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## Bring Back the WPA: Work, Relief, and the Origins of American Social Policy in Welfare Reform\*

When people think of the origins of American social policy, they usually think of the 1935 Social Security Act, part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's second New Deal. That legislation created both old-age insurance, now commonly known as social security, and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), recently known as welfare. Though central to today's social policy, these programs were somewhat marginal to New Deal social policy because they dealt with special categories of "unemployable" citizens. The key concern of New Deal social policymakers was instead with those deemed "employable," and their problems were addressed mainly by another and much less studied program from the second New Deal: the "Works Program" operated mainly by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The lack of attention to the WPA has had important consequences for understandings of American social policy.

Social science literature focusing on American social policy frequently attempts to explain why "social security" (old-age insurance and related programs) and "welfare" (Aid to Families with Dependent Children and

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other means-tested programs) run on separate and unequal tracks. Along these lines, it is sometimes argued that the favored social security program was designed for men earning wages and the scorned welfare program was designed for women with children. It is sometimes argued, too, that social security more heavily represented white Americans, while black Americans were largely consigned to welfare. The main question suggested by this literature is why did this two-track policy emerge? Research attention is often focused on the Social Security Act, where, some argue, this original sin of U.S. social policy was committed.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, comparative analyses of social policy typically focus on three issues: the timing of when five major social insurance programs were enacted, types of *welfare state regimes*, and social spending amounts or “efforts.” Of the five major social insurance programs – workmen’s compensation, health insurance, unemployment insurance, old-age insurance, and family allowances – only workmen’s compensation was available to Americans before 1935. In 1935, old-age and unemployment insurance, but not health insurance or family allowances were adopted. This piecemeal approach toward social insurance has led comparative researchers to view the United States as a late and incomplete entrant to the world of modern social policy. The literature on welfare state regimes, moreover, suggests that the United States has a “liberal,” or residual, social policy designed to aid markets through stingy payments, means tests, and private provision. Finally, the quantitative summary of American social policy is that it is relatively low on “effort” – the amount spent on social programs as a share of national income. Comparative scholars thus ask: Why was the United States so late and spotty in adopting social insurance programs? Why did the United States develop a liberal welfare state regime? Why does the United States devote so little of its income to social policy?<sup>2</sup>

1. For a description of the current two-track nature of American social policy, see, for instance, Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, “Understanding American Social Politics,” *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States*, ed. Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3–27. For the argument that the Social Security Act created a public policy stratified by gender, see Linda Gordon, *Pitied But not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1880–1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 1. For the argument that the Social Security Act created a social policy stratified by race, see Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chap. 2.

2. For influential analyses of the adoption of social insurance, see, for instance, Peter Flora and Arnold J. Heidenheimer, “The Historical Core and Changing Boundaries of the Welfare State,” in *The Development of Welfare States in Europe and America*, ed. Flora and Heidenheimer (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1981), 17–34; Alexander Hicks, Joya Misra, and Tang Nah Ng, “The Programmatic Emergence of the Social Security State,” *American Sociological Review* 60 (1985): 329–49. For welfare state regimes, see Gosta Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (London: Polity Press, 1990). For a review of the literature on social spending efforts and a quantitative assessment, see Evelyne Huber, Charles Ragin, and John D. Stephens, “Social Democracy, Christian Democracy, Constitutional Structure and the Welfare State: Towards a Resolution of Quantitative Studies,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (1993): 711–49. For influential studies of the adoption of American social policies in cross-national perspective, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*

The questions posed and the answers offered by standard social policy literatures have been biased by over-attention to the Social Security Act and under-attention to the WPA. Scholars miss the fact that most Roosevelt Administration policymakers did not see themselves as designing a two-track welfare state; rather, the WPA was a means-tested program that gave relatively high benefits. Nor did American policymakers view economic security strictly as a matter of social insurance coverage; means-tested programs dominated social policy. The WPA organization was at the center of planning and thinking about social policy during the formative years of modern social policy, and its capacities dwarfed those of the Social Security Board. In addition, the breakthrough that was the WPA conflicts with images of the American welfare state as a liberal regime with low spending efforts. Through unprecedented expenditures for the WPA, the United States leapfrogged to the lead of industrialized countries in social spending effort. In short, both America-centered and comparative analysis ignores the most distinctive aspect of New Deal social policy: its commitment to work programs.

Social scientists have avoided the WPA, probably for two main reasons. First, to those concerned with current American social policy the WPA appears to have been a stopgap designed to address, but not outlive, the Great Depression. (The commitment did not last; the WPA was “honorably discharged” during the Second World War.) However, to treat the WPA in this manner is to provide a highly selective reading of U.S. history. The WPA and the Social Security Act combined to produce America’s first “welfare reform”; together they replaced the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which was originally deployed to address the emergency. A second reason to ignore the WPA is that works programs were not adopted elsewhere. Comparative researchers ask why health insurance or family allowances were not enacted here in part because such programs were adopted in other countries. But this approach is ahistorical in principle for it assumes, teleologically and erroneously, that the goal of social policymakers everywhere was to adopt social insurance. It seems historically unsound in any case to take a wholly retrospective view of the period, focusing on ultimately “winning” programs such as old-age insurance and ADC, while ignoring the WPA, a program central to the vision of New Deal social policy reformers.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, we redress the lack of attention to the WPA. We address several questions, including why the WPA was created at the time it was and in the form that it assumed; why its spending and character varied over time; and why some people and not others were likely to receive wages from the WPA. We also address why the program was embroiled in such great

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(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), intro.; Ann Shola Orloff, *The Politics of Pensions: A Comparative Analysis of Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1880–1940* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), chap. 1.

3. For a review of literature on the historical turn in sociology, see Larry J. Griffin, “Temporality, Events, and Explanation in Historical Sociology: An Introduction,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 20 (1992): 403–27.

4 Table 1. A Summary of Legislative and Administrative Events Concerning the WPA, 1933–1943

Period	Legislative Events	Administrative Events
PRE-HISTORY (1933–34)	<p><b>Federal Emergency Relief Act</b> May 12, 1933 Authorizes grants to states for relief and work relief Creates FERA with \$500 million in funding</p> <p><b>National Industrial Recovery Act</b> June 16, 1933 Provides for non-federal public works and construction Appropriates \$3.3 billion Creates Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works</p>	<p><b>Civil Works Administration</b> November 9, 1933 Established by Executive Order 6420-B Administered by FERA with \$400 million allocation</p> <p><b>CWA</b> May 1, 1934 CWA discontinued; final cost \$931 million Emergency work relief program under FERA replaces CWA</p> <p><b>Committee on Economic Security (CES)</b> Appointed June 29, 1934 Issues Preliminary Report on September 24, 1934</p> <p><b>Works Program planning</b> August 1934 Hopkins, Ickes, Morgenthau begin meetings with FDR September 1934 WPA proposals begin circulating among FERA and other officials November 28, 1934 Joint proposal for work program by Hopkins and Ickes presented to FDR</p> <p><b>Executive Order 7034</b> May 6, 1935 Establishes relief organization in 3 divisions: Application and Information to review project</p>
PERIOD 1 (1935–37)	<p><b>Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935</b> April 8, 1935 Authorizes President to establish agencies to provide relief and work relief</p>	

<p>\$1.4 billion to WPA (of total \$4.88 billion)  Funds go directly to President (until 1938)  <b>Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1936</b>  June 22, 1936  \$1.8 billion to WPA (of total \$4.5 billion); in Title II, First Deficiency Appropriation Act, Fiscal Year 1936  Replaces security wage with prevailing-rates wage  <b>The First Deficiency Appropriation Act, Fiscal Year 1937</b>  February 9, 1937 (Pub. No. 4, HR 3587)  \$789 million for relief and work relief</p> <p><b>Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1937</b>  June 29, 1937  \$1.5 billion to WPA (of total \$2.2 billion)</p> <p><b>Supplemental Relief Appropriation, Fiscal Year 1938</b>  March 2, 1938 (75th Cong., Public Res. No. 80)  \$250 million "to continue to provide relief, and work relief on useful public projects"</p> <p><b>Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1938</b>  June 21, 1938  \$1.4 billion to WPA (of \$1.8 billion total)  From now on, appropriations are to WPA directly</p> <p><b>Supplemental Relief Appropriation, Fiscal Year 1939</b>  February 4, 1939 (76th Cong., Public Res. No. 1)  \$725 million to the WPA</p>	<p>applications; Advisory Committee on Allotments to recommend applications to President; Works Progress Administration to execute the work program as a whole.</p> <p><b>WPA</b>  September 1935  WPA becomes independent, freed from the original 3-part organization</p> <p><b>WPA</b>  December 23, 1938  Hopkins steps down as WPA head; is replaced by Col. Francis Harrington</p> <p><b>Reorganization Plan No. 1</b>  April 25, 1939  FDR submits plan to Congress  Establishes Federal Works Agency; to incorporate PWA and WPA (now Work Projects Administration)</p>
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Table 1. Continued

Period	Legislative Events	Administrative Events
<b>Reorganization Act of 1939</b>	<p data-bbox="414 1216 437 1355">April 3, 1939</p> <p data-bbox="440 808 521 1355">Instructs President to devise plan to consolidate government agencies to reduce expenditures and improve efficiency</p>	<p data-bbox="388 465 410 753"><b>Reorganization Plan No. 2</b></p> <p data-bbox="414 621 437 753">May 9, 1939</p> <p data-bbox="440 178 521 753">FDR submits plan to Congress Proposes executive-branch consolidations, esp. in Depts. of State and Treasury</p>
<b>Further Additional Relief Appropriation, Fiscal Year 1939</b>	<p data-bbox="537 808 670 1355">April 13, 1939 (76th Cong., Public Res. No. 10) \$100 million to WPA (to increase the Feb. 4 appropriation to \$825 million)</p>	
<b>Public Resolution No. 20</b>	<p data-bbox="686 808 796 1355">June 7, 1939 (76th Cong., SJ Res. 138)</p> <p data-bbox="709 808 796 1355">Approves Reorganization Plan Nos. 1 and 2, to take effect July 1</p>	
<b>Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1939</b>	<p data-bbox="812 808 1022 1355">June 30, 1939</p> <p data-bbox="835 808 1022 1355">\$1.477 billion to WPA (of \$2.5 billion total)</p> <p data-bbox="862 808 1022 1355">Replaces prevailing-wage pay with fixed monthly rate</p> <p data-bbox="888 808 1022 1355">Prohibits funds for theater projects after June 30, 1939 and for any project sponsored solely by WPA after August 30</p>	

PERIOD 3  
(1940–43)

**Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of Fiscal Year**

**1941**

June 26, 1940

\$975.65 million to WPA

**WPA**

October 1940

Howard O. Hunter becomes Commissioner of Work Projects

**Urgent Deficiency Appropriation Act, 1941**

March 1, 1941 (Public No. 9, 77th Cong.)

