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Democracy and the American Welfare State:
The Politics of Social Policy in an Age of Rising Inequality

Takayuki NISHIYAMA

I. DEMOCRACY AND THE AMERICAN WELFARE STATE

Americans have always cherished the ideals of political equality and a democratically responsive government. These ideals, however, are now threatened by the growing inequality among American citizens in terms

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This work is funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) Grant-in-aid for Young Scientists (B).
of income, wealth, and political opportunity. Some people argue that poverty is structured and that structured poverty prevents equal representation and diminishes democracy in the United States. This paper seeks to explain the mechanism of the politics of social welfare policy in an age of persistent and growing inequality in the United States. In particular, this paper explores the possibility of a politically feasible way to establish a safety net for the poor in the United States.

Social welfare policy is a domestic policy that is designed to help those who are thought to be in need of government assistance. It is thus a typical redistribution policy that meets the needs of the poor. At the same time, this paper emphasizes that politicians think highly of social welfare policy as an important election tool for obtaining the votes of the poor. Political scientist David R. Mayhew argues that the principal motivation of legislators is reelection and that the pursuit of this goal affects the policy process. In their influential textbook of American politics, *American Democracy*, Morris Fiorina and Paul E. Peterson also argue that “politics in the United States is driven by electoral influences” more than in any other democracy. They call the anticipation of and preparation for future elections “permanent campaigns” and make arguments from that perspective. This paper analyzes the politics of American

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social welfare policy from the perspective that governing is, in a sense, a campaign strategy.

The interesting and important feature of the politics of American social welfare policy is its political character. In Europe and Japan, most high-level administrative positions are occupied by well-educated, politically neutral, professional civil servants who are hired based on their educational qualifications. Social welfare policies are implemented by these well-qualified individuals who treat all applicants alike.

On the other hand, the tradition of politically neutral bureaucracy is weak in the United States. Despite reformers’ efforts to separate administration from politics, the practice of patronage has continued until today since President Andrew Jackson began to hand out government jobs to his supporters. Most top bureaucrats are appointed politically and behave in ways that contribute to the interests of their appointers. Since politicians are elected in democratic elections and behave in order to enhance the interests of their electorates, we can say that the politics of social welfare policy is implemented democratically in the United States.

However, it is important to understand that election results are not always accurate expressions of popular preferences. At the same time, elections are only part of a political system and the results must be ana-

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lyzed very carefully. Therefore, after briefly examining the basic structure of the American welfare state, this paper clarifies the mechanism of the politics of social welfare policy in the United States.

II. THE AMERICAN WELFARE STATE, FEDERALISM, AND DEMOCRACY

The basic structure of the American welfare state was established by the Social Security Act of 1935 under the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration. The Social Security Act distinguished contributory (insurance) programs from non-contributory (public assistance) ones. Old age insurance and unemployment compensation are examples of contributory programs wherein individuals must pay into the program in advance in order to be eligible to receive benefits from it. On the other hand, public assistance programs are funded through general tax revenues and are available to the financially needy, whose eligibility is determined by means-testing. While Article 25 of the Constitution of Japan establishes that “All people shall have the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living,” the U.S. constitution does not have an equivalent provision. In the United States, welfare had been viewed as a moral problem and as a gift by the government to the poor, who

have no legal right to welfare.

The most important public assistance program was Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, which was originally called Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)), which was founded under the Social Security Act of 1935 and was terminated in 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 ended federal entitlement to assistance and created Temporary Assistance to Needy Family (TANF) program. The AFDC and TANF programs are often derisively labeled as “welfare.” This paper focuses on these non-contributory programs.

In the United States, the federal government leaves the implementation of many social welfare programs to the states. The manner of

（7）In this paper, I made a distinction between interests and rights. Rights are claims that citizens are entitled to make upon the government. They should be guaranteed and achieved even at high expenses. If the rights are violated in politics, they should be guaranteed at the court. On the other hand, interests can be compromised relatively easily.

