that belong to the wider field of comparative political economy (such as industrial relations or economic policy, see e.g. Hamann and Kelly 2007, Martin and
And we also do not include ‘pure’ party politics literature in this essay, even though this literature has played an important role in informing many of the new contributions that we discuss. Second, we focus on those welfare state studies that clearly refer to political parties. This excludes, on the one hand, those studies that concentrate on electoral systems from a mainly institutional point of view (such as Iversen and Soskice, 2006) and it excludes studies that focus on political strategies that are based on a government rather than a party logic (such as Natali and Rhodes 2004, Schmidt 2002).

As a starting point to our discussion of the literature, let us point out where we think the recent questioning of traditional party politics theory comes from. ‘Partisan politics’ (and related power resource theory) has been a powerful approach to the study of the welfare state and is still highly influential today. How influential it is can often be observed in the implicit assumptions that scholars make, for example about the linear effects of left party government on social policy output. The dominance of partisan theory has first been questioned by the ‘New Politics of the Welfare State’ debate that stirred up comparative welfare state research since the middle of the 1990s (Pierson 1994, 1996, 2001). This challenge to partisan politics focussed primarily on the path dependent effects of established policies. It argued that the very expansion of the welfare state itself changed the rules of the political game by changing the preferences and expectations of voters and interest organizations. Hence, the effect of partisanship on policy outcome, especially in the case of right-wing governments trying to cut back social benefits, is weakened by policy legacies.

The ‘New Politics’ debate led to the rise of historical institutionalism, which emphasizes policy legacies and political institutions. Yet, the debate stimulated also a broader reconsideration of the politics of social policy (Green-Pedersen and Haverland 2002; Ferrera 2008). After all, it implied that parties may behave differently from what partisan theory would predict, depending on the context of policy-making (credit-claiming during welfare expansion vs. blame-avoidance in

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1 However, when we revisit the traditional partisan approach (Section 2, below) we refer also to economic policy as this field played a role in the emergence of the theory.
times of austerity, Pierson 1996), and that ultimately the “color” of the government might not matter much anymore (Huber and Stephens 2001, for example, pointed at a declining explanatory value of partisan variables after the 1980s, see also Seeleib-Kaiser et al. (2008) for an argument on convergence). Some scholars pointed out that Social Democratic parties are often even in a better position to reform the welfare state than conservative parties are (Levy 1999, Ross 2000, Anderson and Meyer 2003). This is what challenged partisan theories of welfare politics. The trend of reconsidering whether and how party politics (still) influences social policy reforms has subsequently built up in recent years, leading to new insights that not only affect our understanding of contemporary party politics in the field of welfare policies, but that may even lead us to reconsider the partisan politics approach more fundamentally.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we revisit the traditional partisan politics theories of the welfare state in order to identify the main elements of this approach. Then we present new studies of party politics and the welfare state, arguing that they can be grouped into three strands of criticism with respect to traditional theory. This is followed by a section in which we discuss the implications of these criticisms for our understanding and use of the partisan politics approach today. A final section concludes and identifies the most promising routes for further research.

2. ‘Old school’ – partisan politics and the welfare state

One of the most influential works linking party politics to governmental policies developed outside the realm of welfare state analysis. In his seminal article ‘Political Parties and Macroeconomic Policy’ Douglas Hibbs, Jr. (1977) elaborated a parsimonious ‘partisan politics’ approach which found wide resonance in comparative political economy and welfare state analysis, despite its sole focus on economic policies. Hibbs starts with the assumptions that (a) blue and white collar workers have distinct economic policy-preferences and (b) that these classes are affiliated to the political left
and right, respectively. He then explores how partisan governments manage the conflicting goals of unemployment and inflation on the theoretical background of the Phillips curve. According to Hibbs (1977: 1467) “[partisan] governments pursue macroeconomic policies broadly in accordance with the objective economic interests and subjective preferences of their class-defined core political constituencies”. Thus, Hibbs finds a linear relationship linking social constituency and their parties to pursued policies and discloses a strong class-based political impact on economic policy-making.

The power resource theory elaborated by Walter Korpi (1983) comes to similar conclusions. The theory can be considered a specific case of the partisan politics approach presented above: it lays more emphasis on a socio-political perspective and is interested mainly in the making of social policy. In his theory Korpi (1983) assumes that (1) socio-economic cleavages are the most important basis for social conflict and party system structure, (2) the working class and capital stand for these conflicting interests and (3) no goal displacement prevails between social class and organizational representatives (parties and interest organizations). On this basis, Korpi understands social policy as a result of the democratic class struggle, wherein working class parties have an interest in moving “the struggle for distribution (...) into the political arena, where their numerical strength can be used more effectively” (1983: 170). The social policies tailored to the interests of the working class – decommodifying, generous and universal – then feed back into the economic sphere as new power resources, counterbalancing the power of capital.

Similarly, Esping-Andersen (1985) argues that social democratic parties not only develop these social policies as resources for wage-earners and the worse-off, but also as distinct instruments to influence the class formation and thereby social democracy’s mobilization power. The power resource theory thus presents a convincing argument as to how classes as political agents (Esping-Andersen 1990: 16) matter for the development of welfare states. Empirical studies supported the claim of a relationship of strong left parties and comprehensive welfare state programs and also gave way to more sophisticated understanding, conceptualizations and
measurements of the welfare state (see e.g. Korpi 1983: 184-208; Esping-Andersen 1990; Schmidt 1982; Korpi and Palme 2003; Allan and Scruggs 2004).