\$375 million to WPA

**National Resources Planning Board**

Issues report in 1941

**WPA**

July 1942

Maj. Gen. Philip B. Fleming is appointed Acting (and final) WPA Commissioner, thru June 1943

**Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of Fiscal Year**

**1942**

July 1, 1941

\$875 million to WPA

**WPA**

December 4, 1942

FDR writes to Fleming, giving WPA “an honorable discharge.”

**Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of Fiscal Year**

**1943**

July 2, 1942

\$280 million to WPA

**WPA**

June 30, 1943

WPA officially ceases to exist

**Second Deficiency Appropriation Act, 1943**

July 12, 1942

Authorizes Federal Works Administrator to set up division to liquidate WPA

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Sources: Lewis Meriam, *Relief and Social Security* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1946). Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1939 Volume: War—and Neutrality*. Compiled and collated by Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Macmillan, 1941). U.S. Federal Works Agency, *WPA, Manual of Rules and Regulations. Volume 1: Organization and Administration* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942). U.S. Federal Works Agency, *WPA, Final Report on the WPA Program 1935–1943* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946). U.S. National Resources Planning Board Committee on Long-Range Work and Relief Policies, *Security, Work and Relief Policies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942).

political controversy and why it ultimately failed, when other New Deal initiatives did not.

First, though, we describe the WPA's rise and fall in the context of New Deal social policy, from the inauguration of the FERA in 1933 through the programs that later replaced it, as three periods of "welfare reform" (see Table 1). The first of these periods comprises deliberation over, and enactment of, a works program and an economic security program. These programs constituted an incipient "work and relief" state favoring the unemployed, providing means-tested work for some and stipends for others who were encouraged to exit the job market. The second phase of welfare reform, beginning in 1938, reinforced previous initiatives with new legislation, new administrative rulings, and new political economic reasoning. The third, beginning in the middle of 1940, produced far-reaching plans to expand and rationalize New Deal social policy. But these plans were rejected, and the episode resulted in the demise of the WPA and the cutting back of other social spending programs.

#### A BRIEF PRE-HISTORY OF THE WPA

Breaking with President Herbert Hoover's grudging emergency relief policies, President Roosevelt created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in May 1933. Starting with an initial appropriation of only \$500 million, the FERA distributed unprecedented sums – approximately \$3.3 billion – over three years. The relief funds went to states on a matching basis – three parts state money to one part national – mainly through the discretion of the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator, Harry L. Hopkins, a former social worker from Iowa. FERA regulations required each state to set up an emergency relief administration to handle and distribute its own and federal funds; the FERA would, at least temporarily, wrest relief from locally controlled poor or "pauper" laws. Providing cash and in-kind aid to the unemployed and others harmed by the Depression, the FERA dominated New Deal social policy until the end of 1935.<sup>4</sup>

4. For the legislation funding the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, see U.S. Federal Works Agency, *Final Statistical Report of the U.S. Federal Emergency Relief Administration* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 99–104. For the chronology of events, see Doris Carothers, *Chronology of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration: May 12, 1933 to December 31, 1935* Works Progress Administration Research Monograph VI (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937). For other discussions, see Josephine Chapin Brown, *Public Relief, 1929–1939* (New York: Holt and Co., 1940), chaps. 8–12; Edward Ainsworth Williams, *Federal Aid for Relief* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), chap. 2; Searle F. Charles, *Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963), chap. 2; George McJinsey, *Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), chap. 4; and William R. Brock, *Welfare, Democracy and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Many states, including most of the former Confederacy, provided little funding of their own for FERA aid. See discussion in Brown, *Public Relief*, 205. Statistical details are provided in Federal Works Agency, *Final Statistical Report of the FERA*. In April 1933, the president, through Executive Order #6101,

Roosevelt's first major public employment program, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), was an offshoot of the FERA. The CWA provided work and wages over the winter of 1933–1934 to both the unemployed on emergency relief and those who would not apply. According to Hopkins's hastily developed plans, the program was intended to employ four million, half to be drawn from the emergency relief rolls. Using the administrative structure of the FERA, the disbursement powers of the Veterans Administration, the offices of the revamped United States Employment Service (USES), its own engineering staff, and help from any other government agency that would cooperate, the CWA hired four million mainly at "prevailing" rates commonly paid for a given type of work. When the CWA was ended in the spring of 1934, the FERA again took the main burden of relief, aiding some five million recipients and their families. The FERA also began work-relief operations in earnest.<sup>5</sup>

### Welfare Reform, Round 1: The Works Program and the Social Security Act

The catalyst for the making of social policy in the second New Deal was congressional debate in 1934 over bills for unemployment compensation and old-age pensions. Lacking focus in his own plans but unwilling to accept piecemeal congressional initiatives in social policy reform, Roosevelt created the Committee on Economic Security (CES) in June and charged it with formulating a comprehensive economic security policy. A cabinet-level group headed by Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the CES also included Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, Attorney General Homer Cummings, and Federal Emergency Relief Administrator Hopkins. The committee's deliberations were framed by the Technical Board and the staff of the CES, led by executive secretary Edwin Witte, a University of Wisconsin public policy expert. The CES operated under severe time constraints – Witte was appointed only four months before the committee's report was due – and fiscal ones as well, having received only \$87,500 in FERA funds.<sup>6</sup>

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created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and Congress funded it through the program of Emergency Conservation Work Act. The CCC quickly employed about 270,000 single men aged 18 to 25 years in conservation work in forest preserves (John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1942: A New Deal Case Study* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967], chaps. 1–2).

5. Bonnie Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration, 1933–34* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). The CWA was created through Executive Order 6420-B. On the wage rates of the CWA, see "Statement of Corrington Gill, Assistant Federal Emergency Relief Administrator," U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Supplemental Hearings, Emergency Relief Appropriation* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), February 11, 1935, 1–26.

6. The accounts of contemporary participants most often relied upon are Edwin Witte, *The Development of the Social Security Act: A Memorandum on the History of the Committee on Economic Security and Drafting and Legislative History of the Social Security Act* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962); Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Harper and Row, 1946), chap. 23; Arthur Altmeyer, *The Formative Years of Social Security* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), chaps. 1–2; and J. Douglas Brown, *An American Philosophy of Social*

The economic security bill that emerged did not propose a program of national employment, even though the “works program,” as it was called, was Roosevelt’s top social spending priority. It had been initially connected with the CES, but soon after the committee convened, the group working on “public employment and relief” went off on its own. A national employment program was regarded as a central part of economic security; “employment assurance” was the first topic in the CES’s report. The committee argued that public employment, in contrast to the explicitly temporary nature of the FERA, “should be recognized as a permanent policy of the Government and not merely as an emergency measure.”<sup>7</sup>

Introducing the works program and the other economic security measures on January 4, 1935, Roosevelt simultaneously signaled the end of FERA. In this speech and in others to follow, he criticized the “dole,” by which he referred both to the FERA’s provision of cash payments to the able-bodied unemployed and to more restricted sorts of aid, such as the grocery orders that localities often provided in lieu of cash on work projects, or both.<sup>8</sup> To replace the dole, Roosevelt proposed his works program,

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*Security: Evolution and Issues* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), chap. 1. For the early years of administering the act, see Charles McKinley and Robert W. Frase, *Launching Social Security* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970). A number of scholarly efforts examining social science arguments have been devoted to this issue as well. Some of the more notable include Edward Berkowitz and Kim McQuaid, *Creating the Welfare State* (New York: Praeger, 1980), chap. 6; Theda Skocpol and G. John Ikenberry, “The Political Formation of the American Welfare State in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Social Research* 6 (1983): 87–148; Jill S. Quadagno, “Welfare Capitalism and the Social Security Act of 1935,” *American Sociological Review* 49 (1984): 632–47; Ann Shola Orloff, “The Political Origins of America’s Belated Welfare State,” in *Politics of Social Policy*, 37–80; and Edward D. Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State: From Roosevelt to Reagan* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), chap. 1. FERA funding made the CES deliberations a kind of professional work program. See Witte, *The Development of the Social Security Act*, 9–10.

7. U.S. Committee on Economic Security, *Report to the President* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), 9. The principal accounts by Witte, Perkins, and Altmeyer do not discuss the work program very much, partly because the program was removed from the deliberations of the CES and was never under the control of the Social Security Board. Also, all three were proponents of social insurance and do not discuss much the relief nature of New Deal social policy. Hopkins, in his *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: Norton, 1936), provides not his account of what happened, but an argument hoping to sway public opinion in favor of a generous work program during the 1936 election year. He indicates his preference for a permanent work program. See also McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, chap. 6, esp. 95–97. As late as December 24, 1934, Roosevelt wanted to combine the legislation for the work program and other economic security programs in one bill. Arthur W. Macmahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden. *The Administration of Federal Work Relief* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1941), 26–27. Witte, *The Development of the Social Security Act*, 77. Altmeyer suggests that Roosevelt initially saw unemployment insurance and work relief as combined, with those running out of insurance benefits to immediately gain work relief (*Formative Years of Social Security*, 12–13). The most reliable general account of the entire decade of reform, focusing on relief aspects, by someone within the government, but not at the center of events is Brown, *Public Relief*.

8. The “dole” was a common term for the “uncovenanted” or transitional unemployment insurance benefits that aided the unemployed in Great Britain during the 1920s. In that country, unemployment insurance had been stretched beyond its original functions to aid those people who had already received the maximum amount of payments, but who were

sometimes called “work relief” (similar to the way that people today refer to “workfare” to set it apart from “welfare,” though with a less pejorative connotation). The joint resolution authorizing the appropriation for the works program was drafted in late December 1934 and placed before Congress on January 21, 1935. With an initial appropriation of approximately \$4.9 billion, an enormous sum for that time, Congress issued the president a blank check to fund all manner of work projects and public works. Based on the powers ceded the president by the Emergency Relief Act of 1933 and the public works titles of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, the resolution was enacted eleven weeks later and approved by Roosevelt on April 11. By an executive order in May, 90 percent of the jobs from the works program were to go to “employables” already on relief. Moreover, the works program was to create a large number of jobs – 3.5 million in the president’s estimate.<sup>9</sup>

Additional specifics of the works program were disputed during the next few months. Authority to choose the work projects and recipients was divided initially between Harold Ickes, the head of the Public Works Administration, and Hopkins. Ickes headed the Advisory Committee on Allotments (ACA), charged with recommending projects for the president’s approval and thus with substantial control over the amount and types of work. Hopkins was placed in charge of the newly created Works Progress Administration, which was to oversee the certification process for work and to ensure that work projects employed relief labor, but with little control over projects. Ickes’s vision of the new works program comprised capital-intensive public works that would be “self-liquidating” – eventually earning back the revenue needed to undertake them. Hopkins’s vision was a program that put as many people to work as quickly and with as little overhead as possible. In the battle for control, Hopkins had the advantage: he had a track record of spending money, having already funneled through the FERA and the CWA most of the funds allocated to Ickes’s PWA. Besides, the FERA was already overseeing numerous work projects of a labor-intensive

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“genuinely seeking work.” By 1931 these transitional benefits were cut back and a means test was applied to applicants for them. See, for instance, Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy since the Industrial Revolution*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), chap. 8; and Corrington Gill, *Wasted Manpower: The Challenge of Unemployment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939), 233–37.