With respect to the social welfare policy, aid to the poor is considered to be a basic component of human rights in Japan; however, in the United States, the poor cannot claim aid as a right. Governments do not have an obligation to provide aid to the poor.

As I will argue later in this paper, the welfare rights movement was a struggle for the poor to claim rights status for public aid; however, their attempts failed. The federal court admitted that public aid was an entitlement to the poor under AFDC, but that it was not a basic component of human rights under the US constitution. After the PRWORA of 1996 abolished AFDC and replaced it with TANF, public aid is no longer an entitlement.

implementation of social welfare programs differs from state to state. In New York State, for instance, local governments had the responsibility to implement the AFDC program. Historically, the federal government has financed 50% of AFDC payments in New York State with a matching grant, the state and local governments each having financed 25% of the payments. With regard to the TANF program, the federal government gives each state an annual bloc grant that can be used by the states to run their own welfare and work programs. American state and local governments have to secure financial sources to implement social welfare programs. When considering the abovementioned features of the American welfare state, we need to analyze the politics of social welfare policy at the state and/or local level.

State and local governments, however, do not have the authority to issue currency or limit the movement of people and businesses. Therefore, according to Peterson’s “city limits” thesis, while the American state/local government has the structural features necessary to promote a developmental policy to attract important taxpayers like the middle-classes or businesses, it hesitates to adopt a redistribution policy, fearing that a generous welfare policy would attract the poor and assuming that taxpayers detest tax burdens. In a sense, the American welfare state is

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confronted with a dilemma that the state and local governments, who have structural difficulties in adopting social welfare policy, have the responsibility to implement it. This paper explains how the poor can influence social welfare policy within this institutional setting.

III. THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY
IN THE UNITED STATES

1) Voting and Party Mobilization

In most democracies, voting is regarded as the most important form of political participation. Although its capacity for conveying information to public officials is weak, election results constrain the behaviors of politicians.

Compared to other forms of political participation, the cost (for example, time, skills, or money) of voting is low, but it is still too high for some people. In the United States, people have to register in advance for voting, which is unlike the case in other industri-alized countries where public servants register citizens using residence cards. Americans also have to bear the costs of gathering the information in order to choose the candidates they wish to vote for. People differ in their abilities to bear the abovementioned costs of voting, and those with a low


socio-economic status have more difficulties in bearing the costs. When political parties function well as mobilizing agents, party mobilization underwrites the costs of political participation. Compared to other democracies, American political parties have been, and still are, decentralized, and the urban political machines, which had developed as profit-oriented organizations to utilize public offices, used public policies as resources to mobilize voters. Often, political machines tried to secure the votes of urban masses by giving them patronage or the necessities of life. They also utilized social welfare policy to win the votes of poor immigrants in the urban areas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Political parties reached the broad public and carefully listened to the needs of the poor.

Political machines, however, could not treat all poor people in the same way. As more and more immigrants came into the city, political machines were not able to afford all the costs of providing them with social services. Further, the single-seat electoral district system proved useful for political machines in terms of minimizing the costs. Under this winner-take-all system, political machines were able to secure seats as long as they got a plurality within a district. As the size of an electoral district was small as compared to those under other electoral systems, political parties were able to easily determine the votes necessary to get the seats. In other words, they could easily determine which electorate they needed to serve and which they did not. Thus, there


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were limits with regard to mobilization by political machines and reform movements triggered by political corruption; further, the federal New Deal social policy weakened political machines.

Today, as American parties have declined as mobilizing agents, the election turnout rates have decreased. One of the problems of declining voter turnouts is that the electorate is unrepresentative. The turnout differs tremendously and constantly according to the education level and socio-economic status of the citizens. Today, the voices of the poor, who do not have higher education or associational benefits with other mobilizing agents like trade unions, cannot be easily heard. The elector-

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(16) The problem of declining voter turnouts among the poor became obvious in the political process for the enactment of the welfare reform bill of 1996, which enabled politicians to cut down welfare spending.