These similar empirical results and conclusions set out the theoretical foundations for numerous researchers, using the *partisan politics matter*-logic in their work (see e.g. Huber et al. 1993; Birchfield and Crepaz 1998; Garret 1998; Rueda 2007). Driven by quantitative methods, these authors primarily apply a simplified hypothesis, understanding left parties – measured by parliamentary or cabinet seats – as agents of the working class with an egalitarian and universalistic ideology and thus strong preferences for welfare state expansion (see e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990, Huber et al. 1993, Huber and Stephens 2001, Bradley et al. 2003, Beramendi and Rueda 2007). Most of these studies do not actually theorize whether parties act on behalf of broad ideological goals (as e.g. Esping-Andersen (1990) seems to suggest) or simply in the direct material interest of their constituencies (as e.g. Stephens (1979) implies). Rather, they all “postulate” (as Pontusson and Rueda (2009) put it) that left parties mobilize the lower wage earners, the “working class, as the flagship of redistributive collectivism” (Esping-Andersen 1999: 293).

This straightforward link between low income, working class voters and left-wing parties was, admittedly, qualified in two respects. On the one hand, Baldwin (1990) showed that Social Democracy did not represent worker interests only, but in some countries included other risk groups such as middle-class and agrarian voters, too. On the other hand, van Kersbergen (1995) argued that during the post-war era, the parties of the Left did not represent the entire working class in continental Europe, given that part of the working class was mobilized by religious, rather than social democratic parties. However, both authors remain clearly in the partisan theory framework,

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2 These hypothesis can be called simplified since it picks up the main argument of the original works of Hibbs (1977), Korpi (1983) and Esping-Andersen (1985) but ignores that, especially Korpi (1983) and Esping-Andersen (1985) acknowledge effects such as social structure (Korpi 1983: 208), welfare state institutions and its feedbacks (Korpi 1983: 208; Esping-Andersen 1985: 145), ideological fragmentation of the political left (Korpi 1983: 208) and coalition behavior (Esping-Andersen 1985: xv) which inhibit a uniform relationship between left-party-strength and welfare state-expansion across different contexts. In that sense, all subsequent works that simply test for the importance of the “left party power”-variable are simplified versions of the initial partisan politics-hypothesis.
and they do not question the basic assumption that links voters, their interests and party politics in the power resources literature: the low-wage working class is the natural constituency of the Left, it holds strong preferences for redistribution and social insurance, and – consequently – the Left fights for welfare state expansion in the democratic class struggle.

As conditions changed from the era of expansion to times of austerity, a mirror-reasoning was applied to welfare state retrenchment: it was argued that left parties stand for less cuts in the realm of social policy, because they represent the beneficiaries of the welfare state and because of their pro-welfare ideology (Korpi and Palme 2003; Allan and Scruggs 2004). Despite criticisms of this conclusion, the importance of partisan politics for welfare state development is widely accepted and often follows the simple logic outlined above – with its strong assumptions on the interconnection of the electorate, social classes and party behaviour.

3. ‘New school’ – competition, linkages, and post-industrial electorates

As mentioned in the previous section, partisan theory is still widely used and highly relevant. Yet, in the last ten years, an increasing number of studies have shown that party politics often shapes social policy change in ways that differ from the mechanisms and hypotheses implied by partisan theory. In the following, we group these studies according to their main points of divergence from traditional theory: first, party systems and interaction between parties - party competition - matter for explaining social policy reforms. Second, different kinds of linkages between parties and electorates shape policy-making. Third, electoral constituencies have changed and do not conform to the assumptions of traditional partisan theory anymore. We take up these three groups of new studies in turn.
3.1. Party systems: what parties do depends on the competition they face

In the classical partisan politics approach the goals and policy choices of a party depend on the ideological ‘family’ it belongs to, which is ultimately a function of the social constituency that a party represents. The presence of other parties is essentially irrelevant to the behaviour of a given party. Other parties only play a role regarding the overall distribution of power. But this affects only the chances of each party to implement their policy goals not their policy goals themselves. Recently, some scholars have opposed this model of party politics and pointed out that the presence of other parties has clear effects on the actions of each party. Hence, these scholars have drawn our attention to the configuration of party systems and the interaction between parties.

The motivations for this kind of perspective have been set out by Ferrera (1993) and Kitschelt (2001). Maurizio Ferrera argued that political mobilizations by socio-economic groups as well as new policy ideas have to pass through the arena of political competition. But this competition has a logic of its own. In this arena “essentially, different relevant ‘power blocs’ confront each other according to a logic of maximizing support” (Ferrera 1993: 108). Because this interaction in the political arena has its own incentives and rules, it is partially autonomous from socio-economic dynamics and policy ideas and can have an independent impact on social policy development (ibd.: 137).

Similarly, Herbert Kitschelt (2001) has made the point that looking just at party families and partisan composition of government is insufficient to explain policy choices. He listed three reasons. First, governments of the same party colour are likely to take different positions depending ‘on the attractiveness and credibility of opposition party positions’ (ibd.: 269). Second, policy positions cannot be assumed just on the basis of party families, but they depend on the relative place of a party within the party system. Third, and related to these analytic issues, the prediction of partisan theory that social democratic governments will introduce less social policy retrenchment is contradicted by the empirical observation that often they have been actually more likely to cut back social protection. In addition, Kitschelt underlines that successful welfare state reform is not just a
question of rhetorical skill or the right framing of the issue. After all, the credibility of a claim such as ‘adjustment is necessary for maintaining the welfare state’ depends on the position of the actor who is making the claim. “The configurations of party competition determine which rhetoric enjoys more credibility in the interpretations of critical electoral constituencies” (ibd.: 273).