9. Work relief was also meant to be different from the degrading “work tests” administered by localities to see if applicants really wanted to work. Roosevelt overstated the number of those receiving payments from the “dole” as most of the 3.5 million “employable” people receiving aid supported by the FERA were already receiving emergency work relief (see Roosevelt, “Annual Message to the Congress, January 4, 1935”). For the question of the authority of the President in determining work relief projects, see “Statement of Rear Admiral C. J. Peoples,” U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on H. J. Res. 117: A Joint Resolution Making Appropriations For Relief Purposes*, January 29, 1935, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), 27–57; U.S. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report on the WPA Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 7–15; Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Sage, 1943), chap. 1; Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, chap. 1. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, 65–71; McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, chaps. 5–6; and Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 200–215.

sort. Only quick action would transfer people from relief to work as the president wanted. The WPA was free of Ickes's ACA in September, when it was abolished, and the WPA was granted the authority to approve any projects costing \$25,000 or less. Most of the remaining appropriation went to the WPA, which became synonymous with the works program.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Works Progress Administration drew on the CWA and the emergency work relief programs under the FERA, it also differed from them. Like the CWA, the WPA was an operation of the national government and ultimately of the president, who was granted the authority to fund works projects. By law, WPA projects could not compete with private business, and no more than one family member could receive employment through the WPA. Although some projects were federally controlled, such as the arts, writing, and theater projects, most were proposed by state and local authorities. From the outset, getting "on the WPA," as people often called receiving WPA employment, typically implied receiving or applying for local relief. As was the case with work relief under the FERA, those receiving WPA work first had to have their resources investigated and measured against minimum budgets. This strategy differed from that of the CWA, which drew half its workers from the relief rolls and half from those seeking work through the USES. By 1936 the WPA was paying a combination of "security" and "prevailing" wages. WPA work was to be repaid with a monthly security sum, and the number of hours worked to receive it were determined by the wages prevailing for the type of work. WPA workers, moreover, were guaranteed a cash wage, unlike the in-kind payments that some local authorities provided for work relief funded by the FERA. These wages varied according to place and skill rather than varying according to a family's "budgetary deficiency," but as was the case for work relief under the FERA, they were generally not as high as those available through the CWA.

Despite delays, the program employed three million workers by February 1936.<sup>11</sup> All signs indicated the Roosevelt Administration was strongly com-

10. The WPA was created by way of Executive Order 7034 on May 6, 1935. The Advisory Committee on Allotments included various people inside and outside the government and was to recommend projects to the president. Frank Walker was in charge of the Division of Applications and Information (DAI), which was to receive suggested plans for work projects and pass them on to the ACA. The ACA and DAI were eliminated in September 1935. See "The Creation of the Machinery for the Works Progress Administration. Executive Order No. 7034. May 6, 1935," in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman, 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938), 4:163–68. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 7–10; Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, chaps. 2–3; and McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, chaps. 5–6. See also, Harold Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes: The First One Thousand Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 429–46.

11. The wages were to vary according to two main dimensions, across place and type of employee. There were small variations across four regions of the country and across county size to take into account cost of living and greater variations across the five skill categories of wage employees and between wage employees and supervisory employees. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 23–26, 37–41. On wages of WPA workers, see also, Howard, *The WPA*, chap. 6. For a case study of someone bidding to receive WPA work, but not already on relief, see Grace Adams, *Workers on Relief* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939), chap. 2. For the influence of organized labor on the upgrading of WPA wages, see McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, 81–83.

mitted to its works program. Later that year Hopkins published a well-received book, *Spending to Save*, which called on the national government to make a permanent commitment to public employment. Public opinion favored the program; people typically thought that the WPA was doing valuable work in their communities. The 1936 Democratic platform, written by Roosevelt, took the Republicans to task for their neglect of “aid to the destitute” and supported public employment.<sup>12</sup>

Despite public popularity and strong support within the Roosevelt administration, the WPA started out on a weak institutional footing. The joint resolution gave vast discretion to the president – something that Congress would not likely approve on a permanent basis. The WPA itself was created by way of executive order rather than legislation, and was sustained by appropriation acts that included the word “emergency” in their titles. There was no entitlement to jobs for individuals who met standard criteria, no guarantee of the number of jobs to be created per year, no formula to allocate across the country the jobs that were funded. Even with the large initial appropriation, the level of funding was not nearly enough to provide a job with wages to all the unemployed applying for relief. The WPA relied on the Roosevelt administration’s desire and ability to gain funds for its continuance. A more stable administrative setup, more standardized allocation of money and jobs, and more routinized funding would be necessary for the program to outlive the Depression.

If these problems were not enough, in the WPA’s first two years, the program was held hostage to the president’s desire to give the appearance of closing the budget deficit. Roosevelt had run deficits, but he continued to balance what he called the “non-emergency” budget annually and made progress in balancing the overall budget. To that end, although his decision was in part due to increases in private employment, he cut expenditures for the WPA in 1936, and both expenditures and employment on the WPA continued to drop through the middle of 1937.<sup>13</sup> New Deal social policy planners, however, did not want to end work relief through the WPA, and soon Roosevelt was induced to see things their way.

12. Hopkins, *Spending to Save*. In October 1936, a poll by Fortune magazine asked, “Do you believe that the WPA has been doing useful work in this locality?” and found that the “yes” answers outnumbered the “no” answers by a margin of four to one (Hadley Cantril, ed. *Public Opinion, 1935–1946* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951], 696). The 1936 Democratic Party platform was explicit about public employment: “Where business fails to supply such employment, we believe that work at prevailing wages should be provided.” The Republican platform criticized New Deal relief policies (Kirk H. Porter and Donald Bruce Johnson, *National Party Platforms, 1840–1968* [Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970], 360–63, 366, quote on 362). The Republicans and their allies in the print media tried to make a big issue of corruption and politics in the WPA and rejected work-relief in their platform. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, 81–86.

13. Cutting expenditures was recommended by Henry Morgenthau, the Secretary of the Treasury. John Morton Blum, *Roosevelt and Morgenthau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972); Dean L. May, *From New Deal to New Economics: The American Liberal Response to the Recession of 1937* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981). See also, McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, chap. 6.

## Welfare Reform, Round II: The Spending Solution and a Program's Progress

In a second wave of welfare reform, the Roosevelt administration underscored its commitment to the WPA and auxiliary programs for the unemployable. In the midst of an economic downturn on his watch – the so-called Roosevelt Depression beginning in late 1937 – Roosevelt reversed course. He decided to drop the distinction between emergency and non-emergency expenditures, to forget about making progress on budget balances, and to follow the advice of administration “spenders.” These advisors advocated increased government expenditures without corresponding taxation increases – a proto-Keynesian policy only slightly animated by the theories of Keynes. Prominent among the spenders was Hopkins, whose WPA had previously suffered from Roosevelt’s offerings to fiscal orthodoxy. In any case, something new was needed, as unemployment increased by four million during what the administration euphemistically called a “recession.”<sup>14</sup>

The WPA was a conspicuous winner in the new political economics: appropriations for the WPA increased sharply in 1938. In other ways, too, the program seemed to be assuming the role originally envisioned for it by the Committee on Economic Security. A Special Senate Committee to Investigate Unemployment and Relief endorsed the program, justifying its continuation despite the payments now being made to the unemployed through the new unemployment compensation programs. Another sign of the ascension of the WPA was the political rise of Hopkins, who, in the mind of the public, embodied the program and was being groomed by Roosevelt to become the Democratic nominee for President in 1940. Hopkins and the WPA were also seen as central to the administration’s attempts in 1938 to move the Democratic party to the left by aiding New Deal supporters and attempting to “purge” conservatives in it. Even after the seating of the new Congress in 1939, with its additional Republican members, the administration received almost all of the supplemental appropriations it requested for the WPA for fiscal year 1940. In 1939, Congress also approved amendments to the Social Security Act to extend and expand programs for “unemployables,” including Old-Age Insurance, Old-Age Assistance, and Aid to Dependent Children.<sup>15</sup>

14. For a discussion of these spenders, see Ellis Hawley, *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966); Herbert Stein, *The Fiscal Revolution in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), chap. 6; May, *From New Deal to New Economics*; Margaret Weir, *Politics and Jobs: The Boundaries of Employment Policy in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34–41; and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Depression and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995), chaps. 4–5. For an analysis of unemployment in this “recession,” see Lester V. Chandler, *America’s Greatest Depression, 1929–1941* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), chap. 3.

15. U.S. Congress, Senate Special Committee to Investigate Unemployment and Relief, *Unemployment and Relief: Report* (76th Congress, 1st Session, January 14, 1939), 3–6; May, *From New Deal to New Economics*; Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, 140–42; Porter, *Congress and the Waning of the New Deal*, chap. 4; Sherwood, *Hopkins and Roosevelt*, 91–99.

The WPA and New Deal social policy generally was fortified further by way of administrative reorganization, which was central to Roosevelt's "third" New Deal, beginning in 1937. One idea behind the third New Deal was to safeguard the social welfare initiatives of the first two New Deals. Although dramatic and controversial legislation to reorganize the government failed in 1938, the Roosevelt administration was able to pass reorganization legislation in 1939. Though less far-reaching than what had been initially proposed, the Executive Reorganization Act of 1939 enabled the president to gain the authority he needed from Congress to consolidate his social spending programs and he promptly submitted two reorganization plans.<sup>16</sup>

Under the first plan the WPA, now renamed the Work Projects Administration, was incorporated as a permanent bureau and placed with the Public Works Administration in the newly created Federal Works Agency. National administrative practices were catching up with national spending initiatives. Another change signaled the WPA's routinization. A lightning rod of criticism in the agency's formative years, Hopkins had been elevated to Secretary of Commerce, mainly to cleanse him politically for an expected presidential run in 1940. To replace him Roosevelt chose the anodyne Army engineer Col. Francis Harrington over ardent New Dealer Aubrey Williams. In his budget message of 1939, the president employed a distinction between "extraordinary" and "ordinary" expenditures, this time claiming that the extraordinary category was to be a permanent part of the budget. The new fiscal thinking and the administrative reorganization was part of a long-term commitment to the programs of the work-relief policy.<sup>17</sup>

The WPA itself underwent significant centralizing changes and rationalization. In the early years of the program, state and local relief agencies had complete responsibility for certifying eligible workers. This was far from optimal, introducing much inequality and some corruption into the program. In response, the WPA, through Administrative Order No. 65 in 1938, assumed responsibility for maintaining referral standards. In the Emergency Relief Act of 1939, the WPA gained greater authority: the process of certifications of need for WPA work were confined by law to the purview of the WPA and public relief agencies authorized by it. In turn, the public relief agencies could now only refer workers to the WPA, the latter having the final responsibility for certification. The agencies cooperating with the WPA also rationalized their procedures so that by 1940 the WPA dealt

16. All reorganization plans submitted by the president, under the new law, would go into effect unless explicitly rejected by both houses of Congress. The following account is drawn from Barry Dean Karl, *Executive Reorganization and Reform in the New Deal: The Genesis of Administrative Management, 1900-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Richard Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government, 1936-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), chap. 9; Porter, *Congress and the Waning of the New Deal*, chap. 5; and Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chaps. 5-6.

