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THE NEW POLITICS OF THE WELFARE STATE? A CASE STUDY OF EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY PARTY POLITICS IN NORWAY

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Abstract

According to the literature on the ‘new politics of the welfare state’, party politics plays a minor role in welfare policy outputs today. In this article, we ask what the degree of politicisation is below the level of government. Focusing on two specific policy areas – pension reform and anti-poverty policy – and both substantive and procedural aspects of politicisation in the case of Norway, we identify party policies and map intra-party decision-making prior to the 2005 general election. We first conclude that neither policy area seemed to be strongly politicised, but nonetheless, there were limits to the ‘de-politicisation’ of welfare policy even in a consensual state like Norway. Hence, we show – or confirm – that counter-forces might exist between and within political parties in advanced industrial societies, yet to varying degrees across welfare policy fields.

Keywords: Norway; politicisation; party organisation; pension reform; poverty; welfare policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

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According to the growing literature on the ‘new politics of the welfare state’, party politics plays a minor role in welfare policy outputs today. It is widely argued that the field of welfare policy is weakly politicised, owing to the various demographic and economic challenges of the modern welfare state. In this article, we shed new light on the topic by focusing on extra-parliamentary party politics in one particular country: Norway. We set out to investigate the extent of the politicisation of policy positions and internal policy-making during the early 2000s, rather than measuring changes over time.

We start by briefly summarising the scholarly literature on the politics of welfare policy, and conclude that what happens *below* the macro-level of the state is still a largely moot point. The question is whether the alleged low degree of party politicisation in this field materialises between and within the parties as well. Next, we examine the concept of politicisation and how it can be understood and measured at lower levels of politics. After that, we present and discuss our general research design: an in-depth case study of Norwegian parties within the fields of pension reform and anti-poverty policy. We argue that Norway is an interesting case from a comparative perspective, not least as one of the major historical examples of extensive welfare states in Europe. Then, we describe and evaluate our data and research methods. The following empirical analysis first maps party policy positions and differences, and secondly, internal policy-making processes. In the final sections, we discuss our findings and their implications for future research.

2. POLITICAL PARTIES AND ‘THE NEW POLITICS OF THE WELFARE STATE’

In the literature on recent welfare policy reforms, Paul Pierson’s work is often the centre of attention. Usually summarised as the ‘new politics’ thesis, Pierson (1994 and 1998) has convincingly argued that politicians have been caught in the crossfire between increasing expectations of welfare services among the voters and an unavoidable need to curb increasing expenditure arising from demographic and economic developments. As a consequence, the politics of social policy today centres on the renegotiation, restructuring, and modernisation of the welfare state, rather than on its dismantling through extreme retrenchment (Pierson 2001). The argument also implies that a broad political consensus about welfare state reform has emerged, in the centre, between the *status quo* and radical retrenchment, among the defenders of the welfare state and the advocates of dismantling social protection (Pierson

1998: 553ff; see also Schludi 2005). Thus, the class-related partisan politics – emphasised by the traditional ‘power resources approach’ (Korpi 1983) – is less important for welfare policy-making than it used to be. Moreover, the partisan arena is not the only, or necessarily the most important, domain in which reform policy is developed today: the corporatist arena plays an equally important or larger role, according to the ‘new politics’ thesis (Pierson 1998: 556). Contrary to the general ‘partisan theory of policy-making’ (Keman 2006), it is argued that the role of parties as policymakers tends to be modest, and consequently, that the characteristics of government (composition and ideology) are not significant for public (reform) policy in this area.

Other studies, however, vary in their support for the new politics thesis (Green-Pedersen and Haverland 2002). Kittel and Obinger (2003) have found a weakening of partisan effects in a study of the development of social expenditure in 21 OECD countries. Based on an analysis of party positions and welfare policy implementation in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, Seeleib-Kaiser *et al.* (2008) have similarly concluded that Social Democratic aims and objectives, have moved closer to those of Christian Democrats, pushing the welfare state in a Liberal Communitarian direction. Others, however, nuance or question ‘the new politics thesis’. Some studies have found that traditional partisan politics remains central to welfare policy-making in an era of austerity, in line with the ‘power resources approach’. Based on an analysis of ‘welfare state regress’ in 18 countries, Korpi and Palme (2003) concluded that class-based partisan politics remains significant for retrenchment (see also Allan and Scruggs 2004). Likewise, Finseraas and Vernby (2011) found that partisan ideology has influenced changes in welfare state generosity in 18 OECD countries. Huber and Stephens (2001) provided qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding the importance of partisanship for the historical development of welfare states. They showed that Social Democratic and Christian Democratic cabinets tended to be significantly associated with an expansion of welfare activity in the 1960s, and to some extent in the 1970s. The relationship weakened in the 1980s and 1990s, but they also concluded that the Left and Centre-left opposed and mitigated retrenchment in the 1990s.

Others have argued that parties matter, but in different ways than those predicted by the ‘power resource approach’. Ross (2000) found that ‘the Left’, in some notable cases, has been more effective in bruising the welfare state than ‘the Right’. Finally, some studies have looked at the conditions for welfare state reforms. General party system configurations – like

the existence of strong market-liberal parties, the saliency of economic vs. socio-cultural issues, or bloc politics vs. party systems with pivotal centre parties – may affect policy-making (e.g. Green-Pedersen 2001; Kitschelt 2001). A few have also maintained that the relationship between political parties and trade unions matters (e.g. Anderson 2001). In other words, it is argued that partisanship remains significant in respect of public welfare policy, and the jury is still partly out as to whether other party (system) features also impact on the content and direction of public welfare policy.