Hence, both Ferrera (1993) and Kitschelt (2001) maintain that competition between parties matters for the policy choices of parties. The way in which they, and other authors who worked in this vein, have analysed party competition differs of course. We can broadly distinguish two strands. Some authors have focussed more on party system cleavages (e.g. Ferrera 1993, Watson 2008). This perspective has been applied mainly to the expansion of social policy. It emphasises how cleavages condition the identity of parties and, consequently, their interaction. Others have focussed more on the spatial configuration of party systems and other strategic aspects such as credibility and organizational capacity (e.g. Kitschelt 2001, Green-Pedersen 2001, Picot 2009). These works have analysed mainly the reform and restructuring of welfare states. They point our attention to the often highly strategic behaviour of parties and to constraints that party competition imposes on parties’ choices.

In the first group of studies, Ferrera (1993), drawing on the works of Rokkan and Sartori, argues that the two main aspects that structure political competition are the number of cleavages and the degree of ideological polarization along the left-right dimension. The presence of ethnic, linguistic or religious cleavages as well as a marked ideological polarization can hinder the introduction of universalistic policies and favour more fragmented and occupationally defined programmes (see also Ferrera, 2005, 65-86).

Sara Watson (2008) highlights one cleavage in particular: the one between Socialist and Communist parties. She shows how the division of the left can affect policy choices and how parties strategically use social policy in order to mobilize support or even de-mobilize the support of others. In Southern Europe the left is often divided into Socialist and Communist parties and also

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3 Also Manow (2009) points out how cleavages influenced welfare state development. But his focus is more on cleavages and electoral systems, less on interaction between parties.
trade unions are fragmented along ideological lines. This leads to a struggle between these organizations over dominance on the left and to the formation of varying alliances between parties and unions. In her case study of unemployment compensation in Southern Spain, Watson shows how the Socialist party established a generous unemployment benefit for agricultural workers in order to contain their radicalization and their mobilization by the communist and anarchist unions.

Turning to the works on reform in times of austerity, Herbert Kitschelt (2001) has analysed when different party system configurations encourage painful welfare reforms and when, by contrast, they impede such reforms. He highlights that strategic considerations shape these policy decisions. In particular, he proposes four factors that increase the probability of welfare state retrenchment (2001, see also 2003):

1. Low credibility of welfare state defending parties, either due to their government track record or due to very radical policy positions, and existence of a strong market liberal party.

2. Low electoral trade-offs, i.e. no significant left-wing competition to the parties in government.

3. Party organization that favours strategic flexibility, in particular
   - cadre rather than mass parties,
   - policy-oriented, non-clientelist parties.

4. Salience of economic-distributive conflict for party competition.

Kitschelt does not specify a logical connection between these four factors. Rather, he indicates that empirically we find mainly four combinations of these four factors. Yet, the gist of the argument is that competition from other parties can hinder or facilitate welfare retrenchment. This depends mainly on what side the competition comes from but also on the characteristics of the relevant competitors (such as credibility or organizational capacities).

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4 These he summarizes as ‘united market-liberals versus united social democrats’ (example: UK), ‘divided market-liberals and centrists versus united social democrats’ (example: Sweden), ‘three-way divide between liberals, centre, and social democrats’ (example: Netherlands), and ‘weak liberals, strong centre, and strong social democrats’ (example: Germany; Kitschelt, 2001).
In a similar vein, Picot (2009) has argued that the spatial configuration of the party system and its interaction with policy demand in the electorate can help to explain social policy reforms. The structure of the party system determines on which groups of voters competition between parties concentrates. Consequently, the preferences of these voters are more likely to be reflected in the policy decisions of parties than other voters’ preferences. He uses this framework to explain why far-reaching labour market reforms have been introduced in Germany in the early 2000s after a long phase of only incremental changes in the 1980s and 1990s.

Christoffer Green-Pedersen (2001, 2002) also looks at the spatial configuration of the party system. However, while the contributions mentioned so far focus on party competition in the electoral arena, he shifts attention to the parliamentary arena and parties’ goal of entering government coalitions. Borrowing from coalition theory, Green-Pedersen distinguishes between bloc systems and pivot systems. In the former kind of system, a right-wing and a left-wing bloc compete against each other. According to Green-Pedersen, if right-wing parties rule their intentions of cutting back welfare are severely hindered by left-wing parties that will attack retrenchment. Therefore, in these party systems welfare restructuring will only have significant chances with left-wing parties in government because – as he assumes – the right-wing opposition will not oppose welfare reforms. In pivot systems, by contrast, a centrist party is pivotal in the sense that no governing coalition can be formed without it. In this constellation, left-wing parties face a trade-off between vote-seeking and office-seeking strategies (cf. Strom and Müller 1999). They will be tempted to oppose welfare state retrenchment in order to maximize votes. But this will confine them to opposition status. In order to be considered as coalition partners they have to open up to the possibility of restrictive social policies. Regarding this trade-off, Green-Pedersen suggests that the temptation of gaining office will prevail. Therefore he concludes: “unless only the left-wing bloc governs in a bloc system, more retrenchment is expected to take place in pivot systems of party competition than in bloc systems” (2001: 968).
All these contributions make a case that the ideological label of a party alone is not a good predictor of its policy choices. Instead of looking at the distribution of power between otherwise “unrelated” parties we have to take into account that the presence of competitors changes the behavior of parties. Hence, the common logic of these studies is the following: the policy choices of parties are shaped by the competition they face. This can concern competition for votes or competition for office.