17. "The Annual Budget Message" (January 5, 1939), *Public Papers of Franklin Roosevelt* 8:36-53; Milkis, *The President and the Parties*, chap. 6; Stein, *The Fiscal Revolution in America*, 124; Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, chap. 6.

Table 2. Social Spending Efforts, Selected Countries, 1938

Year	Percent of GDP	Percent of Government Spending
United States	6.31	29.4
Germany	5.59	18.7
United Kingdom	5.01	17.5
France	3.47	11.9
Sweden	3.15	17.8
Netherlands	1.98	10.2
Italy	1.80	7.3

*Note:* For the European countries the data are from Flora et al. Social spending, which they call “social security,” is defined as public money expended on social insurance and social assistance programs. The figures for Germany are for 1935. The figures for France, Sweden, and the Netherlands are based on central government expenditures for social security and public health policies. European spending is taken as a percentage of gross domestic product. For the United States the data are from *Historical Statistics*. Social spending is taken from columns 33, 34, 39, 41, 42, 47 of the “H” series and include spending on “social insurance,” “public aid,” and “other social welfare.” The figures for the United States are for fiscal year 1939, which began on July 1, 1938, and are divided by the average gross national product for 1938 and 1939.

*Sources:* Peter Flora, Jens Alber, Richard Eichenberg, Jurgen Kohl, Franz Kraus, Winfried Pfenning, and Kurt Seebohm, *State, Economy, and Society in Western Europe 1815–1975: The Growth of Mass Democracies and Welfare States* (Chicago: St. James, 1983), 376, 381, 387, 391, 402, 405, 408, 412, 428, 431, 442, 446; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States From Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), series F 1–5, H 32–47, Y 533–566, pp. 224, 341, 1120.

directly with a state-level agency in 36 states; localities were the main referring agents in only nine. Congress on its own also removed some arbitrary aspects of the program when it established a formula setting the contribution of project sponsors at 25 percent of the cost of the project and set the hours of WPA work at 130 per month per worker, making it easier to complete projects in a timely fashion. Among other things, these standards addressed criticisms that WPA officials favored some localities over others, that WPA workers were slackers, or that WPA projects produced few useful results.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the new programs of the second New Deal and the administrative, legislative, fiscal, and ideological reinforcements of the third New Deal, American public spending programs stood taller in “effort” than those of other industrial democracies by the end of the 1930s. As Table 2 shows, these programs accounted for more than 6 percent of the U.S. gross national product and almost 30 percent of government spending. The

18. The WPA was handling the certification process by itself in eleven states and the District of Columbia. U.S. NRPB Committee on Long-Range Work and Relief Policies, *Security, Work and Relief Policies* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 407; U.S. National Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 8, 19; Howard, *The WPA*, 361–68.

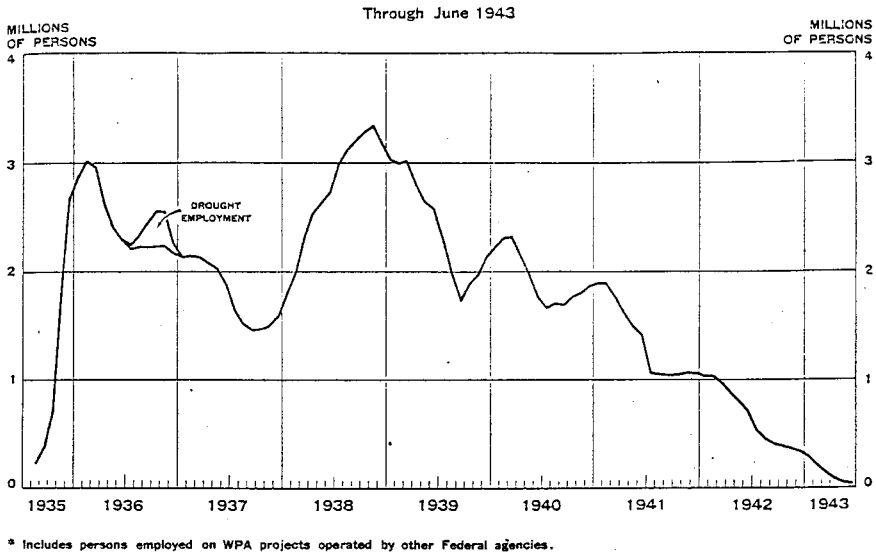


Fig. 1. Employment on WPA Projects, 1935–1943

Source: U.S. Federal Works Agency. 1946 *Final Report on the WPA Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), p. 29.

American efforts were greater than those of Sweden, today's world leader in social spending, and the United States had overtaken the United Kingdom, which began the Depression with the world's most advanced social spending system.

At the end of the 1930s, the most important national spending effort was in public employment. Some 2.1 million workers were on the rolls of the reorganized Work Projects Administration in December 1939, down from of peak of 3.3 million in November 1938, as Figure 1 indicates. The WPA remained concerned with labor-intensive undertakings, mainly constructing or rehabilitating highways, roads, streets, and public buildings and making garments of various sorts. All told, the WPA itself accounted for \$1.57 billion in 1939, amounting to 46 percent of social spending and 1.7 percent of GNP. In addition, one million young Americans were working for the National Youth Administration (NYA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), bringing the cost of all national public employment programs, excluding projects under the Public Works Administration, to \$1.87 billion, or 55 percent of social spending and 2.1 percent of GNP in 1939.<sup>19</sup>

19. NRPB Committee, *Security, Work and Relief*, 558, 561. Social spending for the calendar year is taken by the NRPB committee's definition of public aid, excluding earnings of persons employed on federal construction projects. The GNP is taken from Bureau of the Census,

Table 3. WPA "Man-Years" of Employment and Expenditures for Fiscal Years (Ending June 30), 1936–1943

Year	"Man-years" of employment	Expenditures
1936	1,833,304	\$ 1,326,457,262
1937	2,230,843	2,051,890,076
1938	1,934,441	1,735,173,997
1939	2,914,247	2,561,911,030
1940	1,981,562	1,902,929,067
1941	1,660,930	1,787,148,267
1942	963,888	1,225,648,254
1943	270,974	383,298,734
TOTAL	13,790,189	\$12,974,456,687

*Notes:* A "man-year" of employment is defined as the employment of a worker during a full year. The expenditures include WPA and sponsors' funds.

*Source:* U.S. Federal Works Agency. *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935–1943* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), p. 102.

Problems remained, however, for the WPA's proponents. A key one was that the WPA did not provide jobs for all who wanted them. There were some ten million unemployed in 1939, and the WPA was employing only about a quarter of them. Moreover, if one examines the "man-years" of jobs provided by the WPA, even at its peak in fiscal year 1939, the program never provided a year's worth of work for more than three million<sup>20</sup> (see Table 3). And the program was not particularly fair, favoring male family heads over female ones, and, in many places, white over black Americans. Nor did the program end "relief." In 1939, general relief was far from negligible, accounting for about 13 percent of social spending and about .5 percent of GNP. Approximately 1.7 million people were receiving general assistance. Its administration varied widely, with some states providing it through new, state-level Departments of Public Welfare, while others delegated local authorities great control in the manner of the old poor laws. Although the federal government had severed its connection to the dole, as Roosevelt demanded, relief for "employables" at the state and local levels remained substantial.<sup>21</sup>

Another potential problem was that WPA jobs and funds were not evenly distributed across the country, nor did they follow a set of standards that

*Historical Statistics*, series F1, p. 224. The GNP was \$90.5 billion in 1939. These definitions and figures are used in the following paragraphs. See also Howard, *The WPA*, 854–57; Chandler, *America's Greatest Depression*, chap. 3.

20. NRPB Committee, *Security, Work and Relief Policies*, 558. Howard, *The WPA*, 854–57; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States From Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 357.

21. NRPB Committee, *Security, Work and Relief Policies*, 560–61; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975, *Historical Statistics*, 224; Brown, *Public Relief*, chap. 14.

would justify the differentials. Initially the WPA had what it called a quota of jobs for each state; later it developed quotas for funds to be distributed. The difficulty here was that the WPA was reluctant to divulge individual quotas or even the basis on which they were formulated. In 1938, Hopkins testified before a Senate committee that funds were granted according to the number of unemployed, the number in need, and funds needed for materials. Colonel Francis Harrington, Hopkins's successor, told Congress that funds were distributed according to the following formula: 40 percent, population; 40 percent, unemployment rate; 20 percent, WPA discretion. Neither statement, however, was supported by evidence. Congress, however, could not agree on an alternative formula to standardize the allocation of jobs.<sup>22</sup> WPA wages, too, varied in ways that were difficult to justify. WPA officials divided the country into three wage zones, based on differences in incomes among regions. Actual wage variations, however, went beyond these federally designed differentials. Most southern states, for instance, paid wages lower than one would expect for their incomes, because their ability to control the design of projects ensured that they rarely included high-wage work.<sup>23</sup>

The New Deal reformers were well aware of discrepancies and other problems with the WPA. In response, they sought to modify the program to provide more jobs to all those who needed them and to increase wages in low-wage areas. Many thought that World War II would present the opportunity to strengthen the WPA and other New Deal social programs; however, such plans were rejected in a third wave of welfare "reform."

### Welfare Reform, Round III: Plans to Complete Work and Relief Policy Encounter Hostilities

Following the fall of France in June 1940, Roosevelt, preoccupied with the war effort, turned his attention away from social policy. Later that year, however, he instructed the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB) to plan national social and economic policies for postwar America. Reformers based in the NRPB and in the Social Security Board undertook or sponsored a number of investigations of the social spending system and proposed changes in it.

The most important of the NRPB-sponsored reports, *Security, Work and*

22. Monthly or semi-monthly quotas were given by the WPA to state WPA offices. In March 1936, for instance, WPA quotas specified the maximum number of workers to be employed for each half-month through June (U.S. Works Progress Administration, *WPA Progress Report, April 15, 1936* [Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936]). The evidence suggests that a state's share of overall "man-years" of WPA employment closely reflected that state's population as a share of overall population (Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 36–37). See also, Howard, *The WPA*, 595–604.

23. The variation in wages across regions was not as great as the variation across wage classes. For the breakdowns, see Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 25. For an analysis of differences in average wages across states, see Edwin Amenta and Jane D. Poulsen, "Social Politics in Context: The Institutional Politics Theory and State-Level U.S. Social Spending Policies at the End of the New Deal," *Social Forces* 75 (1996): 33–60.