In this article we do not aim to address this debate *per se*, but focus instead on extra-parliamentary party politics in light of the implications of the ‘new politics thesis’, both as regards policy positions/distances and the process of internal policy-making today. One issue is what parties do when adopting public policy in government; another is how they compete for votes by offering policy choices and how welfare reform policy is developed (or not) outside public office, independent of bureaucracy. Autonomous parties may react differently to similar general circumstances, and are capable of acting in response to the context. Factors like variation in primary goals (i.e. votes, office and policy (Strøm and Müller 1999)) might make parties differ, and thus matter, even when the external pressure for homogeneity is strong. Moreover, membership-based parties might need to anchor major policy decisions in their party organisations before negotiating in public office. Thus, the question to be addressed is: what is the degree of politicisation of welfare policy beyond the level of government? It is not given that the party level is weakly politicised, even if public policy is: possible counter forces to pressure for limited ‘politicisation’ might be found between and within the parties themselves in advanced industrial societies. Moreover, if parties are actually distinct, policy wise, at this point in time, and include their membership organisations in the making of general welfare reform policies, this would shed light on the above-mentioned findings at the macro level. Indeed, the studies supporting the ‘power resources approach’ do themselves make a significant or perhaps even a strong degree of politicisation at the party level more likely to exist.

To answer our research question (as far as the Norwegian case is concerned), one needs to identify individual parties’ policy positions (from left to right) on major welfare issues, and to assess the extent of policy differences between them (party distance). In addition, one has to map intra-party decision-making on these policy issues before any negotiations take place

between the parties. Below, the concept of politicised vs. depoliticised issues is further discussed and specified for empirical research.

3. THE POLITICISATION OF WELFARE PARTY POLICY: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

‘Politicisation’ deals with the process through which certain issues become objects of public contention and debate, and a politicised issue is, thus, by definition, a publicly contested one. Hence, if welfare policy-making were left to corporatist arrangements or to technocrats in the central administration, it would be considered a virtually depoliticised area. However, the literature on welfare state reforms does not imply that the field of welfare policy completely lacks ‘politics’, but that weak politicisation involves the limited impact of political parties on public policy. In what follows, we ask what the logic of the ‘new politics’ would imply beyond the macro level, in the extra-parliamentary party sphere. Even though we do not measure policy change over time, descriptions of the current ‘status quo’ public policy and traditional party policy differences will indirectly serve as key points of reference.

First, we would expect policy differences between the parties to be small. Major parties will advocate a moderate ‘middle position’ between the status quo and radical retrenchment, and not their traditional ideological positions on welfare reform issues. Moreover, party elites are likely to pay limited attention to reform issues in election manifestos and campaigns, as this is not an issue likely to mobilise voters. According to Pierson (1994; 1998), party competition over welfare policy is now about blame avoidance rather than credit seeking. Welfare cutbacks are necessary, but unpopular, and parties want to evade responsibility. As such, the welfare state literature largely echoes recent party literature: according to the so-called ‘cartelisation thesis’ globalisation has led to the convergence of parties’ economic policies (Blyth and Katz 2005). The result is, according to Katz and Mair (1995; 2009), the formation of party cartels among established parties. Together they limit the extent of party competition and vulnerability to public opinion, by downsizing voter expectations and excluding certain issues and political solutions from the public agenda (Blyth and Katz 2005). Unpopular welfare state reforms could be one such issue. That said, however, new (post-war) parties might exist in opposition to established parties on welfare policy (reform) issues, increasing the level of politicisation somewhat.

Second, if party elites are compelled to promote austerity on welfare issues due to structural constraints, they might well hesitate from involving the party organisation in policy-making, even though intra-party democracy formally exists. Such involvement could provide legitimacy to reform policies, as was the case in the era of the typical mass membership party (Duverger [1954] 1972), but could also hinder the party leadership in making unpopular decisions. Thus, in line with the de-emphasis of manifestos, party elites might prefer to control welfare policy-making completely – or simply to avoid it until after election day. In this sense, ‘depoliticised’ means that involvement in major policy decisions is limited to the party elite. This proposition is also in line with the general cartel party thesis, which states that representatives in public office gain power at the expense of the extra-parliamentary organisation (Katz and Mair 2002).¹

Hence, we see that the degree of politicisation both has a substantive and a process-oriented, or procedural, aspect. Whereas the first concerns both the individual party and the party system, the second is an intra-party dimension, including formal structures and actors. To study them empirically, we must both look at the parties’ policy statements and the processes through which policies are developed. Table 1 specifies possible aspects of the weak *vs.* strong politicisation continuum along each dimension. For the sake of simplicity, and to highlight the implications of the ‘new politics thesis’, only indicators of weak politicisation are included in the table.

Table 1. Indicators of weak politicisation of party policies and policy-making in welfare reform issues

¹ The procedural aspect is hitherto a largely neglected aspect of politicisation at the party level in the welfare state reform literature. Yet it is worth noting that Loxbo (2013) recently concluded that the leaders of the Swedish Social Democratic Party exercised *less* control over internal party debate and decision-making on pension reform in the 1990s than in the 1950s, in a recent in-depth empirical comparison of two policy-making processes.

<i>Weak substantive politicisation (individual party and inter-party)</i>	<i>Weak procedural politicisation (intra-party)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The policy differences between the major parties are marginal as regards the need for welfare state reform; they neither prefer status quo nor radical retrenchment ▪ The parties' welfare (reform) policies are not marked by traditional ideological positions along the left-right axis ▪ New significant (post-war) parties in opposition to a possible agreement between established parties in welfare policy (reform) issues do not exist ▪ Welfare (reform) issues do not constitute significant parts of election manifestos and campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual party activists and local party branches are not involved in intra-party discussions of welfare policy (reform) issues ▪ Their views are not systematically channelled to the party leadership through a representative or direct intra-party democracy ▪ 'Internal' interest groups, such as trade unionists in the case of leftist parties, are not involved in intra-party welfare (reform) policy-making ▪ Such policies are instead developed by the party leadership and its professional staff – or exclusively by the party group in Parliament/government

It is, of course, hard to tell exactly what the threshold for weak politicisation is, and the overall degree of politicisation will be assessed as a tentative, qualitative judgement. However, the various criteria will be further specified in due course. Regarding 'traditional positions in welfare issues', we assume, in line with the power resources thesis (Korpi 1983; Korpi and Palme 2003), that right-of-centre parties have typically criticised an extensive, redistributive welfare state, whereas left-of-centre parties have advocated this model (see also Budge *et al.* 2001).