Within this common logic there have been of course different emphases. The first group of studies (Ferrera 1993, Watson 2008) stressed how the party system is structured by cleavages. These cleavages determine the fragmentation of the party system, but also more specifically the identity of parties and of their competitors. This context of competition is reflected in policy decisions. In the second group of studies (Kitschelt 2001, Green-Pedersen 2001, Picot 2009) the emphasis is more on the relative positioning of parties in a common political space as well as on additional aspects of credibility and organizational capacity. Within this group we can distinguish two kinds of argument (or, possibly, two ‘readings’ of their arguments). The first line of argument highlights that policy choices are motivated by strategic considerations. In Picot (2009) policies are used to appeal to important groups of voters and in Green-Pedersen (2001) policies decisions are conditioned by the strategic aim on entering government. The work of Watson (2008) takes a similar approach because she highlights how social policy is used for mobilizing political support or de-mobilizing opposition. The second line of argument focuses more on how policy decisions are constrained by party competition. Kitschelt (2001) starts from the assumption that welfare retrenchment is necessary and then analyses which party systems enable or impede this type of reform. Similarly, competition as a constraint plays a role in Green-Pedersen (2001) and Picot (2009), as well.

In sum, the literature on party systems and social policy development raises three aspects that are disregarded in the traditional partisan politics approach: cleavages structuring party interaction, the strategic use of policy decisions in party competition, and the constraints that party
competition imposes on government decisions. However, these aspects share the logic that what parties do depends on the competition they face.

3.2. Party-electorate linkages: What parties do depends on how they relate to voters

The relation between parties and their electorate can be based on rational-programmatic considerations, on material-particularistic motives, or on subjective-cultural ties. In other words, voters may choose a party because they are genuinely convinced of the policies it proposes, because they expect to get a direct benefit in return for their vote (an individual payoff or a support to their specific community), or because they identify with this party due to social and cultural ties (Parisi and Pasquino 1977; Kitschelt 2007: 526-529). As mentioned in section 2, the partisan approach has not conceptualized the party-electorate relationship explicitly. Probably most influential is the perspective that sees parties attached to a broad ideology in a more programmatic way (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990). It is true that some authors stress the idea that parties represent the material interests of their constituency (e.g. Stephens 1979) and the concepts of core constituency and partisanship do imply a strong (cultural) attachment to a party. However, the most widespread version of the partisan hypothesis assumes that parties promote a certain policy programme (such as generous and universal social benefits in case of Social Democratic parties). Hence, politics is seen in programmatic terms rather than particularistic or cultural.

In contrast to this programmatic bias in partisan theory, some researchers have stressed that social policy is sometimes shaped by the particularistic motives of parties, even in Western Europe. Julia Lynch (2006), for example, has criticized partisan theory for characterising welfare state development as a highly intentional process driven by powerful parties with clear ideological policy programs. Instead, she argues that policy development is often shaped by unintended consequences of the institutional context and modes of competition. In particular, whether parties compete on particularistic or on programmatic terms influences policy output. Lynch defines political competition as particularistic “when politicians offer tangible benefits to selective groups of voters
in return for their votes” and as programmatic when there is a “relatively low degree of selectivity of the beneficiary groups” (ibd.: 63). Lynch maintains that these modes of competition can explain why some occupational welfare states adopted more citizen-based programmes after World War II while others did not. The break after the war and the diffusion of new policy ideas (by the Beveridge plan and the ILO) presented an opportunity for a path-shift (see also Ferrera 1993) that only the countries with programmatic political competition took advantage of.

Why is particularistic competition related to occupationalist policies and programmatic competition to citizenship-based policies? Lynch offers two reasons. First, fragmented “[o]ccupationally based social insurance programs plainly lend themselves far more than do universal programs to the kind of fine-grained targeting of incentives on which particularistic political competition thrives” (ibd.: 65). Second, politicians with particularistic linkages will not support the development of neutral state capacities as these could put at risk their particularistic exchanges. But more universal policies can not be implemented without a certain standard of state capacities. This, in turn, affects also the preferences of more programmatically oriented parties.

The latter argument has been made in a similar way already by Ann Orloff and Theda Skocpol (1984, see also Skocpol 1992) in their comparison of early social policy development in the United States and the United Kingdom. They show how the lack of administrative autonomy in the US facilitated clientelist abuse of social programmes at the time. The existence of these clientelist relations in turn kept progressive politicians from demanding social policy expansion, because they feared that new social measures would also be hijacked for clientelist purposes. Therefore, the kind of party-electorate linkage that prevails can have effects also on the policy stance of programmatically minded politicians.

An important issue with arguments on particularistic competition is the definition of the independent variable. There is a risk of defining particularistic competition with reference to parties making use of particularistic policies. But in this way the independent variable would not provide a powerful explanation of policy output. In this regard, Margarita Estévez-Abe’s (2008) argument in
her book on the Japanese welfare state is interesting. According to her, the degree to which parties adopt targeted or universalistic policies depends on the electoral system. Electoral rules determine electoral strategies and, consequently, the policy choices of parties and politicians. The district magnitude and the importance of the personal vote are two crucial parameters. In multi-member districts electoral competition revolves mainly around organized groups of voters and, therefore, more narrow interests. The personal vote gives candidates incentives to make particularistic policy choices. Hence, in Estévez-Abe’s model the particularistic or programmatic relation between parties and voters is not itself a variable but is part of the causal mechanism that links independent variable (electoral rules) and dependent variable (targeted versus universalistic policies).

In contrast to the programmatic bias in partisan theory, the actions of parties may sometimes be particularistic. They may adopt narrowly defined policies in order to attract very specific groups of voters. This of course brings about social policies that do not conform to ideological preconceptions.