*Relief Policies*, was written by the Committee on Long Range Work and Relief Policies, which had been asked to survey work and relief programs and redesign them. Begun in June 1940, *Security, Work, and Relief Policies* was submitted just before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Unlike the 1935 *Report of the Committee on Economic Security*, the NRPB committee's report could reflect on the nation's recent experience with an array of social spending programs.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1941 report, relief, social insurance, and public employment programs were all considered to be components of what the committee called "public aid." In using this term the committee made no distinctions between the social insurance and means-tested programs of the New Deal and certainly did not intend to marginalize the latter. Indeed, the committee recommended upgrading public assistance. Echoing the sentiments of the Committee on Economic Security, the NRPB committee called for the assurance of an "American standard" of economic security as a *right* of every citizen. By this the committee meant that all should receive at least the minimum wage as legislated in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.<sup>25</sup>

The main way to ensure economic security was to provide work for those who needed it, and so the committee concerned itself foremost with measures to guarantee full employment. Following the conventional economic thinking of the day, the committee expected that unemployment would reemerge after the war and that business activity alone would not provide full employment. Only vigorous and sustained government spending would. Like the Committee on Economic Security before it, however, the NRPB committee did not think undirected government spending would be sufficient. Rather, it saw direct public employment, as well as public works, as the best way to counter unemployment. Everyone who needed a job and could not find one should be provided one by the government, as a matter of right.

The committee's vision of public employment for America was a strengthened and rationalized version of the WPA. The committee proposed the permanent planning of projects, mainly the labor-intensive WPA-type project, but also the large-scale, capital-intensive sorts of projects carried out by the Public Works Administration. Unlike the WPA, work on these projects would be without a means test and similar to private employment in wages, hours, and work conditions. The committee proposed to pay the prevailing wage where wages were high, as in the industrial North, and the so-called security or minimum wage where wages were substandard. To ensure the guarantee to work, the committee called for the removal of state and local public relief officials from the process of assigning jobs

24. For a discussion of the NRPB and its committee, see Marion Clawson, *New Deal Planning: The National Resources Planning Board* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); and Philip W. Warlen, *A History of the National Resources Planning Board* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979). For the significance of the planning board for postwar American liberalism, see Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 245–53. See also, Edwin Amenta and Theda Skocpol, "Redefining the New Deal: World War II and the Development of Social Provision in the United States," in *Politics of Social Policy*, 81–122.

25. U.S. NRPB Committee, *Security, Work, and Relief Policies*, 514–15.

because of the arbitrariness with which these agencies were thought to act, and instead called for a nationalized United States Employment Service (USES) so that the unemployed would not have to apply for relief to get work, as they did under the WPA.<sup>26</sup> Privately, President Roosevelt referred to the NRPB's "grandiose schemes" and he marginalized the Board during deliberations on the postwar welfare state during the spring and fall of 1941. But his objections were to such NRPB proposals as government underwriting of business investment and public-private joint ventures, not to public works. In fact, his main charge to the NRPB during the early war years was to compile a reserve of potential projects which could be undertaken to counter postwar unemployment. He even admonished the Board in 1942 for spending too little of its funds on the development of public works.<sup>27</sup>

Despite strong support from the Roosevelt administration, social spending programs and initiatives suffered a terrible defeat after the elections of 1942. In fact, the period running from the end of 1942 until the beginning of 1945 was the worst of any of the Roosevelt years for social spending policies. Against the hopes of reformers, Congress rolled back the New Deal. The earliest and most devastating losses affected longstanding public employment programs. Even if unemployment were to drop to the level of the 1920s, New Dealers expected that there would still be a need for three or four million people on national employment programs. But as the war effort absorbed many unemployed and drove people who had not sought wage work during the 1930s into the labor market, the public employment system was dismantled. The attack on the system gained real momentum in the wake of the 1942 congressional elections' disastrous results for the Democrats. Roosevelt gave the WPA an "honorable discharge" at the end of the year, and it completed its operations in 1943.<sup>28</sup> There would not be a fourth New Deal. Before explaining this historical trajectory of welfare reform, it is worth reflecting on the characteristics of New Deal social policy as it stood at the end of the 1930s and speculating about what it might have become if it had been completed.

What Sort of Social Policy Did the New Deal and the WPA Provide?

Current debates in social science have focused on differences in the type and nature of social spending systems. According to Gøsta Esping-Andersen, rich capitalist democracies have produced three distinctive "welfare state regimes": social democratic, conservative corporatist, and liberal. The social democratic regime, most closely approximated by modern Scandinavia, is based on the principles of universalism and "decommodification" – the latter meaning that private markets play a minimal role in workers' lives. Social rights extend to the middle class. The conservative corporatist type, seen in Austria and France, is universal, but solidifies

26. *Ibid.*, 523–24.

27. Michael K. Brown, "State Capacity and Political Choice: Interpreting the Failure of the Third New Deal," *Studies in American Political Development* 9 (1995): 187–212.

28. See, Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, v.

status distinctions between groups. It also upholds the traditional family, with one male breadwinner bringing home a family wage. The liberal welfare state is devoted to making markets run smoothly and has a large private component. The United States and most other English-speaking countries are typically deemed to approximate liberal welfare states.<sup>29</sup>

Ann Shola Orloff has criticized Esping-Andersen's decommodification standard as being inapplicable to circumstances of gender inequality, for it ignores the autonomy-granting potential for women of paid work as well as the social organization of non-market domestic and caretaking work. She proposes instead the more general criteria of "access" and "autonomy." She notes that for many women, access to paid work can provide autonomy from unequal domestic relations between men and women. Under Orloff's criteria, both decommodification *and* access to paid work can provide autonomy for workers.<sup>30</sup> Other scholars of American policy focus on the type of domestic state America devised in the 1930s. Ira Katznelson and Bruce Pietrykowski have argued that in the late 1930s American policy embraced two distinct models of state intervention in the economy. They argue that a "fiscalist" model, located primarily in the Bureau of the Budget and focusing on countercyclical fiscal and monetary policy, defeated a "developmental" model, located primarily in the NRPB and focusing on direct government intervention in capital and labor markets. The WPA would seem to stand somewhere between these models. It certainly had an impact on labor markets, and public employment projects could easily be integrated into NRPB proposals for government-directed infrastructure development. On the other hand, public employment could also be construed as countercyclical spending. It certainly received a boost when administration spenders first caught Roosevelt's attention in 1938.<sup>31</sup>

These ideal types and analytical criteria, however, beg the question of what sort of social spending system was produced overall by the New Deal. Did the WPA and New Deal social policy approximate one or more of Esping-Andersen's main types? The standards of autonomy and access, moreover, can be extended to groups beyond women, such as African Americans and immigrants. Did the program enhance autonomy and ac-

29. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 26–29, builds on the famous distinction between "institutional" and "residual" welfare states first proposed by Richard Titmuss in *Social Policy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). Esping-Andersen sees the conservative corporatist regime as standing somewhere between the social democratic and liberal regimes. For an analysis of his model, see Charles Ragin, "A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Pension Systems," in *Methodological Advances in Comparative Political Economy*, ed. Thomas Janoski and Alexander Hicks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 320–45.

30. Ann Shola Orloff, "Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship: The Comparative Analysis of Gender Relations and Welfare States," *American Sociological Review* 58 (1993): 303–28. Her critique implies a more negative evaluation of the conservative corporatist regime, insofar as it discourages the participation of women in the paid labor force. See also, Orloff, "Gender in the Welfare State" *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1996): 51–78. On decommodification, see Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, chap. 2.

31. Ira Katznelson and Bruce Pietrykowski, "Rebuilding the American State: Evidence from the 1940s," *Studies in American Political Development* 5 (1991): 301–99.

cess? Did it undermine or uphold economic and status distinctions among groups? How fair was the WPA and associated programs?

New Deal social policy does not easily conform to any of the standard welfare state regime categories, because it was based on work and means-tested relief. Though never reaching the standards set by the New Dealers, work and relief were to be provided as a matter of right, thus constituting a repudiation of market mechanisms standing alone. The government took the responsibility to employ workers deemed “employable” when the private market failed.<sup>32</sup> Citizens in “unemployable” categories would also have rights to stipends if they fit standard criteria – such as being aged or the head of a family that had no breadwinner. Though based on need, the policy was not designed to be residual in nature. Nor was it meant to punish or stigmatize those who benefitted from it or to force them to take low-paying work. In this way the work and relief programs diverged from the locally funded and controlled pre-Depression relief system they were designed to eclipse.

The WPA program also provided an alternative to menial labor available through the private market. According to the Emergency Relief Act of 1939, workers were required to accept offers of private employment only if that employment paid prevailing wages. In 1939, “unskilled” work constituted about 70 percent of all WPA employment, and wages for this work were largely in line with those of the private market. After WPA workers were required to work 130-hour months, in September 1939, average wages dropped to 44 cents per hour; but even this was about 85 percent of the average entry-level pay of common laborers in 1940 – 51 cents per hour. WPA work also attempted to include many of those who would otherwise be in the middle class, at higher wages, and professional work was more represented among WPA work than the distribution of WPA recipients would warrant.<sup>33</sup> The private component of this program and New Deal social policy generally was minimal. All of these characteristics suggest that the WPA and New Deal social policy incorporated social democratic elements. However, because the policy was incomplete and under-funded, the reality only approximated the ideal type.

In other ways the WPA was a program that incorporated conservative aspects of the corporatist welfare state regime, especially regarding gender relations. The policy was based on the idea that satisfactory jobs through the private economy were likely to be scarce. Like the rest of the New Deal, the WPA adhered to the concept of the family wage, enforced by the stricture that only one family member, usually expected to be a man, could

32. Workers began to feel as though the provision of work was a right. See Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 6.

33. This act reinstated the initial 1936 federal regulations, which had been diluted somewhat by the Emergency Relief Act of 1937. Job access was also mitigated by the 1939 act’s stricture that those working more than eighteen months continuously were to be automatically dismissed and not reinstated for thirty days. See Howard, *The WPA*, 491, 517–20. For the wage rates and employment by wage classes, see Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 23–25, 37–41.

receive WPA employment. In this way the program by design fortified power relationships within a standard nuclear family, in which the husband was expected to be the wage-earner and the wife to take charge of home life.<sup>34</sup> New Deal work and relief policy more generally drew lines among citizens between those considered high priority for paid work – the “employable” – and low priority – the “unemployable.” The WPA was to provide work and wages for the first group, others were to receive stipends that were expected to sustain the person or household, but were not as generous. In this way, the policy legitimated work among some groups and discouraged work among others.

To ascertain the fairness of the program requires exploring who, exactly, gained the privilege of WPA employment. Officially, the WPA was adamantly opposed to discrimination of most kinds. Throughout the 1930s, the no-discrimination pledge was made explicit for a number of potential labor sources, including “race, creed, color, or any political activity,” yet some official restrictions and favoritism did find their way into law. Over the life of the WPA, emergency relief acts applied restrictions on employment to aliens; in 1939 even legal aliens were barred from WPA jobs, despite the objections of the Roosevelt administration. At the same time, the emergency relief acts progressively preferred veterans or their wives.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to consider not only official statements of policy but also the two processes that determined whether individuals would actually get to work on the WPA. In the first process, individuals had to apply for relief and WPA work, be referred to the WPA, become certified for WPA work, be selected for it, and be kept on the list. To get work they had to pass a needs test administered by local relief offices. Next, they had to be deemed “employable,” a more subjective determination, and their skill level had to be ascertained and rated. At any stage, individuals could be discouraged, obstructed, or rejected. In the second process, state and local governments proposed projects and had them funded or rejected by the WPA. Governments might design projects that limited who could work on them. For example, a state that designed few sewing projects – the largest employers of women – would be more likely to have fewer women doing WPA work. In short, officially mandated fairness in the program was undermined by state and local officials who had great control over the certification process for potential WPA workers or over the designing of projects. Groups also could be subject to favoritism or bias from WPA officials who reviewed certifications, set employment quotas, influenced project proposals, and chose the projects to be funded.