4. GENERAL RESEARCH DESIGN

A general aim of this study is to link two separate strands of literature together: the literature on welfare state reforms and the literature on political parties. This attempt at breaking new ground calls for an in-depth study and we have, therefore, selected one country and one party system to explore as a start: Norway. To map the entire system of political parties and possible variation across policy areas, we concentrate on policies and policy-making in the early 2000s. The theoretically-grounded expectations to be explored empirically are formulated accordingly.

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We cannot generalise about other countries, but Norway is one of the major historical examples of extensive and universal welfare states, and thus an interesting case from a comparative perspective (Esping-Andersen 1990; Kuhnle 1983). Like other advanced industrial societies, the Norwegian state is facing a substantial increase in the proportion of the elderly compared to the proportion of the population in the work force. Even though the development of public welfare was based on a broad degree of political consensus in Norway, there was also significant party disagreement – for example, on the degree of universalism and the balance between redistribution and social insurance in the National Insurance System (Hatland 1992; Kuhnle 1983).

A possible objection is that Norway is particularly affluent due to its oil resources, and thus in a very different economic situation than most advanced welfare states. However, the oil fortune is not unlimited and it is widely argued that it must be shared with future generations. From a long-term perspective, Norway is faced with the same need to adapt its pension system to challenges created by the aging of the population. Also, this case study provides an opportunity to examine the role of parties in a multi-party system, including both a new left-wing party and a new right-wing party. As far as policy-making is concerned, Norwegian parties are historical examples of extra-parliamentary party organisations that have, in fact, developed policy – not just political principles and overall goals (Heidar and Saglie 2002). On the other hand, the Norwegian political system has – like other Nordic systems – often been described as ‘consensual’, due, among other things, to parliamentary standing committees and commissions of inquiry on major policy issues including both government and opposition parties (Arter 1999: 200ff).

Empirically, the study is limited to two specific policy fields. We study pension reform as a major example of an area where the external pressure for reform has been strong in all welfare states. If a low degree of party politicisation characterises the field of welfare policy, this is very likely to include pension reforms. One reason is the economic need for radical reform; another is the technical complexity of the matter. As Anderson (2001: 1085) points out, many citizens were simply unable to follow discussions on pension reform in Sweden.

If traditional ideology still generates party differences as regards the choice of pension model, different positions can also be expected concerning both the need for cuts and the system

architecture in Norway. In particular, right-of-centre parties will be inclined to cut expenditure and promote an insurance-based model, whereas left-of-centre parties will be more reluctant to accept the need for cuts and will advocate a redistributive system. The centrist position on the pension issue – which weak politicisation would imply – would be to enforce cuts in spending, but not radical ones, even if they are thought to be necessary.

To get a rough idea of whether a possible tendency of weak politicisation applies to welfare policies in general or is more limited, we contrast pension policy with anti-poverty policy. Some sectors may be less conducive than public pensions to the kind of strategic positioning Pierson describes. Clasen (2005: 188) argues that ‘welfare states as a whole are ill-suited for comparisons of reform dynamics since actors and institutional settings vary across welfare state programmes within a country’ (see also Anderson 2001). For example, the perceived need for budget cuts might differ across policy fields. Measures against poverty weigh less heavily on public budgets, and fighting poverty might well imply a need to spend more money.

Moreover, old-age pensions are universal, whereas only a small – and politically marginal – group is affected by anti-poverty measures. The conditions for highlighting party differences in elections may therefore be more favourable in the latter field. The pressure for less intra-party participation may also be weaker in the area of anti-poverty policy than in the area of pension reform. Whereas pension reform is a technically complex matter, the grassroots level of a party may more easily relate to many other welfare issues, including anti-poverty policies. To quote a former British Social Security Minister, ‘in the welfare field, the punter is the expert’ (Bochel and Defty 2007b: 305).

The political Left and the political Right have not been clearly polarised on anti-poverty policies in Norway, but structural explanations of poverty and universal welfare measures are traditionally most strongly associated with the Left. If the parties’ anti-poverty policies are characterised by weak politicisation, we would primarily expect leftist parties today to place more emphasis on individual responsibility to improve living conditions (the ‘workfare principle’) and selective welfare measures, at the expense of structural explanations and universalism (Villadsen 2007).

Hence, we do not only aim to compare different parties, but also to explore whether there are differences as regards party policy positions/differences and the intra-party policy-making process between different policy fields. In this way, we hope to respond to a widespread objection against the ‘new politics’ literature, namely that (too) little attention has been paid to differences between policy sectors (Green-Pedersen and Haverland 2002).

5. DATA AND METHODS

As indicated above, we do not aim to measure the extent of change over time, but whether parties approach the contemporary pattern of policy and policy-making as the ‘new politics’ thesis would suggest.

Our units of analysis are the seven largest Norwegian parties, with (almost) continuous representation in Parliament since the 1970s. The aim has been to map the parties’ policies and policy-making before the 2005 general elections. Norway was then governed by a centre-right minority coalition, including the Conservative Party, the Christian People’s Party and the Liberal Party. The centre-left opposition (which formed a coalition government after the 2005 election) consisted of the Centre Party, the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party. The final opposition party was the Progress Party. The Socialist Left Party and the Progress Party were the only parties without any previous government experience before the 2005 elections. They were founded in the 1960s and 1970s on the left and the right, respectively, in opposition to the establishment. However, although all parties are important to the party system as a whole, most attention will be paid to the Conservative and Labour positions, as these are the traditional antagonists along the right-left axis.

Data from the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) are often used to map policy positions, and an example of a key issue that is used to measure left-right positions is welfare state expansion vs. limitation (see Budge *et al.* 2001). The data set has also been used in studies of how the welfare policies of Nordic political parties have developed since the 1970s (Nygård 2006; see details below). However, while useful for comparisons over time and across countries, the broad categories used in these data cannot be used to describe differences between welfare policy fields. To map both substantive and procedural party politicisation of pension and anti-poverty policies, we instead chose a qualitative design.

We used two types of sources and data in this study: statements from various party documents and interviews with key informants. Moreover, one of the authors observed the 2005 national party congresses of all seven parties,² which provided valuable background information on both aspects. Newspaper articles and the speeches of party leaders were used for illustrative purposes.