Dismantling the welfare state is not an easy task for politicians who are seeking reelection, because the fundamental rule of cutting down welfare payments is "blame avoidance" instead of "credit claiming." Claiming to cut down welfare payments sounds favorable for the voters, but actually cutting down the payments does not always help politicians to win reelection. On the one hand, cutting the welfare payments saves the taxpayers’ money; however, the benefits are diffused among the entire population. On the other hand, the costs of cutting down welfare payments are concentrated among the poor, who tend to live largely in urban areas. These poor people may express their discontent at the polling booth.

One of the reasons that politicians were able to make a decision to cut down welfare payments in the 1996 welfare reform is that the poor rarely vote. There are two aspects of this argument. First, politicians cannot get political reward for implementing welfare policy particularly because poor people rarely vote. Instead, politicians get political rewards for proposing welfare reform. They can not only
ate is wealthier, whiter, older, and better educated than the general population.

Elected officials naturally pay greater attention to the demands of frequent voters than those who do not vote often. In particular, the turnout for the primaries is much lower than it is for the general elections. Politicians tend to behave in a way that satisfies the needs of active voters who have strong incentives to join politics in order to pursue their extreme agendas. Further, after the decay of the traditional party organizations, candidates now have to build campaign organizations themselves. Since campaigns require money and workers, candidates have incentives to listen to those who provide such campaign resources.

As a result, elections have become biased and public policies adopted by politicians may consequently be distorted. Politicians are constantly concerned with pleasing the voters and are likely to be responsive to their needs (they act according to the short-term electoral advantages). Incumbent politicians constantly have to campaign to maintain their base of electoral support. Moreover, the majority party is able to control the agenda and prevent certain issues from being considered. While politicians seek issues that help them win the election, they may ignore issues that threaten the interest of the supporters. They do not wish to promise to save taxpayers’ money but also cater to prevailing stereotype. Second, politicians understand that even if they cut welfare payments, the poor will not express their discontent at the election. Thus, this paper argues that unless the poor change their political behavior by themselves and express themselves as important political actors, their situation will never improve. Cf., Pierson, Paul, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

（17）Verba, Schlozman & Brady, *op.cit.*
（18）Jacobs & Skocpol, *op.cit.*
antagonize important electorates. But politicians and political parties often sacrifice the interests of politically inactive non-voters and are not interested in developing a comprehensive policy that serves the long-term interests of the entire electorate.

Thus, elections do not guarantee that all citizens influence the government equally. In most cases, special interest groups act contrary to popular wishes and exert greater influence on the government. This is partly due to the unequal participation and unequal campaign resources of the electorates.

Voting is certainly important, but so are other forms of participation in the policy making processes.

2) Interest Group Participation

Another important form of political participation is participation by groups. The most typical explanation of (urban) politics in the United States is based on the pluralist theory, which celebrated the role of groups in American politics. According to the pluralists, nobody with a strong interest in the policy-making process will find themselves completely isolated. All they have to do is form an interest group and assert their interests. Since the American political regime guarantees open and equal access to every interest group, all interest groups will receive some benefits in their specialized areas. If we follow the plural-

ists’ argument, poor people’s interests will be guaranteed as long as they form interest groups.

This argument, however, has at least two problems. First, interest groups cannot be formed as easily and equally as the pluralists assume. Since forming an interest group involves costs, the poor have more difficulties than businesses in organizing groups.

Second, contrary to the pluralists’ assumption, the political system in states and cities is biased. The most sophisticated argument on city politics from the structuralist perspective is Peterson’s city limits theory. Peterson clarifies the effects of federalism on American city politics and considers the maintenance and enhancement of the cities’ economic productivity as the responsibility of the local government. Since state and local governments have to secure their own revenue sources, economic prosperity is the basis of their well-being. Therefore, while political elites promote a developmental policy that enhances the economic position of the state and local governments, they hesitate to adopt a redistributive policy that benefits the poor but negatively affects the local economy. According to this theory, state and local governments will participate in “the race to the bottom” wherein both governments compete with other surrounding governments to offer the least generous welfare benefits.