3.3. Changing electoral constituencies: what parties do depends on who they represent

Most of the partisan politics literature on the welfare state sees political parties as the key actors in the “democratic class struggle” (Lipset 1960), a concept that stresses the representative function of parties. As discussed in section 2 above, this is clearly true for studies in the power resources tradition, which showed that the Left was a driving force for welfare state expansion, assuming that the reason for this is to be found in the working-class interests the Left represents. The more recent literature on social policy making since the 1980s still shares that same assumption. None of the major studies in the partisan policy tradition (e.g. Huber and Stephens 2001, Bradley et al. 2003, Allan and Scruggs 2004, Korpi and Palme 2003, Iversen and Soskice 2006, Beramendi and Rueda 2007) actually tests the electoral foundations of the political parties when assessing the explanatory value of Left party power on social policy outputs and outcomes.
Rather, they postulate that the Left still represents the “working class” and the same “working class interests” of redistributive collectivism as in the era of welfare state growth. In the light of this assumption on electoral constituencies, they interpret their empirical results. Studies that do find a positive impact of Left power on different measures of redistribution and welfare generosity (e.g. Bradley et al. 2003, Allan and Scruggs 2004, Korpi and Palme 2003, Beramendi and Rueda 2007) take this as evidence that the model with all underlying assumptions still holds: welfare politics is still the same democratic class struggle it was 50 years ago. Most studies indeed still find such an effect, but the explanatory power of party differences (the Left party variable) has become weaker, as Huber and Stephens (2001) conclusively show in their study of welfare state development after 1970. Again in line with traditional assumptions of the electoral patterns underlying party politics, this weakening is seen as evidence that parties matter less, and that their programmatic differences are increasingly constrained and narrowed by exogenous forces, such as globalization or fiscal constraints. Finally, studies that point to the absence of party differences or “unexpected” party behavior (such as left-wing parties cutting back on welfare or different left- and right governments pursuing very similar social policy agendas, e.g. Pierson 2001, Kitschelt 2001, Levy 1999, Anderson and Meyer 2003) interpret this as evidence for a loosening link between parties and their working class electorates, a “hollowing” of the representative function of parties (Mair 2004). In short, if left-wing parties do not defend the “old” welfare state and push for more redistribution, and if right-wing parties do not push for less state intervention and redistribution, this is seen as evidence that party politics are not driven by the interests of their core electorates anymore. This is a very strong argument and it all rests on the – untested – assumption that the electoral patterns have not changed.

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5 Anderson and Meyer’s (2003) study of Swedish and German pension reforms under social-democratic government focuses on union – rather than party – constituencies. However, it is relevant in this context, because the authors argue that the more encompassing union membership in Sweden (and the stronger links between unions and the social-democratic party) explain why the Swedish SAP adopted a “truly social-democratic” reform, while the narrow membership and weaker ties between German unions and the SPD account for the fact that the SPD disregarded worker interests in its pension reform.
This is obviously problematic, because there is ample reason to believe that electorates and voter interests have changed profoundly over the past decades. Hence – and in line with earlier social policy research that stresses the complex electoral patterns underlying Western European party systems, such as van Kersbergen 1995 or Manow and van Kersbergen 2009 – there is an increasing literature that questions the assumptions on which the traditional party politics literature relies. Indeed, social structure and electoral structure have evolved since the 1970s, entailing a range of electoral dealignments and realignments that are well-researched in the literature on party systems (e.g. Kitschelt 1994, Evans 1999, Kriesi et al. 2008) but almost completely ignored in the welfare state literature. The implication of this criticism of traditional partisan politics theory is that parties may very well still be “programmatic organizations with well-developed ties to particular social groups” (Pontusson and Rueda 2009: 317), but we need to reconceptualize the relevant social groups. Once we get to a more adequate conceptualization of electoral constituencies, partisan politics variables may explain just as much about social policy development as they did in the heyday of the power resources approach.

So, what are the relevant electoral changes that – according to this third criticism to the partisan politics literature – need to be taken into account? There are two sides of this argument on how electoral change impacts on what we expect parties to advocate: on the one hand, the same parties may mobilize different social groups than before, and on the other hand, the “traditional voters” may change preferences. Both have distinctive implications and we discuss them subsequently.

The first development relates to the fact that Left parties increasingly attract high-skilled middle class voters (Kitschelt 1994, Esping-Andersen 1999). The causes for this are not necessarily linked to welfare-issues, but to the emergence of a new cultural divide in the middle class (Kriesi 1998), which is itself a consequence of post-industrialization. This cultural divide opposes advocates of libertarian values to supporters of more traditionalist values (Kitschelt 1994) and it is closely linked to education and gender. Different left-wing parties (social-democratic parties, green
parties, radical left parties) have mobilized this new electorate of younger, highly educated and highly libertarian voters, many of them women (Esping-Andersen 1999). The shift of these middle class voters to the Left is driven by cultural, rather than economic reasons. However, authors such as Kitschelt and Rehm (2005) and Häusermann (2010) argue that it nonetheless has profound implications for distributive partisan politics. High-skilled women working in the service sector obviously incur different social risks and have different social preferences from the average male production worker. They claim “new” social policies linked to education, social investment, universalism and gender equality. By contrast, they have less interest in traditional redistributive schemes (because they are highly skilled and thus have high earnings-power in the market) and in traditional income protection (because they lack the standard employment career on which social protection has traditionally been modeled). This implies that to the extent that Left parties rely on this “new” electorate, we should expect a social investment agenda, rather than traditional redistributive policy agenda.

The second development concerns “traditional constituencies” who change preferences. This argument deals with the shift in working class votes. Workers and low-income voters, increasingly desert the very left-wing parties we have traditionally associated them with. There are two lines of explanation for this, one cultural and one economic. With regard to cultural motivations, authors such as Kriesi et al. (2008) and Bornschier (2010) show that the populist/radical right has become the first choice for workers in several west European countries because these workers adhere to the traditionalist and anti-immigration stances these parties defend. These authors do not investigate the policy-consequences of this shift, but it is obvious that the loss of working class votes has implications for the social policy agenda of the Left parties.