Most WPA jobs went to men of a certain age and family status. Men on the WPA were slightly older on average than those in private employment, reflecting in part the preference of private employers for younger men. In

34. See, for instance, Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and His Family: The Effect of Unemployment upon the Status of the Man in Fifty-Nine Families* (New York: Dryden Press, 1940); and E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Worker: A Study of the Task of Making a Living without a Job* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940).

35. Howard, *The WPA*, 285–86, 303–6, 325–31.

1938, legislation stipulated that a recipient had to be at least eighteen years old. Younger people had their own work and training programs – the National Youth Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps – designed to provide aid and training and to delay the movement of young people into the paid labor force. In addition, heads of families were given preference for WPA work over single men. The preference of the WPA for older men had its limits, however. Until legislation in 1939 prohibited the exclusion of people sixty-five years and older, older men were routinely purged – “separated,” to use the official terminology – from the WPA’s rolls. WPA officials viewed the aged as eligible for and more suited to old-age pensions. After 1939, although older workers could not be summarily dismissed, they were not encouraged. In 1939, men sixty-five years and older constituted 4 percent of the labor force, but only 1.6 percent of WPA employment; still, the median age of men on the WPA was 39.4 years, in February 1939, more than three years higher than the median age of men in the labor force. Generally, the WPA supported and elevated the status of men heading households, discouraged older men, and designated young men and those without families as not suitable for WPA employment.<sup>36</sup>

Women received WPA work at a much lower rate than men and at a lower rate than one would expect given women’s representation in the work force. This was due to the restriction on employment to one family member and also to the WPA’s vision of what constituted “employability.” In 1939, for instance, women made up one-quarter of the private labor force but comprised only 13.1 percent of WPA’s certified work force. Like their male counterparts, the women on the WPA tended to be heads of households. WPA women, moreover, were clustered in the Division of Women’s and Professional Projects, which included most so-called service projects. Most semi- and unskilled women working on service projects were engaged in so-called welfare projects. The most significant of these, as already mentioned, were sewing projects, which produced garments and household items, and were such an important part of the WPA that they were proposed by state-level organizations rather than local ones. Being sex-segregated, they reinforced the distinction between men’s and women’s work. Like aged men, women with children but without husbands were not encouraged to take WPA jobs and were presumed by WPA officials to be better candidates for categorical assistance than for WPA work. The WPA sometimes provided employment in cases where states or localities did not provide Aid to Dependent Children, but that was not the WPA’s preference.<sup>37</sup> As with men sixty-five years and older, Congress provided that women with dependent children could not be barred from WPA employment.

36. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report of the WPA*, 42–43; Howard, *The WPA*, 429–34. The median age of men on the WPA rose as war-related employment hired away younger men.

37. The WPA did not keep separate statistics concerning women with children and without husbands in the home, but admitted its policy openly. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 44–45, 67–71; Howard, *The WPA*, 429–34.

Whether the WPA served to ameliorate race stratification and whether the program was “fair” in this sense depends on what one means by fair. Did African Americans fare better with WPA work than they would have relative to the private labor market or with other programs? Did African Americans as group do as well as white Americans under the program? Did the WPA fundamentally challenge the racial caste system of the South, as its radical eligibility criteria and relatively high wage rates might lead one to believe? Did the program promote segregation or integration? Needless to say, the answers to these questions were not the same.

In terms of overall representation, the figures suggest that the WPA served to ameliorate racial stratification. African Americans were more highly represented on WPA rolls than in the general population. Black Americans constituted 14 percent of WPA employees in 1939, whereas the proportion of nonwhite persons in the labor force was about 11 percent in 1940. During the war years the percentage of African Americans working for the WPA increased steadily. The wages that African Americans received through the WPA were likely to be higher than wages paid on the private market. In the South, blacks constituted a higher percentage of WPA workers than relief recipients, suggesting the WPA was providing a better deal than what otherwise would have been available by way of public policy. Furthermore, African Americans were highly represented in the WPA programs of southern cities, again being “over-represented” in relation to their share of the population (as Richard Sterner describes it) in 14 of 22 large southern and border state cities in 1941. In outdoor WPA projects in the South, men of both races worked side by side.<sup>38</sup>

This said, these figures mask other ways that the program failed to reduce inequalities and, in many cases, reinforced them. Blacks tended to suffer higher rates of unemployment than whites, so being over-represented in the WPA work force did not mean over-representation with respect to need. Generally speaking, blacks earned less than whites because they lived in low-wage counties and only rarely found work on the higher paying professional and service projects. African Americans fared much better in the urban South than in the rural South, where the proportion of African Americans receiving WPA work relative to their representation in the population fluctuated wildly, indicating clear local discrimination. African-American women were doubly disadvantaged in the rural South, adding racial discrimination to one program’s biases against female family heads. Sewing projects were both sex- and race-segregated.<sup>39</sup> All in all, the program eased some racial inequalities, but did not challenge the racial order in the South, as the more radical plans of the NRPB committee might have, by guaranteeing a national standard of living for everyone, backed by federal enforcement.

38. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 45. Richard Sterner, *The Negro’s Share: A Study of Income, Consumption, Housing, and Public Assistance* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), chap. 13.

39. Sterner, *The Negro’s Share*, chap. 13.

This account of three periods of welfare reform and the character of the WPA and American social policy in the Roosevelt era suggests a number of further questions. Why did the United States develop a work program and place it at the center of its social reconstruction efforts, whereas other countries did not follow this lead? Why did the program take the form that it did – national funding of projects mainly proposed by local governmental agencies? Why did the program employ such limited numbers of the unemployed? Why did the WPA have the historical trajectory that it did – begun during the second New Deal of 1935, cut back in 1936, sharply expanded in 1938, and ultimately disbanded in 1943? Why was it dismantled, when other programs of the New Deal era merely had their funding cut? In the next section, we address the first set of questions concerning why the United States developed the WPA, who was behind its construction, and what accounts for its historical trajectory.

#### EXPLAINING THE RISE AND HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF THE WPA

We argue that political institutions, state bureaucrats, and partisan regimes had the greatest influence on the WPA. First, however, the most prominent alternatives should be addressed briefly. Although some argue that U.S. social policy, and thus the WPA, was spurred mainly by the Depression, the slump was also severe in many countries that had neither extensive work relief nor increased social spending. Also, despite the Depression, Hoover dragged his heels on relief, and Roosevelt did not propose permanent reforms until the worst was over. In any case, the social emergency might have been addressed solely by way of temporary funds lent or granted to the states and localities, as through the FERA.<sup>40</sup> Another argument suggests that reform groups, such as the Townsend Movement, Share Our Wealth, an unemployed workers' movement, and a resurgent labor movement, had the greatest influence on Depression-era American social policy. Yet the Townsend Movement was focused on old-age pensions, and Share Our Wealth was more interested in soaking the rich and providing cash stipends rather than work. The unemployed workers' movement was largely demobilized in 1935. Organized labor also had little to do with the origins of the WPA. AFL leaders criticized WPA because of its "security" wage; they much preferred the CWA with "prevailing" wages and because recipients did not first have to apply for relief.<sup>41</sup> In short, while both the

40. See Christopher Leman, "Patterns of Policy Development: Social Security in the United States and Canada," *Public Policy* 25 (1977): 261–91; and Fred Block, "The Ruling Class Does Not Rule," *Socialist Revolution* 33 (1977): 6–28. For cross-national evidence, see Peter Gourevitch, *Politics in Hard Times: Comparative Responses to International Economic Crises* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). For a comparison of the United States and Great Britain in the adoption of Keynesian deficit-spending techniques, see Margaret Weir, "Ideas and Politics: The Acceptance of Keynesianism in Britain and the United States," in *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Nations*, ed. Peter A. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 53–86.

41. The classic statement about the role of protest on politics can be found in Frances Fox

Depression and social movements put pressure on the government to advance social policy, they do not account for the type and degree of response that occurred.

### Divisions of Authority in a Political System

We argue that political institutions shaped the process and prospects of changing social policy. Like other scholars, we focus in part on the degree to which powers are divided in a given political system. The more political authority is divided, the less likely far-reaching and coherent policies of any kind are possible because divided political institutions offer numerous veto points where strongly organized anti-social policy groups can prevent the enactment of new legislation. According to this line of thinking, presidential systems are more likely than parliamentary systems to thwart small majorities in favor of spending legislation. Federalism has a similar effect, as lower levels of government must often approve or cooperate with major innovations in public policy.<sup>42</sup>

The U.S. polity is fragmented in extreme and well-known ways. The United States has a presidential system, with separations between the executive and the legislative branches. The U.S. Congress is itself broken up into dominions. The House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee have great powers over social spending bills. Bills can also be tied up in various subcommittees or the Rules Committee. The Senate invokes the ultimate delaying tactic – the rule that a 60 percent majority is needed to close debate. Each of these works to the advantage of those wanting to stall or dilute comprehensive social legislation. What is more, legislators represent districts, not parties, giving them a local rather

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Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Random House, 1977), chap. 1. For analyses of the influences of the Townsend Movement and Share Our Wealth, see Edwin Amenta, Bruce G. Carruthers, and Yvonne Zylan, "A Hero For the Aged? The Townsend Movement, The Political Mediation Model, and U.S. Old-Age Policy, 1934–1950," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992): 308–39; Edwin Amenta, Kathleen Dunleavy, and Mary Bernstein, "Stolen Thunder? Huey Long's Share Our Wealth, Political Mediation, and the Second New Deal," *American Sociological Review* 59 (1994): 678–702. On the unemployed workers' movement, see Steve Valocchi, "The Unemployed Workers' Movement: A Reexamination of the Piven and Cloward Thesis," *Social Problems* 37 (1990): 191–205. On organized labor, see the "Statement of William Green," U.S. Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Supplemental Hearings, Emergency Relief Appropriation*, February 12, 1935, 27–46. Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration*, chap. 4; Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, 52–53; Howard, *The WPA*, 215–16.