The most authoritative accounts of parties' welfare policy positions are the relevant parts of the party programmes or manifestos. Norwegian parties adopt new programmes before each general election, which are held every four years. These are detailed policy documents, and thus more comprehensive than their counterparts in most other Western European countries (Green-Pedersen 2007). Norway has no constitutional provision for the early dissolution of Parliament, and this predictability facilitates comprehensive manifesto development, often starting a couple of years prior to the election.

The Labour government appointed a Pension Commission with representatives from all parties to discuss and propose pension reforms in 2001. As party policies in 2005 could be – and turned out to be – strongly affected by party positions in this Commission, a few government reports and white papers on pension reform have been included in our analysis. Moreover, to deepen our knowledge of the final policy statements, we have followed the entire path to the party programme by examining the manifesto drafts, proposed changes (put forward before the congress by local or regional branches, parliamentarians, youth organisations, the executive committee etc., or at the congress by the editorial committee), in addition to the final product. Manifestos have been supplemented with congress resolutions, when parties chose to include only short statements on pension reform in their manifestos. Our interviews (described below) provide supplementary information, and also indicate that other documents were relevant in a few cases – like resolutions adopted by the party's national council.³ As regards the content of parties' campaign efforts, we rely on previous research on the role of welfare issues in the 2005 election campaign (Karlsen 2009).

² *Centre Party*, Kristiansand 10–13 March; *Socialist Left Party*, Kristiansand 31 March–3 April; *Labour Party*, Oslo 7–10 April; *Liberal Party*, Molde 15–17 April; *Christian People's Party*, Tønsberg 21–24 April; *Conservative Party*, Oslo 6–8 May; *Progress Party*, Ålesund 20–22 May.

³ Due to space constraints, the titles of the numerous party documents are not listed here.

A broad range of sources – and ‘process tracing’ – has also been used to analyse ‘procedural politicisation’ (cf. Table 1 above). Following the development of policy documents from the Pension Commission, via manifesto drafts to the final statements, was, in itself, useful. The parties’ annual reports also provide valuable procedural information, and have thus been used as well. However, most importantly, we carried out qualitative interviews with the secretaries of the committees that prepared the 2005–2009 Manifestos in all the seven parties. These were all political advisers at national party headquarters, selected on the basis of their formal position, and interviewed as representatives of the party as a whole. Because the Socialist Left Party and the Progress Party dissented from the majority recommendations of the Pension Commission, we also interviewed these two parties’ representatives on the Commission.⁴ The elite interviews were semi-structured and based on a fairly detailed, fixed list of open-ended questions, with room for individual follow-up questions when relevant. Summaries of conducted interviews were sent to, and approved by, all interviewees.

As for data analysis, beyond summarising organisational facts, we have classified manifest policy statements into pre-defined categories after reading documents and interview reports. The content, however, has not been coded. Reflecting our multiple source approach, major tendencies are summarised verbally as detailed descriptions, with document and interview references and a few quotes to illustrate typical statements. The empirical analysis is divided into two main parts: an analysis of substantive and procedural politicisation, i.e. policy positions and ways of policy-making. Due to the nature of the policy-making process, the descriptions are first made chronologically: we do not apply the analytical dimensions and indicators listed in Table 1 explicitly until the final discussion of findings. Put differently: the study is theory-informed, but not designed as a rigorous test, as we have also, in a more explorative way, aimed to describe policy-making *as a process*.

6. SUBSTANTIVE POLITICISATION: MAPPING OF POLICY POSITIONS AND DISTANCE

⁴ Two of the authors interviewed Political Adviser, Tor Brostigen (Socialist Left Party, 9.11.05); Deputy Leader, Henriette Westhrin (Socialist Left Party, 13.12.05); Political Adviser, Snorre Wikstrøm (Labour Party, 15.11.05), Assistant General Secretary, Oddvar Igland (Centre Party, 9.12.05); Political Adviser, Alf Rose Sørugaarden (Christian People’s Party, 30.11.05); Political Adviser, Geir Olsen (Liberal Party, 8.12.05); former Political Adviser, Egil Dahl (Conservative Party, 17.2.06); Political Adviser, Ronny Røste (Progress Party, 14.2.06); and Political Adviser, Inger Marie Ytterhorn (Progress Party, 7.3.06).

In this section we map party positions and differences in the 2005 election manifestos and other policy documents, within our two selected fields of policy. Do party positions vary significantly, along traditional ideological lines, or not? The ‘new politics’ thesis predicts marginal welfare policy differences between the parties, at least in the case of pension reform. A study of *welfare policy positions* in the Nordic countries from 1970 to the early 2000s, based on data from the MRG Project, indicates that Norwegian parties still differ from each other. The Left remains the foremost defender of a strong welfare state, whereas the Right, to a greater extent, promotes market-type solutions (Nygård 2006). Is this also the case for particular policy sectors? We first examine pension policies, and second, policies for combating poverty. In each case, we start by presenting the backdrop to the parties’ policy positions in 2005: the public policies and the agenda of public debate in Norway at that time.

6.1. Party Positions and Differences: Pension Reform

The old-age pension system is the cornerstone of the Norwegian National Insurance System, which consists of a first tier of universal flat-rate benefits and a second tier of earnings-related benefits. The System is financed according to the pay-as-you-go principle, and the future financial position of the scheme has been a concern of successive governments for the last three decades. Recently, the Norwegian debate on pension reform has centred around two main issues, both echoing the literature on retrenchment. First, financial sustainability: is there a need for a reform that limits future expenditure? Second, the distribution of benefits: should the system move towards a more insurance-based model, or maintain its rather strong redistributive profile (Pedersen 2005)?

We begin the assessment of party positions in 2005 by looking at the Pension Commission’s report (NOU 2004:1), as this became the basis for all the parties’ manifesto statements on pensions. The Commission was appointed to ‘clarify the main objectives of and principles for the overall pension system’ (NOU 2004:1, p. 38). All parties represented in Parliament accepted the invitation to participate in the Commission, along with some independent experts.