The economic argumentation, however, is even closer to the policy-consequences that are relevant for this discussion. A growing literature shows that the “working class” today is divided into at least two groups: insiders and outsiders (Rueda 2005, 2007). The insider-outsider distinction refers to a divide “between a shrinking, largely male, core of secure and privileged employees and a
mass of more or less chronically unemployed and marginalized populations” (Esping-Andersen 1999: 294). Both groups are low-skilled and low- to medium-income voters, but they differ in their social needs and in their preferences. Different authors have different hypotheses as to how this divide is mobilized in the party political realm (and this issue is still under-researched and unresolved). Rueda (2005, 2007) and King and Rueda (2009) are so far the clearest and most prominent voices in this area. They argue (but do not test empirically) that inside workers continue voting for social-democratic parties, while outsiders either abstain from voting or vote for anti-system right-wing parties. If that was true, we would expect the Left to defend the status quo of insider-protection (mainly through social insurance which rewards continuous employment biographies and full contribution-records), rather than pushing for more outsider-oriented policies (such as needs-based minimum protection, social investment and truly redistributive universal benefits). In contrast, Häusermann and Walter (2010) have analyzed the electoral reconfiguration and constituency preferences empirically for Switzerland, showing that it is actually the old insider working class that shifts to the right, in defense of the old order and welfare chauvinism. Outsiders, by contrast, i.e. the truly vulnerable strata of the post-industrial society, either abstain from voting or vote for left parties that advocate more universal and needs-based social policies. This implies that we would expect right-wing workerist parties to defend the status quo (of employment-related social insurance), while those parties of the left (be it green, social democratic or radical left parties) who attract the outsider-votes would be expected to advocate a universalist and redistributive agenda.

In sum, studies on the underlying electoral shifts show that we need to adapt our expectations of who parties actually represent. Both the shift of middle-class voters to the left as well as the increasing shift of low-income voters to the right are relevant in this respect. Only if we formulate expected party policies based on their current and empirically established electoral basis – rather than on an assumed working class-electorate that is about to disappear throughout the developed world in the wake of deindustrialization – can we test whether parties still fulfil their representative
functions. Just because they “do different things” than 30 years ago does not disprove this representative function. Parties may as well defend different policies because they represent different social groups.

4. Discussion – between updating and revising

The goal of this contribution is by no means to discard the partisan politics approach from the menu of welfare state-analysis tools. Rather, we argue that theoretical innovations on how to analyse party politics and the welfare state as well as empirical developments since the heyday of partisan theory have to be taken seriously. A “mechanistic” application of partisan politics (i.e. testing for the impact of “left power” on welfare generosity and redistribution) today may bring about results that even underestimate the influence that parties still have in shaping public policies. This is why we presented three areas of criticism of the traditional partisan politics approach. All of them suggest a number of variables that should be taken into account to understand party effects.

Two general lessons can be drawn from the recent studies that we presented here. First, the traditional approach remains valuable, but for a more limited set of empirical cases. Second, for the remaining cases partisan politics theory has to be adapted. On this second aspect the implications of the recent contributions differ: some contributions imply that we should reconceptualize our approach to party politics and the welfare state more fundamentally, while others indicate that we can still build on the traditional approach, if we update some of its assumptions.

In this section we start by proposing scope conditions for the applicability of the traditional approach to partisan politics. Scope conditions specify the empirical conditions under which we expect a theory to hold. Then we go on to discuss the insights and implications of the three strands of theory and research we presented above. That is to say, we address the question: if one or several
of the scope conditions do not apply, what are we supposed to do about analysing party politics? When do we have to discard the traditional approach? How can we adapt and update it?

Each of the three groups of criticisms that we presented can be read in terms of scope conditions for partisan theory. They do not criticize the traditional approach *tout court*. Rather, they specify under what circumstances we would expect this theory to hold. In this sense, the studies on party systems/party competition and social policy represent probably the most fundamental critique of the traditional approach: it holds that it is *always* necessary to take the structure of the party system into account, not just in specific historical circumstances. However, the issue can be rephrased in terms of which party system contains most clearly the types of parties partisan theory (implicitly) refers to. This is certainly the case in a bipolar, majoritarian party system in which a united left competes with a rival political block on the right. As soon as relevant “third” competitors enter the stage, strategic considerations of parties become more complex.

For the other two groups of criticism the resulting scope conditions are more straightforward. First, programmatic party-electorate linkages are an (underlying) assumption of most partisan politics models. Where parties use policies as concrete objects in exchange for particular votes, i.e. when policies apply to narrowly identified groups of voters rather than stating general rules, approaches relying on ideological party families fall short. Second, traditional partisan politics theory was conceived with reference to an electorate that is structured by industrial class relations, assuming a reasonably homogenous “working class” with identifiable interests, as well as a relatively close link between income and political preferences.

In sum, the scope conditions of partisan theory that we suggest are: programmatic party-electorate linkages, an industrial social structure, and a bipolar party system. We would argue that these three conditions, taken together, constitute a sufficient condition for the applicability of partisan politics theory. Programmatic linkages may, in addition, be a necessary condition, which means that it is not possible to update or adapt the traditional approach to take clientelistic linkages into account (whereas the model can be adapted to different party systems and to changing social
structures). Each of these conditions – the type of linkages, the social structure and the configuration of party competition – must and can be observed empirically and varies across countries and across time.⁶

In the context of this paper, the important question obviously is: what do we do if one or several of the mentioned scope conditions are not met? In discussing this, we proceed from the most generally applicable to the historically more specific criticisms discussed above.