42. See, for instance, James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984): 734–49; and Theda Skocpol, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1969), first analyzed the impact of American political and administrative decentralization. For its impact on social politics, see Ellen Immergut, *The Political Construction of Interests: National Health Insurance Politics in Switzerland, France, and Sweden* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Sven Steinmo, *Taxation and Democracy: Swedish, British, and American Approaches to Financing the Modern State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); and Huber et al., "Social Democracy, Christian Democracy, Constitutional Structure and the Welfare State."

than national orientation. The constitutional separation of powers between the legislature and the executive branches is compounded by the existence of courts with powers of review. On top of that, there are the separations of powers in each state, and each state, county, and city has some authority over social spending programs.<sup>43</sup>

Although this multi-faceted separation of powers is an enduring fact of American political life and cannot explain why the United States took world leadership in social spending during the New Deal, the division of authority has implications for the making of American public policy. Because the various U.S. political actors have different constituencies, any truly *national* social spending in the United States will likely be led by the president. Unlike other political actors, the president has a national constituency and can demand and direct the administrative means needed to run modern, national social policies.<sup>44</sup> With its patchwork-quilt of local constituents, Congress must be induced to go along. Because of its representative structure, its divisions of authority, and the constant need to find coalitions for legislative action, Congress is inclined to promote divisibility in any benefits it legislates, through the time-honored practice of log-rolling. Even a pro-social spending Congress will provide money more readily for sub-nationally controlled social policy and promote incremental change – a difficult route to the end of national social policy.

#### Democratic Political Institutions and Public Social Provision

We argue that a more central institutional influence concerns the role of everyday people in political life. Following V.O. Key, we argue that the prevalence of democratic procedures in political decision-making will influence the range of possibility in social spending. Where poor people are not substantial parts of the electorate, politicians will have little incentive to appeal to them and will have little reason to support extensive social policy, such as through the WPA.<sup>45</sup> Democracy in America has had a peculiar career – early to develop, late to complete, especially in the South where African Americans and poor whites were disfranchised in late nineteenth

43. For the classic statement about the division of authority in the U.S. political system, see Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), chap. 2. On the horizontal and vertical dimensions of federalism, see Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32–35.

44. As Stephen Skowronek argues, the presidency is in part an order-shattering institution. Skowronek also argues that the presidency is order-affirming and order creating. See Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 2. We argue that to create national social policy, presidents must work to create national bureaucratic authority and to wrest power or potential power from the Congress and state and local governments. On the conflict between the president and the party organizations that typically control Congress, see Milkis, *The President and the Parties*.

45. V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Knopf, 1949), chap. 14. Key argued especially that disorganized, one-party politics was unlikely to produce public policy serving the interests of “have-nots,” but also addressed the exclusion issue, (307–8). For a cross-national analysis of the role of democratic institutions in the adoption of core social insurance programs, see Hicks et al., “The Programmatic Emergence of the Social Security State.”

century. Many potential voters in the North, too, were discouraged by restrictions on the franchise during the Republican-dominated “system of 1896,” as Walter Dean Burnham has called it. Others, immigrants and their children, were ineligible to vote.<sup>46</sup>

Although the South remained under-democratized during the 1930s, the peculiarities and rhythms of democracy in America influenced New Deal policy. In keeping with this explanation, the elections between 1928 and 1936 may be seen as ones of democratic upsurge. Most of the electoral realignment in favor of the Democrats beginning in 1928 and culminating in the overwhelming majorities of 1936 was due not to voters switching parties, but to previously discouraged or ineligible voters who now voted Democratic.<sup>47</sup> Continuing electoral exclusion in the South, though, presented a consistent drag on the momentum of U.S. social policies and the WPA.

### The Impact of State Actors and Previous Programs on New Deal Welfare Reform

Theodore Lowi and Theda Skocpol, among others, have argued that social policies produce their own politics. According to the concept of “political learning,” for instance, state administrators puzzle over the experiences of previous programs as they devise new ones or augment existing ones. Previous policies may also produce bureaucratic capacities that make some types of future policies likely and other types less likely. Also, the general public may refuse to support social spending programs if the relevant agencies are not staffed professionally.<sup>48</sup>

Much of the evidence about the construction and character of the WPA fits these arguments. Experts situated within the state developed the social

46. J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1970), chap. 4; Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

47. Burnham, *Critical Elections*; Kristi Andersen, *The Creation of a Democratic Majority, 1928–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). The sheer number of people participating in the presidential election leapt from 36.8 million in 1928 to 45.6 million in 1936 (Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 1076, 1078). The switching of parties was not negligible, however, especially among African American voters, who went from strongly pro-Republican to strongly pro-Democratic in the North after the elections of 1932. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Vol 1: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford, 1978), chap. 4; Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

48. Theodore J. Lowi, “Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice,” *Public Administration Review* 32 (1972): 298–310; Theda Skocpol, “Political Response to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal,” *Politics and Society* 10 (1980): 155–201; Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, intro. For a discussion of “political learning,” see Hugh Hecl, *Modern Social Politics: in Britain and Sweden* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), chap. 6. More generally, statist arguments typically hold that states can have their own functions, missions, and interests. Their independence or autonomy is usually defined as the ability of state actors to create independent strategies of action. In democratic and capitalist societies, the state can be considered autonomous when it can create strategies independent from capitalists and organized business groups, political parties, interest groups, movement organizations, and public opinion (see Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In”).

spending programs of the New Deal. Notably, FERA officials, mainly former social workers, devised the work program. Moreover, previous policies influenced the forms of programs. The Committee on Economic Security and New Deal planners mainly endorsed programs that had existing political and bureaucratic backing.

The Committee on Economic Security (CES) began its work in August 1934. It included committees on unemployment insurance, old-age security, medical care or health insurance, and public employment and public assistance – as well as an executive committee. CES staff committees were dominated by governmental experts while the decision-making committees included both governmental experts and political appointees. Given the high priority of the issue of public employment, the deliberations over the WPA actually preceded those over the economic security legislation. Before the CES began work in August, the planning of the WPA was dominated by FERA officials. Roosevelt met informally on this issue over the summer with Hopkins and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, with assistance from FERA staffers. Harold Ickes, the Public Works Administrator, was actively involved, and became more so during the autumn.<sup>49</sup>

Questions of work and relief were central to the initial thinking of the committee. Indeed, “guarantee of work” and “relief” were among the four approaches suggested by executive secretary Witte for possible adoption by the CES in its overall vision of economic security. Coordinating, funding, and promoting means-tested programs across the country, the FERA staff had an excellent overview of the advantages and disadvantages of these programs. They also had substantial control over the issue in the CES. FERA officials headed both the staff and decision-making committees on the issue and FERA officials were well-represented on each. Soon, FERA officials gained even greater control when the committee on public employment and assistance was removed from CES auspices, much to the dismay of Witte. In late November 1934, a memo to the president was drafted by the FERA staff outlining recommendations for the public employment program.<sup>50</sup>

49. For the CES, see Witte, *The Development of the Social Security Act*. For the early deliberations on the work program, see Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, 25–28, 57. Some memos important to the story of the creation of the WPA can be found in “Records of the Work Projects Administration,” National Archives, Record Group 69 (hereafter abbreviated NA, RG).

50. The other two approaches were “social insurance” and “annuity,” see Witte’s “Possible General Approaches to the Problem of Economic Security,” (Aug. 16, 1934). NA, RG 47, box 1, file 8. For the reports of the Committee on Public Employment and Relief, see NA, RG 47, box 1, file 2. Emerson Ross’s initial report “Relief, Employment, and Retraining in Relation to Economic Security” is dated August 13, 1934, NA, RG 47, box 21. For the breaking away of the public employment and relief group from the CES, see Witte, *The Development of the Social Security Act*, 11–12, 31. Aubrey Williams, an assistant administrator of the FERA, was named the chairman of the Technical Board committee on public employment and assistance. Also included were Corrington Gill, another assistant administrator of the FERA, and Howard B. Meyers, of the FERA’s Division of Research and Statistics. FERA Assistant Administrator Jacob Baker also made a number of proposals for a work program. His memos are housed at the Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) Library, Hopkins papers, container 49, “Mr. Jacob Baker’s Memoranda on ‘A National Work Program.’” The FERA’s Ross was placed in charge of staff studies, was aided in

The nature of deliberations had a great impact on what was proposed. Assembled hastily, the CES mainly backed proposals that had prior study and national bureaucratic backing. And prior study and bureaucratic backing were mutually reinforcing, as the reform proposals benefiting from the greatest previous analytical attention also had support in the FERA. In many cases, the CES and Roosevelt merely extended and ratified legislative proposals developed in Congress – proposals to support and buttress existing programs controlled at the state and local levels of government. Members of Congress, especially from states that had already adopted programs, in turn were aided and advised by state-level administrators. Wherever states and localities had begun to develop programs, national legislation, generated before the creation of the CES, recognized this. The CES proposals for unemployment compensation, Old-Age Assistance, and Aid to Dependent Children gave the lower levels of government large degrees of bureaucratic and fiscal control.

The impact of state- and local-level precedents can be seen by comparing other programs. Unlike the power-sharing programs of the Social Security Act, the two major national innovations of the second New Deal – public employment and Old-Age Insurance – had few or no state and local precedents. Permanent public employment programs were never part of the policy makeup of states and localities. Although states and localities had been involved in cyclical, cost-effective public works in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these programs focused on the content of the projects more than on the employment they generated. The states and localities developed various works projects during the Depression only as stopgaps, not permanent policy. In any case, by the time Roosevelt took office these units of government had reached their fiscal limits.<sup>51</sup> The way was clear for the large scale experiments in national public employment that began with the Civil Works Administration in the winter of 1933 and 1934, followed by the more elaborate and institutionally stronger Works Progress Administration. Similarly, many states had developed means-tested old-age pensions by the middle of the 1930s, but none had adopted Old-Age Insurance.

The situation of the programs also reflected their priorities in the plans of the Roosevelt administration. The programs with both the greatest and lowest priorities had the greatest national controls in them. Because the relief of employable people was perhaps the most crucial political and fiscal issue before the country, the Roosevelt administration needed to take charge of it. FERA officials had learned from experience that it was diffi-

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turn by a considerable FERA-financed staff, and produced a report entitled, "A Permanent Program of Public Employment and Relief."

51. Leah Hannah Feder, *Unemployment Relief in Periods of Depression: A Study of Measures Adopted in Certain American Cities, 1857-1922* (New York: Sage, 1936). Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). On the state and local work relief programs, see Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*. On the fiscal crises of the states, see Irving Bernstein, *A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933: The Lean Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

cult getting states and localities to agree to conditions on grants. The old-age insurance program was both gamble and experiment. The administration was willing to risk national old-age insurance being declared unconstitutional, which it was unwilling to do for unemployment compensation, a power-sharing program with higher political priority.

It was not the case, though, that state bureaucrats and previous programs determined entirely the course and nature of New Deal social policy. Although a work strategy was chosen over capital-intensive public works in part because a work program was easier to execute for a weak American state, that was not the only reason. After all, there were few existing administrative capacities for a national work program before the New Deal, and part of the reason concerned politics. Private interests sought to deflect any public works with great money-making potential. In addition, the government officials and experts who provided most of the ideas behind the programs of the second New Deal were not long-time civil servants. Indeed, the early years of the New Deal as a whole was a setback for civil service appointees, as Congress exempted most new agencies from merit system regulations.<sup>52</sup> Hopkins and his associates were engaged in a political project and not merely an administrative one. For these reasons, statist arguments must be supplemented with arguments concerning political partisanship.