When the Commission’s report was published in January 2004, all parties except the Progress Party concluded that it was necessary to reduce future pension expenditure, and all parties except the Socialist Left and Progress Party supported a closer link between contributions and

benefits. The Socialist Left Party developed an alternative proposition, which also reduced future expenditure, but with a stronger element of redistribution. The Progress Party, on the other hand, proposed a universal flat-rate benefit system – which the party’s manifestos have promoted since 1975 (Opsahl 2007: 12–13). Thus, old parties tended to agree, whereas both new parties dissented from the majority position to a greater or lesser extent. The rightist Progress Party’s somewhat surprising position relates to the fact that the party advocates spending a larger share of the oil revenues than other parties do.

Most parties presented their pension reform policies in detail in their manifestos or in a comprehensive resolution adopted by the party congress. However, as the conventions took place before the negotiations on a parliamentary settlement were completed in May 2005, the policy statements in the manifestos or congress resolutions were made relatively vague. As for the content, the five parties that agreed on the need for reform in the Pension Commission maintained this position in their manifestos and resolutions, but traditional party positions regarding redistribution were to a greater extent recognisable here. The Conservatives strongly advocated reforms to make the system more economically sustainable and a closer connection between individual contributions and the size of the pension,⁵ whereas the Pension Commission’s report was much disputed within the Labour Party. Critics within the Party argued that the Commission had proposed a model that worked to the disadvantage of low-income groups (see Pedersen 2009: 136–7). The party debate revolved around two conflicting principles – redistribution *vs.* rewarding work effort – and both principles were eventually endorsed in the manifesto.⁶

The internal debate became even more heated in the Socialist Left Party, and led the party to reject a cost-cutting reform:

The Socialist Left Party disagrees with the view that there is a need for cuts in the National Insurance System, because nobody knows what the situation will be in ten or twenty years. The Socialist Left Party proposes that Parliament should review the financial situation of the

⁵ ‘Nye muligheter. Høyres stortingsvalgprogram 2005–2009’. (‘New opportunities. The Conservative Party’s manifesto 2005-2009’) Adopted by the Conservative Party’s congress, Oslo, 6–8.5 2005, 102. However, it could also be argued that the Conservatives had toned down the previous manifesto’s emphasis on market-based elements in the pension system (see the Conservative Party’s manifesto for 2001–2005, section 7.20, downloaded from www.hoyre.no).

⁶ ‘Ny solidaritet. Arbeiderpartiets program 2005–2009’. (‘New solidarity. The Labour Party’s manifesto 2005-2009’). Adopted by the Labour Party’s congress, Oslo, 7–10.4 2005, 41–43.

National Insurance System, for example, every tenth year. The alternative to future cuts may be an increase in social insurance contributions.⁷

In May 2005 all major Norwegian parties, except for the Progress Party and the Socialist Left Party, formed a parliamentary settlement on pension reform (Pedersen 2009). In this way, pension reform was excluded as an issue from the forthcoming election campaign by the old parties. However, the two new parties which opted out of the settlement used their 2005 party congresses to raise pensions as a campaign issue before the general election in September 2005. The Progress Party Deputy Leader, Siv Jensen, described the recent parliamentary settlement in this way:

Through the pension settlement, the government parties, the Centre Party and the Labour Party are taking pensions away from people. Now it has been agreed that pensioners will be robbed This is being done to cut public expenditure.⁸

Likewise, the Socialist Left Party leader, Kristin Halvorsen, stated that ‘if the government parties and the parliamentary majority enforce unjust cuts at this point, we promise a replay after the election!’⁹ However, she eventually had to consider the trade-off between campaigning against pension reform and the party’s credibility as a partner in a government coalition with two pro-reform parties. The ‘replay’ was cancelled, and neither the Socialist Left Party nor the Progress Party actually used pensions as a campaign issue (Karlsen 2009).

6.2. Party Positions and Differences: Anti-Poverty

Norwegian local authorities provide social assistance to persons in need of urgent income support, and to those who are not entitled to benefits from the National Insurance System. Social assistance is means-tested, and the level of support varies between municipalities. National standardisation of benefits has been a recurring issue, but two other issues within the poverty field were equally central during the early 2000s: the balance between work and benefits and the choice between selective and universal measures. In Norway, as in many

⁷ ‘Et rettferdig pensjonssystem’ (A fair pension system)... Resolution adopted by the Socialist Left Party’s congress, Kristiansand, 31.3–3.4 2005.

⁸ Main points from Siv Jensen’s speech to the Progress Party’s congress, Ålesund, 20–22.5.2005, reported at www.frp.no. See also *VG Nett*, 20.5.2005

⁹ Kristin Halvorsen’s speech to the Socialist Left Party’s congress, Kristiansand, 31.3–3.4.2005.

other countries, demands on welfare recipients have become more widespread in recent years. The question is to what extent work and activity should be a condition for the payment of benefits – so-called ‘workfare’ (Lødemel and Trickey 2001).

What were the Norwegian parties’ policy positions on these issues in 2005? All parties paid significant attention to poverty in their manifestos, but under different headings. Some parties emphasised the concept of poverty, whereas others discussed the same policy measures in terms of other principles, e.g. redistribution or the standard of living. For example, ‘nobody should live in poverty’ was one of the headlines in the Socialist Left Party manifesto, while the Conservative Party manifesto only used the word ‘poverty’ when describing global challenges.¹⁰ Regardless of the parties’ use of concepts, we focus on the extent to which traditional patterns appeared regarding views on the causes of poverty and on the choice of selective *vs.* universal measures.

First, it should be noted that there was broad agreement – among both old and new parties – on emphasising that employment is the most important way to combat poverty – perhaps most clearly articulated by the Conservatives and the Labour Party. True, our interviews show that the Conservative Party spoke for the more liberal regulation of temporary employment, in order to ease access to the labour market, whereas the Labour Party introduced ‘welfare contracts’ (between clients and the social security office) to encourage social assistance recipients to find employment.¹¹ But in both cases, the poor were supposed to assume responsibility for improving the situation themselves. Thus, the Old Left did not articulate the traditional structural view on poverty, and the new Socialist Left clearly did not oppose this cross-party agreement.