As these two problems clarify, the inherent problem of interest group politics at the state and local levels is the lack of representative-


(22) Peterson, City Limits; Peterson & Rom, Welfare Magnets; Peterson, The Price of Federalism.
ness. Economically strong groups obtain narrow economic benefits at the expense of the broader population including poor families.

The problem of interest group politics becomes evident when we compare the old age pension and public assistance programs. The poverty rate among families with dependent children in the United States is twice as high as that in most other advanced industrial countries, while the poverty rate among seniors is about the same. While the old age insurance program is supported by many Americans, the public assistance program does not enjoy such a good reputation. In the old age insurance program, a retiree does not have to show that he/she needs coverage because of the insurance principle. On the other hand, programs for poor families with children are poorly funded and restrictively designed. The main public assistance program, TANF, is not indexed to changes in the cost of living. A low income family has to demonstrate that it has virtually no other means to secure the necessities of life.

The difference between the old age insurance programs and public assistance is partly explained by the differences in voter turnouts: while senior citizens vote more often than other American citizens, welfare recipients do not vote so often. However, the difference between the two programs can be explained better by the logic of interest group politics. More than 35 million people are members of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the largest interest group in the United States; the interests of the elderly are protected by the AARP and politi-

(23) Senior citizens are more likely to back up their votes with other political actions such as writing letters to politicians or contributing money to political parties. Cf., Campbell, Andrea Louise, How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
cal parties. However, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are committed to expanding the interests of the poor families because there is no association comparable to the scale of AARP. The problem of interest group politics is amplified by the logic of federalism that state and local governments hesitate to adopt redistributive policy (this problem does not occur to the federal contributory program of old age insurance).

Welfare recipients are not able to form interest groups to exercise direct political power, and depend on others who provide only limited help. If poor people grow in number to change politicians’ behavior, or if they can persuade a good part of society to help them, they may change the structure of poverty politics.

3) Social Movements and Litigation Politics

As is mentioned above, poor people’s needs cannot be satisfied within the framework of ordinary electoral politics. However, things can change when they increase in number and are mobilized by outsiders who are sympathetic to them.

Welfare rights movements in the 1960s provided poor people with an opportunity to achieve their interests. Stimulated by the civil rights movement and fueled by the federal War on Poverty program, Welfare Rights Organizations (WROs) emerged as organizations that attempted to influence the American welfare system. Columbia University social scien-


(甲南法学'09) 49-1・2-100（100）
tists Richard A. Cloward and Francis Fox Piven elaborated the core strategy of legally destroying the American welfare system by urging potential welfare recipients to demand legally mandated services and resources. According to Piven and Cloward, if WROs could double or triple the welfare rolls and secure legally mandated services, the state and local governments would be overburdened and would request federal governments to establish a national guaranteed minimum income policy.

George Wiley, an associate director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and spread the welfare rights movements nationwide based on the Piven and Cloward strategy. The NWRO mainly consisted of black women, almost all of whom were recipients of AFDC and had little opportunity to join the labor market, and by 1969, the NWRO claimed a dues-paying membership of 22,500 families with 523 chapters across the nation.

The welfare rights movement also employed a legal strategy. French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville observed more than 150 years ago that “there is hardly a political question in the United States which does not sooner or later turn into a judicial one,” and social welfare surely turned into a judicial problem in the 1960s. The poverty lawyers, the most influential of whom was Charles Reich, advocated that the state

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应该为弱势群体提供福利保障。虽然道德的话语是模糊的，而且在多元化社会中并不总是具有说服力，但权利似乎相对中立，并具有很高的地位。权利常常被用作一种道德牌（28）在政治讨论中作为一张王牌，正如Glendon所指出的那样。对于那些从未被政客在常规选举政治中听到的声音，诉讼可能是一种有效的政治策略来实现其目的。在1970年的Goldberg v. Kelly案中，最高法院裁定，只要一个人成为AFDC的合格受益人，并且至少当AFDC项目有效时，该人不应被剥夺福利，除非经过正当程序。这一案例发展了对社会福利政策中的保障概念。