The literature focusing on programmatic vs. clientelistic party-voter linkages claims that partisan politics theory can only be expected to apply when parties mobilize with programmatic appeals and they do so in the context of a state that is sufficiently strong to implement these policies. If parties use policies to reward particular groups of voters, i.e. to “buy” their votes, they – and their opponents – may advocate programmes and policies that deviate from what we expect in light of the party family ideology. Orloff and Skocpol’s (1984) observation that progressive politicians in the early development of US social policy did not advocate expansion because they feared these policies could be “misused” for clientelistic exchange is a case in point. What does it imply for research that tests the impact of parties on the welfare state? Two answers may be given. The first considers programmatic-vs.-clientelistic linkages as a dichotomous variable without addressing the causes of either kind of linkage. In this view, we need to verify that our scope condition of programmatic mobilization applies, before testing partisan politics-hypotheses. If it does not apply we need a different theory. This theory is currently not established, but elements can

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⁶ It may in fact be possible to add a fourth condition, which refers to types of party organization (and is linked to both party competition and social structure). Partisan theory is evidently based on the model of the socialist mass party that grew out of the labour movement and, hence, has a clearly defined constituency and close organizational ties to this constituency. This model of organization was implemented to a lesser degree also by other parties. However, some authors argue that the dominant models of party organization have changed over time (e.g. Kirchheimer, 1966; Katz and Mair, 1995). The mass party was superseded by the catch-all party, which deliberately tried to broaden its electoral basis. Katz and Mair (1995) further argue that the catch-all party was replaced by the cartel party, which has looser electoral ties and is more strongly incorporated into the state. So far, to our knowledge, there is no literature that applies the consequences of different types of party organisation to social policy making. But it is reasonable to expect that a catch-all party or cartel party makes policy choices different from a mass party, not least because they are less committed to one clearly defined constituency. In the views of these authors, mass parties were characteristic of the industrial age, which, therefore, would coincide historically with the scope condition of an industrial social structure.
be found in Lynch (2006) and Skocpol (1992). Regarding traditional partisan theory, this condition would probably lead us to exclude a few OECD-countries (during specific periods in history) and many of the developing countries.

The second – more complicated, but also more nuanced – answer is that programmatic-vs.-clientelistic mobilization is a more gradual distinction that applies “to a certain extent” in both developing and developed countries. This argument also implies that the type of linkages can be traced back to institutional causes. Estévez-Abe’s (2008) argument that multi-member electoral districts in Japan led parties to focus on narrow interest groups is a case in point. It implies that vote fragmentation leads to more particularistic policies. This approach can be basically applied to all political systems and it requires that we control for the effect of electoral institutions on party-electorate linkages and, consequently, on policy decisions. Alternatively, we might test for the degree of clientelism directly, e.g. with expert survey data that provides information on clientelistic practices of different parties in particular countries (cf. the ongoing Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project at Duke University).

The argument that *party competition and party systems* condition the applicability and content of partisan politics theory is probably an even more central problem to the literature than the linkages-literature (which applies mostly to past periods of history and developing countries). Generally the recent contributions on this matter argued that the policy decisions of parties depend on the competition that they are confronted with. More specifically, this argument can be found in three different varieties. First, some authors stress how cleavages shape the identity and interaction of parties and, consequently, the policies that parties advocate (Ferrera 1993, Watson 2008). Second, other works highlighted that parties may use social policy strategically either in seeking votes (Picot 2009, but also Watson 2008) or in seeking office (Green-Pedersen 2001). Third, party competition has been shown to constrain the policy goals that parties in government pursue (Kitschelt 2001, but also Green-Pedersen 2001 and Picot 2009).
Although similar in their general emphasis on party competition, these arguments have different implications with respect to partisan theory. The first two (on cleavages and strategic policy choices) are more remote from a typical partisan politics perspective whereas the constraint-argument can more easily be combined with partisan hypotheses. The cleavage-based argument is difficult to reconcile with traditional partisan theory because here parties’ identities and interactions always depend on the specific constellation of cleavages. In Ferrera’s (1993) and Watson’s (2008) approaches, party fragmentation (resulting from social cleavages) influences what parties want. Hence, we cannot theorize their programs and policy preferences independently of the structure of the whole party system. From a different angle, the argument on the strategic use of policies is based on an understanding of party politics that differs clearly from partisan theory. Partisan theory assumes a direct link from a social constituency to a party to policy output. The strategic view of party competition, by contrast, sees parties as resourceful organizations that are partially autonomous from social structures. Depending on the competition they face, they strategically try to address different parts of the electorate (or adapt their policy goals to the requirements of finding a coalition partner). To put it simply, this is a more top-down view of party politics as opposed to the bottom-up perspective of partisan politics. If we take it seriously, we may have to discard the partisan politics approach. In contrast to partisan theory, policy decisions in this strong version of the competition argument depend on the relative position of a party in the party system and not on the party type. Moreover, they are not so much related to established constituencies but to ‘contested’ constituencies, i.e. those that may easily vote for a different party as opposed to those that routinely vote for the party in question.

The argument on party competition as a constraint on policy choices, however, can more easily be reconciled with a partisan politics approach. The policy goal of a party may be determined by its social constituency. But the extent to which this goal can be actively pursued is conditioned by the competition the party faces (see e.g. Zohlnhöfer 2001). To give an example, if Social

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7 This view is shared by the literature on party organizations (e.g. Katz and Mair 1995), which argues that parties used to have a closer connection to their electorate in the past, but are more autonomous today.
Democrats have to compete with a more radical party to their left then we expect the Social Democrats to advocate more left-wing policies. If, however, Social Democrats face competition by a center party (a pivot party in Green-Pedersen’s 2001 analysis), we expect it to advocate a more moderate and centrist program. Hence, it might not be a disconfirmation of partisan politics theory if we see the British Labor Party, the Dutch Social Democrats and the Swiss Socialist Party behave differently. But we need to know the party system of a country to formulate meaningful hypotheses. This does not mean that we cannot go beyond in-depth case studies, but in comparative studies we would have to control for the presence or absence of a radical or a pivotal competitor in our models.