However, both leftist parties still preferred universal measures. The centre–right Bondevik II government, in contrast, emphasised the need for ‘targeted’ (i.e. selective) social policy measures, to reach those who needed it most. Yet our interviews indicated some

¹⁰ ‘Ulike mennesker. Like muligheter. SVs arbeidsprogram 2005–2009’. (‘Different individuals. Equal opportunities. The Socialist Left Party’s manifesto 2005–2009’). Adopted by the Socialist Left Party’s congress, Kristiansand, 31.3–3.4 2005, p.7; ‘Nye muligheter. Høyres stortingsvalgprogram 2005–2009’. (‘New opportunities. The Conservative Party’s manifesto 2005–2009’). Adopted by the Conservative Party’s congress, Oslo, 6–8.5 2005.

¹¹ Interviews with former Political Adviser, Egil Dahl, 17.2.06; and Political Adviser, Snorre Wikstrøm, 15.11.05.

disagreement among and within the coalition parties. In the Conservative Party, targeting was said to be in line with century-old Conservative policies, while there was some unease about this development in the Christian People's Party – where policies used to be anchored in universalism.¹² The Liberal Party argued strongly in favour of targeting. The following statement from the party leader's speech to the Liberal Party congress illustrates this point:

Cheap rhetoric about tax cuts for the rich has never helped those who are left behind. Nor have general welfare measures for everybody. The Liberal Party's targeted measures for those who need public support most, will do so...The Liberal Party will give priority to those who need it most, instead of spreading new welfare benefits thinly. For the Liberal Party, the aim is not to improve conditions for the entire working class, but to take care of individuals who have been unfortunate at different stages in life.¹³

In accordance with this emphasis on targeting, the Liberals proposed, among other things, means-testing child allowances. On the other hand, the Liberals were the only party to endorse the idea of basic income.¹⁴ This is a universal benefit, and the concept 'income' implies that the benefits must be above a minimal level. When it came to concrete measures against poverty, the Liberal manifesto and website, as well as our interview, indicated that the party was at odds with itself.

Finally, it should be noted that poverty made up not only a significant part of all manifestos, but was also a campaign issue of three parties in 2005: the Socialist Left, the Liberals, and the Christian People's Party – even though poverty issues ranked low on the voters' policy agendas (Karlsen 2009).

7. PROCEDURAL POLITICISATION: EXPLORING THE DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT FROM BELOW

We can now turn to the procedural aspect of politicisation: to what extent was there involvement from 'below' in the party in the making of the 2005 party programmes and other

¹² Interviews with former Political Adviser, Egil Dahl, 17.2.06; and Political Adviser, Alf Rose Sørsgaarden, 30.11.05.

¹³ Party leader Lars Sponheim's speech at the Liberal Party's congress, Molde, 15–17.4.2005.

¹⁴ 'Mer frihet. Mer ansvar. Et sosialliberalt reformprogram for stortingsperioden 2005–2009'. ('More freedom. More responsibility. A social liberal reform program for 2005–2009'). Manifesto adopted by the Liberal Party's congress, Molde, 15–17.4.2005, p 58–59 and 53–54.

policy documents? First, however, a few words are needed on the general process of manifesto development.

All Norwegian parties appoint a manifesto committee, usually headed by a member of the party leadership. The committees write drafts that are sent to all local branches, which may submit proposals for changes. A revised draft is then circulated throughout the party organisation, before it is presented to the national party congress. Among the congress documents, the delegates (except for the Progress Party) also get a booklet setting out proposed changes from local branches and other party organs. During the congress, an ‘editorial committee’ is responsible for further revisions and recommendations from the delegates, before the congress votes. In the description below, we follow the development of policies on pension and poverty through this process – before and during the congresses.

7.1. Party Debate before the Congresses

Many positions from the 2001 manifestos were repeated in 2005, but that was not the case for poverty and pension. Poverty had become a debated issue after the 2001 election. It was generally assumed in Norwegian public debate and in the media that more money should be spent on fighting poverty (Bay and Stang 2009). Most parties – and especially Labour – had been accused of lacking policies on this issue and they aimed to update their manifestos in this area. In fact, Labour appointed an internal party committee on ‘social justice’ after losing the 2001 election. The idea of ‘welfare contracts’, which became a central part of the manifesto process, was originally launched by this committee.¹⁵ Moreover, between 2001 and 2005, the Ministry of Social Affairs was governed first by the Conservatives and later by the Christian People’s Party. The policy-making of this Ministry became influential when these two parties subsequently presented their policies on poverty in their manifestos. Indeed, the Centre Party interviewee stated that the party had less need for policy development in this field, because so much work had been done by its previous Minister of Social Affairs (1997–2000).¹⁶ That said, all parties included the poverty issue in their characteristically inclusive manifesto-making process prior to the 2005 elections.

¹⁵ Interview with Political Adviser, Snorre Wikstrøm, 15.11.05.

¹⁶ Interview with Assistant General Secretary, Oddvar Iglund, 9.12.05.

The parties also needed new policies on pensions, owing to the pension reform. However, most of the manifesto discussions took place after the Pension Commission presented its report in January 2004. This limited the freedom of the party organisation in the manifesto-making process, although some parties coordinated the two processes by means of personnel overlap. A party could not easily revoke its position in the Commission, despite internal disagreements. The party leaderships aimed to provide negotiators with some flexibility in the upcoming deliberations in Parliament by limiting the level of detail in the manifesto.