由于政府无法将政治需求纳入考虑，使弱势群体的政治运动破坏了政治和社会稳定性。然而，尽管福利权利活动家的强烈努力，法院从未将公共福利视为美国宪法所保障的基本人权之一（29）。即使福利系统的州和城市几乎崩溃，如Piven和Cloward所预测的那样，州和地方政府都没有敦促联邦政府改革美国福利制度，而是决定削减福利支出。

随着福利权利运动的衰落，没有影响力的社会运动出现，使福利受益者受益。虽然残疾人通过诉讼获得了他们的法律权利，但福利受益者
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were not able to use courts effectively to advance their political agenda. Lacking a sense of political efficacy, poor people do not raise their voice but continue to rely on others who provide only limited help, such as liberal policy advocates or interest groups. Whether their issues would be enacted into law or not depended largely on the trends of public opinion.

4) Public Opinion

Public opinion is very important in democratic politics because people's opinion must translate into public policies. However, translating the results of public opinion polls directly into public policies is problematic, particularly because people react inconsistently toward politics.

Inconsistent attitudes toward public policies become apparent when politically “loaded” terms are used in the questionnaires. In case of the government spending on the poor, the problem is particularly apparent. For example, think about the following survey question.

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(31) The following opinion poll seems to have originally appeared in Tom Smith's article, but I have referenced the poll from Fiorina and Peterson's textbook. Smith, Tom, “Public Support for Public Spending, 1973–1994,” The Public Perspective 6 (1995), cited in Fiorina and Peterson, op.cit.
We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount.

Very interestingly, when the same people in the same poll were asked about “welfare” and “assistance to the poor,” very different reactions were observed.

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<th>Too little</th>
<th>About right</th>
<th>Too much</th>
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<td>Welfare</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistance to the poor</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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In most countries, “welfare” and “assistance to the poor” are used interchangeably. In the United States, however, “welfare” carries negative connotations but “assistance to the poor” does not.

The results of the poll show American people's delicate and inconsistent attitudes toward welfare, and we cannot, and should not, decide which poll results are accurate. But we can guess that conservatives will use the poll results of “welfare” to support their agenda to cut down public spending on the poor and that liberals will use the poll data of “assistance to the poor” and claim that welfare spending should increase.


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This example shows that governing based on public opinion polls is impossible and inappropriate. However, as following the results of public opinion polls appears democratic, most politicians try to control the narrative and manipulate the “social construction of target populations” of the public policy.

Today, in the United States, poverty agenda is inseparable from the moral and racial attitudes associated with it. Political scientist Martin Gilens shows that criticism of the American social welfare policy is backed up by the prejudice that most welfare recipients do not work primarily because they lack the work ethic. Contrary to this generally accepted idea, Gilens argues, that public opinion poll show that the American public consistently expresses a desire for more government effort to help the poor and is willing to pay more tax money if necessary. Americans, however, are very critical of particular types of social expenditure, particularly the AFDC program. The criticism of the welfare recipients is amplified by the racial stereotype that most welfare recipients are black and that blacks are less committed to the work ethic than other Americans.

Gilens discusses the serious problems in these public perceptions. For example, Americans overestimate the proportion of blacks among the poor. Even though blacks comprised only about 27% of all the poor people in 1995, the American public thinks that nearly half of the poor are black.

(35) Ibid.
According to Gilens, the prejudices that most welfare recipients are black and that blacks are lazy originated in times of slavery and are amplified by the biased media reports since the 1960s. Gilens examined photographs in three weekly journals, Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report from 1950 to 1995 and some TV news clips after 1968, and found that the proportion of blacks used in pictures depicting the poverty problem was much higher than the actual proportion of blacks among the poor. Gilens also found that in the recession of 1974–75 and 1982–83, the pictures of whites were generally used to represent the “deserving poor” such as the unemployed who were looking for jobs. On the contrary, pictures of the blacks were overwhelmingly used to represent the “undeserving poor” in the urban ghetto. Even though American journalists are said to be more liberal than the general public, they show surprising biases, considering that only 6% of all poor Americans are blacks living in urban ghettos. This biased selection, Gilens states, is a manifestation of subconscious racial stereotypes or “subtle racism.”