To summarize the implication of the party system critique more broadly: We always need to control for the structural incentives created by the party system – in a strong version of this critique the party system largely determines policy choices, in a weak version it merely constrains policy choices.

The last strand of criticism or discussion of traditional partisan politics approaches is probably the most context-specific, since it argues that electoral constituencies of political parties have changed together with wider trends of socio-structural transformations from an industrial to a post-industrial society. The idea here is that partisan politics approaches may well have been adequate and suited in the industrial era (where their explanatory power was, indeed, strong), but that they rely on assumptions about patterns of representation that may not be valid anymore, because both the middle-class and the working class have become heterogeneous and cannot be clearly linked to a specific party family anymore. While some studies emphasize the shift of the “new middle-classes” to the left (e.g. Kitschelt 1994), other authors show that part of the working class are increasingly mobilized by the right-wing parties (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2008, Bornschier 2010, King and Rueda 2009). If there remains any validity to the representative function of political parties in modern democracies, these shifts should impact on what parties want and do. This analysis clearly does not lead to discarding partisan politics theory, because it relies on the same basic assumptions as the old
approach, i.e. parties as representatives of identifiable societal constituencies and interests. What it requires, though, is a re-analysis of this representative pattern.\(^8\) This “updating” of the representative links between parties and electorates needs to take place at both the micro- and the macro-levels.

At the micro-level, the recent trend in comparative political economy and comparative welfare state literature to integrate micro-level analysis in the study of party effects can be seen as a step in the direction of updating the traditional partisan politics approach. Studies such as Cusack et al. (2006), Rueda (2005), Rehm (2009), Häusermann (2010) or Häusermann and Walter (2010) all study the preferences of post-industrial risk groups for particular policies empirically, before linking them to what parties and governments actually do. More specifically, taking this approach seriously implies that we empirically observe both the policy and the party preferences of different post-industrial electoral potentials. On this basis, it is possible to “update” and adapt our hypotheses with regard to the policies we expect parties to advocate and implement.

Studies that adopt a macro-level perspective only may have more difficulties to control for changing electorates, since the extent and structure of electoral reconfigurations varies across countries and cannot easily be generalized. However, the electoral shifts are not random. Hence, based on (secondary) studies of electoral dynamics, it may be possible to replace the old variables (such as “left party power” and similar variables) directly with more meaningful categories. We know by now, for instance, that we need to distinguish between “new and old left” parties (i.e. left parties with a more workerist vs. parties with a more middle-class profile). We also need to distinguish between radical and moderate right-wing parties’ impact, because they mobilize very different segments of the society. Basically, the shifting electoral foundations of post-industrial

\(^8\) Note the crucial role of the concept of representation in this discussion. All three groups of criticism that we presented can be rephrased in relation to this concept. The linkage argument asks us to take into account whether representation is based on narrow material interests or on programmatic consensus. The party system argument raises the question whether party politics is still based on a stable representation of core constituencies or whether representation has become more precarious as parties address different parts of the electorate depending on the configuration of party competition. Finally, the argument on socio-structural changes holds that parties still represent identifiable constituencies but that the composition of constituencies has changed.
party systems require us to “re-classify” parties into new party families. Parties may still have the same names as 30 or 40 years ago, but that may not tell us much about their voter profile anymore.

Overall, this discussion raises a key question: is it possible to update partisan theory for the post-industrial age or do we have to revise our analysis of party politics and the welfare state more fundamentally? Those studies that have focussed on socio-structural changes in the electorate point to the first possibility. As long as (post-industrial) society is still characterized by identifiable electoral constituencies (even if different from the industrial ones) and parties’ policy choices are based on these constituencies, updating is possible. If, however, parties in post-industrial contexts do not mobilize identifiable socio-structural constituencies anymore or if they decide on policies strategically rather than based on who they represent, we may have to depart more radically from traditional partisan theory. This is an empirical question, which remains to be investigated. Both critics and advocates of partisan politics theory have an interest in doing so.

5. Conclusion

Partisan politics has been a powerful approach in comparative welfare state research and contributed significantly to our understanding of the expansion of welfare states and the emergence of different welfare regimes. However, the rising tide of studies that indicate different ways in which party politics influences social policy development shows that partisan theory needs to be reconsidered. In this paper, we discussed three strands of theorizing and research, which point to different “deviations” from the assumptions of traditional partisan politics theory. A first strand argues that what parties want depends on the structure of party competition they are confronted with. Hence, we cannot theorize the impact of isolated parties unless we understand the context in which they operate. A second strand of literature argues that the underlying assumption of programmatic voter-party linkages in partisan politics theory may not always hold. Even in
developed democracies, some parties may mobilize voters with clientelistic practices, which alters our expectations of what policies different parties advocate. Finally, some studies argue that post-industrial socio-structural change has altered the electoral constituencies of parties, so that it does not make much sense to expect them to still advocate the same policies as in the industrial age. We then discussed the question what these criticisms imply for the application of partisan policy approaches today: as we have pointed out, it may suffice to update partisan theory to take into account the socio-structural changes of post-industrialisation, or to acknowledge constraints on party policies stemming from particular patterns of party competition. On the other hand, it may be necessary to re-conceptualize our model of party politics more fundamentally, in order to account for strategic motivations for policy decisions that are conditioned by the configuration of party competition.

Hence, one of the most important questions for further research is to investigate to what extent parties’ policy decisions are still based on the representation of identifiable constituencies and social interests, and to what extent policy choices are motivated by the need to compete with rival parties over specific groups of voters. The answer to this question requires the integration of the study of voters, parties and policies. In this respect, welfare state research can benefit greatly from adopting insights of electoral studies and party research. In the debates that we have outlined, we already see that part of the welfare studies literature has moved closer to these other fields of comparative politics and we consider this both necessary and beneficial for our understanding of recent welfare state changes.
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