Pension reform was originally not an issue that aroused the interest of many party members. It was characterised as a ‘sport for the experienced’ in some of our interviews. Several parties found it necessary to educate their members, and the objective seemed to be to build the perception that reform was needed. For example, the Labour Party published a booklet on pension reform as part of the internal manifesto debate. The main topic discussed was how the reform should be designed, rather than whether reform was necessary.¹⁷

However, some groups within the parties got heavily involved in detailed aspects of the reform. Several parties’ women’s organisations were concerned with how the reform would affect women. A major issue was the choice between a lifetime accrual of pension rights and a 20-best-year rule. For example, the Christian People’s Party Women wanted to keep the 20-best-year-rule – contrary to the position of the main party organisation and the Pension Commission.¹⁸

The Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and individual LO members played central roles *within* the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party. The partnership between the Labour Party and LO has traditionally been strong, and continued to be strong during the 2000s (Allern 2010). It was crucial for the Labour Party to avoid disagreement with LO in the pension debate. The LO Chair, Gerd-Liv Valla, was a member of Labour’s manifesto committee. According to newspaper reports, she and Labour Leader, Jens Stoltenberg, had

¹⁷ Trygg og rettferdig pensjonsordning? Et debatthefte om Pensjonskomisjonens forslag og fremtidens pensjonssystem. (‘A robust and fair pension system? A discussion booklet on the proposals of the Pension Commission and the future pension system’). Labour Party, 2004.

¹⁸ Forslag nr 73, i ‘Endringsforslag til politisk program 2005–2009’. (Proposal no. 73, in ‘Amendments to the 2005–2009 manifesto’). Document for the Christian People’s Party’s congress, Tønsberg, 21.–24.4.2005.

numerous informal talks on the pension reform.¹⁹ The Leader of the Transport Workers' Union was a key player in the pension debate in the Socialist Left Party. Among other things, he headed the editorial committee at a decisive National Council meeting.²⁰ LO's influence was nevertheless limited by conflicts between individual LO unions. Blue-collar unions disagreed with white-collar and public sector unions, and their representatives brought these disagreements into both the Labour Party and Socialist Left Party.

Those who opposed pension reform entered the debate late, but resistance grew stronger in some parties. The protest was especially pronounced in the Socialist Left Party, where the anti-reform arguments entered into a broader ideological frame – the fight against the idea that 'there is no alternative'.²¹ This led the Socialist Left Party's National Council to abandon the party's position on the Pension Commission in February 2005 – a decision that was confirmed by the party congress in April.

7.2. The Party Congresses

Several issues relating to poverty and pensions were controversial during the congress, such as basic income as an anti-poverty measure or 20-best-year rule *versus* accrual of pension rights over a lifetime. In several cases, substantial changes were made at the congress. However, these changes often took place through compromises behind closed doors in the editorial committee – not through voting. For instance, the Liberal Party congress abandoned the manifesto committee's position against mandatory occupational pensions – in line with the recommendation of the editorial committee.

But even though the 2005 party manifestos were adopted after an inclusive and relatively democratic procedure, the final policy decisions were yet to be made, in particular regarding pension reform. In the Progress Party the manifesto described a universal flat-rate benefit model, but the Deputy Leader, Siv Jensen, later had to admit that 'our primary model is politically stone dead, and we have to deal with the map everybody else is dealing with'.²² The party had to take a stand on different concrete reform proposals. As the manifesto

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Aftenposten* 12.3.2004, *Dagsavisen* 12.16.2004.

²⁰ *Klassekampen* 14.2.2005.

²¹ Interview with Political Adviser, Tor Brostigen, 9.11.05.

²² *Klassekampen* 28.4.2005.

provided no guidelines, the party's positions were in practice developed by the parliamentary party group.

8. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

We will now summarise and discuss the findings above by referring to each of the indicators listed in Table 1 in turn. To what extent was the extra-parliamentary politics of pension reform and anti-poverty policy politicised during the early 2000s in Norway?

Regarding substantive politicisation, in terms of policy differences *vs.* consensus and ideological positions, the policy documents and the interviews point to a broad, pragmatic agreement between the five 'old' parties on the need for an economically sustainable pension system, and thus cost-saving reform. However, this broad agreement – which brought about the Pension Commission – cracked when parties discussed the design of the new system. Disagreements both between and within parties were rooted in traditional party ideology, and significant policy differences were evident, as far as specific measures were concerned, between Left and Right. Parties on the Left were more concerned with redistribution, whereas the Conservatives emphasised that work should pay. The leadership of the Labour Party, for example, was pushed by party members, LO and the Socialist Left Party to propose a more redistributive system than the Pension Commission's proposal, whereas the Conservatives consistently defended the connection between contributions and benefits.

Moreover, both the two new parties on the left and right – the Socialist Left and the Progress Party – rejected the need for cost-savings. Finally, as far as attention paid to the policy issues was concerned, we may conclude that all parties had significant presentations of pension policies in their manifestos and other policy documents adopted by the party congresses, but that the parliamentary settlement of May 2005 removed pensions from the agenda of the *Storting* election campaign later that year.

As regards poverty, there was broad agreement among both old and new parties on the importance of incentives to seek employment. Even the Labour Party emphasised individual responsibility for poverty ('workfare') rather than traditional public expenditure to fight poverty – and the new Socialist Left party did not clearly dissent. However, we might have underestimated an old social democratic norm: that 'everybody must contribute their share'

(Terum 1996). Thus, it could be argued that the workfare principle partly reflects a historical tradition in the Norwegian Labour Party. In any case, left–right polarisation was clearly present in party positions on universal *vs.* selective measures. The Right (the Conservatives and the Progress Party) was more supportive of non-selective measures than the parties on the Left. The Centre–Right parties (the Liberals and the Christian People’s Party) supported the government’s targeting policy, but were either somewhat uneasy about it or rather contradictory. Finally, we have seen that party programmes included comprehensive presentations of anti-poverty policies, and three of the seven parties studied here chose the ‘fight against poverty’ as one of their key campaign issues before the 2005 general elections.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the substantial politicisation of pension policies is closer to the weak end of the weak–strong continuum. Two indicators clearly point in the direction of weakness: the uniform lack of campaigning and the centrist agreement among old parties on significant cuts in spending. This was, however, moderated by traditional conflicts regarding system architecture, and the fact that new parties developed their own policies. The findings for poverty policy are (more) mixed, as the results partly differed between the sub-fields of workfare and selective measures. A centrist agreement on individual responsibility points in the direction of weak politicisation, whereas traditional left-right conflicts in respect of selective *vs.* universal measures and a general lack of focus on budget cuts point in the opposite direction. Moreover, the poverty issue was included in both party manifestos and election campaigns. Hence, the degree of substantial politicisation seems stronger here than in the case of pension policies.