Thus, we can say that governing based on public opinion is inappropriate at least in social welfare policy. But conservative social critic Lawrence M. Mead claims that the recent reform of the American social welfare policy is a reflection of public opinion in the United States. Mead characterizes the direction of contemporary American social policy as “new paternalism.” New paternalism in public welfare is a way to direct and supervise the poor to reduce poverty and the problems caused by it. New paternalism requests that welfare recipients satisfy some behavioral requirements such as working or staying in school under

(36) Ibid.

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close supervision. New paternalism advocates emphasize a social contract, in which the welfare recipients are required to work or receive job training in order to receive public relief. Public relief would no longer be given as entitlement. Welfare recipients should be supervised so that they can acquire these values and live constructively. Thus, new paternalism is proactive and emphasizes enforcement more than traditional policies derived from the philosophy of entitlement.

The new paternalism social policy is implemented not arbitrarily but lawfully by governments and only adds obligation to the welfare benefits. Access to aid is determined on the basis of nondiscriminatory eligibility standards and behavioral rules decided publicly by legislature. Thus, new paternalism does not advocate changing the scale of governments

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In Europe, social democratic scholars emphasized citizenship to defend welfare states from conservative attacks. Citizenship is defined in terms of the rights and duties of a citizen. According to British philosopher T. H. Marshall, the development of social citizenship, particularly the aspect of rights, was regarded as self-evident under the economic prosperity after World War II.

However, in light of economic downturn and tight fiscal conditions in the 1980s, the discourse has changed. American social critics such as Lawrence Mead argue that most arguments on citizenship emphasize only the aspects of rights and deemphasize or ignore duty. American conservatives believed that the social citizenship discourse that deemphasizes the aspect of duty produced under-class people. These arguments are the historical background of the welfare reform of 1996.

but to redefining social welfare policy and the role of governments. This strategy may cut the social expenditure in the long term, but it is more costly than merely cutting access to aid or reducing benefits in the short term. We cannot entirely explain the adoption of new paternalism by budgetary concerns. Thus, according to Mead, “a better political explanation for paternalism is the power of public opinion. Paternalism appears to be the social policy that most Americans prefer, to judge from polls about welfare and poverty.”

Liberal social scientist David Ellwood also points out four basic tenets that underlie the philosophical and political rhetoric about poverty — autonomy of the individual, virtue of work, primacy of the family, and desire for and sense of community — and tried to design social policy that minimizes the contradictions between them. He proposed that the American welfare system would improve if services to the poor were expanded in scope and limited in duration. His idea was shared in some parts by Mead and was adopted by the Clinton Administration. In fact, Ellwood supported the direction of welfare reform at least in the beginning.

Due to space constrains, we cannot explain the entire policy making

(38) It is not easy to place this new paternalism in the traditional framework contrasting liberals and conservatives. New paternalism is conservative in that it uses public relief to transform the lifestyles of the poor for the purpose of social control rather than to improve their benefits or opportunities. At the same time, new paternalism has something in common with liberalism in that it regards welfare policy as given and requests the government to play important roles.


process of the 1996 welfare reform, but political actors including President Clinton, Congressmen and Senators, and Governors collaborated to ensure that the policy maximizes their possibility of reelection. In order to get the support of the electorate, politicians used public opinion polls to determine how best to frame their policy position and controlled the discourse. It is safe to conclude that the direction of welfare reform did not contradict public opinion.

IV. CONCLUSION

The report of the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy’s, namely, “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality,” concluded in 2004 that “progress toward realizing American ideals of democracy may have stalled — and in some arenas reversed” as a result of rising inequality. Inequality in the distribution of income is not a problem as long as everyone’s situation is improving or as long as there is individual opportunity and social mobility. However, inequality is now solidified by public policies that are made


(43) APSA Task force on Inequality and American Democracy, op.cit.; Cf., Jacobs & Skocpol, op.cit.