Turning to procedural politicisation, we have shown that all parties used an inclusive procedure to adopt the party programme in general. Party organisations were involved in an extensive manifesto process (even if one may question the real influence of the activist level) in all cases. Drafts were discussed in local party branches, before the final decision was made by the representative party congress based on both the draft and proposals from the local level. Moreover, ‘internal’ interest groups, especially the trade unions in leftist parties, were strongly involved in the process. Taken together, at first glance, all four indicators testify to strong procedural politicisation.

However, the parties in government relied on new poverty policies developed in office, and pension reform in particular exemplifies the limitations to the formal intra-party democracy

in times of major reforms. In practice, the party leadership and professional staff became predominant in the latter case. The timing of the manifesto process – after the Pension Commission – did not fit into the internal routines described above, and the technical nature of the issue did not encourage activity. Instead it created a need for expertise, favouring the civil service and independent experts. Hence, a closer scrutiny reveals that the pension policy was only moderately ‘procedurally politicised’.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on a detailed description of party policy positions and policy-making processes, we may conclude that pension reform was not strongly politicised – either substantially or procedurally – in the early 2000s in Norway. Major parties did advocate a moderate ‘middle position’ between the *status quo* and radical retrenchment, and the concern for cost-saving influenced the political debate and the repertoire of measures discussed in most parties. The party leadership and professional staff became predominant in the policy-making process outside Parliament. In this sense, the Norwegian core example of ‘retrenchment policies’ at the party (system) level was in line with the expectation based on the ‘the new politics thesis’.

However, we have also seen that some substantial aspects indicate strong politicisation – like opposition from new parties (who do not or only modestly share a concern for future expenditure) and disagreement on the design of the pension system based on traditional ideological positions. Moreover, the case of anti-poverty policy was included to examine whether the implication of the ‘new politics thesis’ might apply to different fields of welfare policy. This sector matched the pattern of ‘weak politicisation’ at the party level to an even lesser extent, mainly due to traditional left-right policy disagreement and significant involvement from below within parties. If we also consider the fact that there is a tradition of cross-party compromises in Parliament in the case of major reforms (whether or not they are cuts-oriented) in Norway, the more elitist process observed during the pension reform process could be due more to the timing of the party congresses than to pressure for retrenchment. Whatever the case may be, the extra-parliamentary politics of welfare policies studied here seem neither strongly nor weakly politicised – rather, something in between.

What are the implications of these findings? Our synchronous data do not allow any analysis of how party positions or processes develop over time. We have looked into these issues on the basis of an in-depth study of the contemporary situation, using historical party policy differences and party organisational traditions only as indirect points of reference. From this angle, patterns that are not clearly consistent with the implications of the new politics thesis are revealed. Above all, we find that, despite indications of weak politicisation, significant and ideologically rooted policy differences on welfare issues still exist in the new millennium in Norway. Moreover, party activists and interest groups appear, to some extent, to be consulted on major welfare policy issues, and party organisations do still provide an arena for popular involvement. In sum, significant counter forces to the structural pressure for welfare (reform) policy convergence or homogeneity – described or implied by the new politics thesis – seem to exist between and within the parties themselves, even in a consensual state with a strong tradition for cross-party compromises. The study also reminds us that parties are complex collective political actors, not only constrained by the electoral market, but also by ideological legacies and formally democratic membership organisations outside the parliamentary sphere. Consequently, adopting less generous and different welfare policies probably involves some internal costs for party elites, in terms of resistance to the membership organisation if activists have a say. Moreover, our findings suggest that significant differences do exist between policy fields.

An interesting avenue for future research could be to explore the extent to which there are significant differences between policy tools and fundamental policy goals within different areas, what Hall (1993) has conceptualised as ‘policy instruments vs. paradigms’. The pension reform debate illustrates that there might be agreement on general (yet quite specific) policy aims (on cost-saving reforms), but disagreement on the policy tools for reaching this objective (on the detailed system design), rooted in disagreement on more fundamental party goals (such as the degree of redistribution). Yet we also see that the distinctions between them are not necessarily watertight: some policy instruments, such as National Insurance, may acquire a symbolic value for political parties – and become goals in themselves.

Of course we cannot generalise beyond Norway, but to what extent can we expect to find similar results in other countries? Norway is a major historical example of an extensive, universal welfare state. The extent of substantial politicisation of pension reform policies at the party level may not only be due to the existence of new Left and Right parties, but also to

the favourable state of the Norwegian oil economy. A more ‘centrist’ and ‘cartel-like’ pension reform may require a common perception of a more genuine crisis. The broad party consensus on workfare is, however, not peculiar to Norway. Several European countries, as well as the EU, focus on employment as a means of combating poverty and social exclusion. Bochel and Defty’s (2007a and b) study, for instance, points to a growing support for such measures among British MPs.

Regarding procedural politicisation, Norwegian political institutions may be conducive to both strong and weak politicisation. For example, the fact that Norway has no constitutional provision for the early dissolution of Parliament makes the manifesto-making of parties (outside Parliament) more comprehensive and relevant than in other parties. This could partly explain the revealed degree of involvement from below as it nurtures the tradition of intra-party democracy. On the other hand, the typical Norwegian – or Scandinavian – solution of establishing a reform-preparing committee including both government and opposition makes strong procedural politicisation less likely to exist here, though on a different basis than assumed by the ‘new politics thesis’.

Whatever the case may be, future comparative studies of welfare policies and policy-making of parties should try to control for such institutional differences. This case study suggests that a possible avenue for studies of welfare policy at the level of government is not only to explore the impact of party system features and variation across policy fields, but also the possible significance of different types of party organisations involved in policy-making. Many parties might be willing to promote welfare reduction, although perhaps to different degrees, depending on both their original policy and their prioritisation of the goal of policy-maximisation relative to access to office in cases of trade-offs. Moreover, strong intra-party democracy in terms of leadership accountability often means emphasis on core policies (Strøm and Müller 1999: 18). Thus, the enduring significance of partisanship revealed by recent macro-level studies might also be explained by what happens at the party level.

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