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democratically by politicians who are looking for reelection.

In a society where democracy in the procedural sense is established, political reform must be achieved through the elected officials in the first place. As this paper argues, however, political participation by voting and interest groups reflect the distribution of economic resources. While the rich participate in politics more than others and are well

(45) Cf., Hacker, Jacob S., Suzanne Mettler, & Dianne Pinderhughes, “Inequality and Public Policy,” in Jacobs & Skocpol, op.cit.

(46) In political science, there is a continuing debate on whether democracy is an institution or a movement. Of course, democracy should have both aspects; however, this paper emphasizes the importance of placing greater emphasis on the aspect of democracy being a political institution. Democracy is, after all, a type of polity, and every polity has to make some decision in the short term. Unless democracy is institutionalized and stabilized, democratic polity will not be able to make a legitimate and authoritative decision.

Samuel P. Huntington, who is famous for the “clash of civilization” thesis, is also known for his theory of democracy. His theory is often called the “excess of democracy” thesis. He emphasizes the importance of the institutionalization of democracy. Huntington argues that if political demands or political movements go beyond the desirable limits or institutional capacity, democratic polity will face a legitimation and governability crisis stemming from a loss of trust in the government. Therefore, he argues that institutional development should go beyond political participation. Further, he argues that some kind of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups are necessary and even desirable for the democratic operation of a democratic political system.

The dilemma of democracy is that some kind of apathy is necessary in democratic politics; however, a certain class of people is always passive as is argued in this paper. I am not sure if we should call this “the cost of democracy” but it is definitely a dilemma of democracy. Cfs., Huntington, Samuel P., “The United States,” in Crozier, Michel, Samuel P. Huntington, & Joji Watanuki, The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission, (New York: New York University Press, 1975); Huntington, Samuel P., Political Order in Changing Societies, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
organized to make their demands known to the government, the poor lack the skills, motivation, and networks to express their demands to the government. The privileged have an advantage in terms of controlling the political discourse and also get the support of the public opinion. Since government officials hear more often and more clearly from the privileged, policy makers are less likely to respond to the concerns of the unorganized poor. The “democratic” response of the government exacerbates the economic disparity in American society. Most Americans praised the ideal of democracy as a symbol to integrate society, but democracy is not a perfect political system to advance equality as is argued in this paper.

Is there any way to break the vicious cycle and establish a safety net for the poor? This question is beyond the scope of this paper, but simply advocating “more democracy” is not the proper solution. The United States is a diverse country and people have conflicting values. Since politicians have an electoral incentive to be elected and reelected, they each answer their own constituency and develop conflicting government programs and policies that represent the interests of their constituencies. As long as the political mechanism explained in this paper exists, simply demanding further democracy will probably complicate the reality and worsen the problems. To improve the economic situation of the poor, carefully crafted political strategy is necessary.

One possible answer to the question is correcting the misperceptions of the American people. Many Americans perceive poor people as “welfare poor” who receive cash payments from the government, but

(47) We can recall the famous remark by Winston Churchill that “democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried.”

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these individuals form only a part of the poor in the United States. Today, more and more Americans who have full-time, part-time, temporary, or in other types of jobs, fall below the poverty line. They need to make their situation known to the general public. If the poor can form a larger coalition seeking political advancement and persuade the public, they may be able to improve their economic and political situation. In a time of declining social capital, the first step to overcome the inequality must be taken by the poor themselves.


This paper emphasized the importance of changing the perception of the American people and suggested that the poor should form a larger coalition seeking political advancement. One of the problems of contemporary United States is that most people believe that the poor live in another world. In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls presupposed the existence of the “veil of ignorance” in the original position and justified distributive justice. Today, however, most people believe that the “veil of ignorance” has been torn apart. They think the poor live in a different world and that they do not have to redistribute money to the poor.

However, considering that many working people are forced to live below the poverty line, the assumption that the veil has been torn apart may not be accurate. Therefore, whether the poor people can be a part of a larger coalition depends on their ability to persuade other people and establish a “we-consciousness.”