#### Reform-Oriented Regimes and the Progress of Work-Relief Policy

The overall historical trajectory of the social legislation and the WPA largely followed partisan politics. Yet current versions of these arguments are deficient. According to most theories of electoral partisanship, a country's party system and the type of regime in power are crucial to explaining the development of public social provision. Most specifications of these arguments suggest that the United States, without a socialist party, would see social policy gains when its center party, the Democrats, takes power.<sup>53</sup> Although the New Deal did occur with the Democrats in control of the government, they remained in power when the WPA was ended and other social spending programs were cut back. Other scholars argue that broader

52. Paul P. Van Riper, *History of The United States Civil Service* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1958), chap. 13.

53. The social-democratic model, developed by John D. Stephens, has had a particularly powerful influence on thinking about the welfare state. This thesis holds that the earlier and more extensively that industrial workers become organized in centralized unions and in social democratic parties, and the more frequently that these parties hold office, the sooner and more extensive the development of the welfare state (John D. Stephens, *The Transition From Capitalism to Socialism* [London: Macmillan, 1979]). For a review of the research on this thesis, see Gøsta Esping-Andersen and Kees van Kersbergen, "Contemporary Research on Social Democracy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992): 187–208. For partisan characterizations of U.S. political parties and those of other rich capitalist democracies, see Francis G. Castles and Peter Mair, "Left-Right Political Scales: Some 'Expert' Judgments," *European Journal of Political Research* 12 (1984): 73–88; Alexander Hicks and Joya Misra, "Political Resources and the Growth of Welfare Effort: The Case of Affluent Capitalist Democracies, 1960–1982," *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (1993): 668–710; Huber, Ragin, and Stephens, "Social Democracy, Christian Democracy, Constitutional Structure and the Welfare State."

social and political coalitions, especially including experts and organized labor, are required to enact far-reaching social spending policies.<sup>54</sup> However, there were few outside experts calling for the Works Progress Administration or anything like it in the 1920s, and organized labor was not fully behind it at first. Furthermore, during World War II New Deal social policy was rolled back despite the resistance of a coalition of organized labor and policy experts.

Many aspects of American party politics elude partisanship perspectives, which expect parties to appeal to voters ideologically through programs. Parties can also rely on supporters who desire “patronage,” such as government jobs or contracts; and such parties have been prevalent in the American setting. As many U.S. political scientists have argued, people working for these organizations typically do so to further their material position in society, not to pursue an ideology or program of reform.<sup>55</sup> David Mayhew claims that patronage-oriented parties avoid programmatic social policy because they find professional bureaucracies threatening. Social insurance and social assistance programs require trained and qualified workers to operate them, and so their supporters seek to legislate merit-based hiring practices. When they are successful, a letter of recommendation from a party notable no longer constitutes a ticket to a government job.<sup>56</sup>

An alternative is to provide patronage opportunities through social policy. Such programs may win the support of patronage-oriented politicians who are favored or expect to benefit. Yet that strategy brings its own problems. The programs will most likely be opposed by others not so favored. Providing patronage opportunities often comes at the expense of setting up professional bureaucracies and the efficient running of a program. Most of all, a program designed in such a way opens itself to charges of corruption and unfairness and may end up becoming discredited in public opinion.

For these reasons, partisanship and political coalition theories require

54. Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, chap. 1. Orloff, *The Politics of Pensions*, chap. 2.

55. For notable arguments about “machine” or patronage politics, see Harold Gosnell, *Machine Politics: Chicago Model* 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Martin Shefter, “Party and Patronage: Germany, Italy, and England,” *Politics and Society* 7 (1977): 404–51; and Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

56. Mayhew refers to these as “traditional party organizations” and defines them as autonomous, long-lasting, hierarchical, seeking to nominate candidates for a wide range of public offices, and relying substantially on material incentives (Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986], 19–20). He also argues (292–94) that the leaders of patronage-oriented party organizations are inclined to avoid programmatic benefits because the kind of person attracted to patronage parties is unlikely to be someone with an urge to build programs, pro-spending groups like the labor movement cannot easily exercise influence in them, and these parties promote issue-less politics and discourage professional bureaucracies, while creating a political culture of pessimism about the utility of government.

some revision to explain the historical trajectory of U.S. social policy and the WPA. According to our institutionally-revised partisanship argument, we anticipate public spending gains when what we call *reform-oriented regimes* take power. Because of institutional variations, however, taking power in the American context usually means more than having a Democratic executive and a mere Democratic majority in the legislature. At the national level, a pro-social spending regime requires the election of a reform-oriented president *and* a “pro-spending” Congressional majority. Below we detail the requirements of each.

A president’s orientation toward reform is likely to have a key impact on social spending programs. Presidents can employ persuasion or favors or their influence over public opinion to convince wavering legislators to support a domestic program. But what is likely to induce the impulse to support social policy in a president? A few things come to mind. First, a president is likely to be reform-oriented if affiliated with a party in favor of social spending and unaffiliated with a party opposed. Second, a president’s orientation to reform depends on the number and degree of alliances with pro-spending organizations, ranging from professional reform organizations to labor unions. Third, orientation to reform depends on a president’s political history of supporting or opposing social policy. Finally, the president has to be oriented more toward domestic policy than foreign policy. Wanting to reform is not enough, though. Any president is more likely to succeed with more power and room to maneuver. These depend in turn on other variables. The greater the electoral majority, the greater the influence the president can have over social policy. A close connection in the public’s mind to recent presidents from the same party is likely to constrain a president, whereas a lack of connection would not.<sup>57</sup>

Presidents, however, cannot legislate on their own and need to be backed by a large reform-oriented contingent in Congress. Its size must be such that it is able to overcome resistance not only from Republicans, but also from Democratic representatives of undemocratic regimes.<sup>58</sup> Two sorts of Democrats, we argue, were likely to defect from Roosevelt administration-supported social spending proposals. The segments of the party most opposed to social spending were likely to be found in the South – where, Key suggests, politics was largely undemocratic and there was little electoral reason for politicians to promote policies to aid the less well off. In the 1930s, for instance, 102 House seats were held by southern Democrats. A second group likely to defect were Democrats from patronage-oriented parties, as suggested by Mayhew. In the thirteen states where these party organizations flourished, Democratic congressional representatives might back social spending programs, but it would depend on the nature of the program and their potential to control it.

57. On the maneuverability of presidents, see Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*.

58. For a discussion of sectionalism in America, see Richard Franklin Bensel, *Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880–1980* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

Political Forces for Reform and U.S. Social Spending Policy,  
1931–1944

By the criteria enumerated above, it is easy to see that Franklin Roosevelt was going to be more reform-oriented than his predecessor, Herbert Hoover. Hoover was associated with the low-tax policies of the Republican administrations of the 1920s. He was not closely aligned with either the labor movement or with professional social reform associations. Although, like most American presidents of his era, he was more concerned with domestic than foreign policy, he had no previous political record in favor of modern social policy; he had held no previous elected political office. As Secretary of Commerce in the early 1920s he had explored modern and moderate means to fight short-term unemployment, but his inquiry stopped short of unemployment insurance or large expenditures to promote direct employment.<sup>59</sup>

By contrast, Roosevelt was the nominee of the Democratic party. That party had not been in the vanguard of national and permanent social spending reform, but it did have its advantages. In Congress, the Democrats led the fight for emergency relief during the waning years of the Hoover regime. The nation's strongest social policy advocate, Senator Robert Wagner, was a Democratic leader. The party also supported unemployment insurance and old-age pensions in its 1932 platform. Most of all, the Democratic party, unlike the Republican party, was not committed to policies of low taxation and to industrial and financial interest groups. Roosevelt himself was an earnest champion of social policy reform as the Governor of New York: He had presided over the passage of its old-age pension legislation and the reorganization of its Department of Welfare, and was in the forefront of providing emergency relief through New York's Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. For these reasons, he received support from many pro-spending people and groups.<sup>60</sup>

Social spending results depend on both the strength of the reform impulse and the mandate and mission of the president. Roosevelt's reform-orientation was relatively strong and consistent, though it varied somewhat during his twelve years in power. It grew stronger as he sought and gained the support of pro-spending organizations in his bid for reelection in 1936. During that election, too, his support had become much more polarized along class lines. Near the end of the decade, however, Roosevelt's top priority became foreign policy, as he prepared American entry into the war and was reelected an unprecedented second time. Roosevelt's mandate to act on his agenda was probably greater than his social-spending impulse and certainly more consistent. He was only the second Democratic presi-

59. Udo Sautter, *Three Cheers for the Unemployed: Government and Unemployment Before the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

60. See, for instance, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 390–95; Brock, *Welfare, Democracy, and the New Deal*, chap. 4; Hopkins, *Spending to Save*, chap. 3; and Sautter, *Three Cheers for the Unemployed*, 305–13.

dent of his century and followed twelve years of Republican rule – freeing him from the policies of predecessors. His mandate was strong from the start, as he won in 1932 with some 57.4 percent of the two-party vote. His support peaked after the elections of the 1936, which he won with 60.8 percent of the two-party vote and captured all states but Maine and Vermont. In 1940 his support dropped somewhat to 54.7 percent of the two-party vote, as eight states joined Vermont and Maine in the Republican column. In 1944, the totals were 53.4 percent and twelve states lost.<sup>61</sup>

The president needed reform-oriented congressional majorities, however, to support his social legislation – or to force his hand by proposing some of their own. For pro-social spenders to control Congress, a number of things would have to happen simultaneously. Democrats, especially in the agrarian and non-patronage party West, and third-party candidates had to establish a sizable presence in Congress. Democrats would also need to win the vast majority of the congressional districts in which organized labor had a substantial electoral presence.<sup>62</sup> These contingents had to be large enough to overcome opposition to social spending proposals – notably from Republicans and southern Democrats. These institutional impediments were so great that only rarely did these events converge.

From 1931 through 1944 Democrats held majorities in Congress, but party fortunes there varied much more than did the electoral support for the president. The strongest Democratic representation in the Congress came after the elections of 1934 and 1936. At the beginning of 1935, the Democrats had a majority of 216 in the House and a majority of 44 in the Senate. This swing to the Democrats flouted the usual electoral principle that the president's party will lose seats during off-term elections. After Roosevelt's reelection landslide in 1936, the Democratic majority in the House rose to 242 and the majority in the Senate to 60. Although the Democrats lost 70 seats in the House in 1938, their majority was still almost 100 and the Democratic majority in the Senate fell only to 46, an extremely high level for any period in U.S. history. Although the party held its strength during Roosevelt's second reelection in 1940, in the off-year elections of 1942 the Democratic majority in the House dropped to 10 and in the Senate to 21. In what follows we trace the reform orientation of the House of Representatives. We do this not because it is more important than the Senate – indeed, the institutional barriers to social reform were greater in the Senate. But the Senate was highly Democratic during our period of interest, while the partisan make-up of the House varied more substantially and thus would be expected to have a greater influence on fluctuations in social policy.

To simplify an analysis of the support for social spending proposals in the House, we first isolate Democratic representatives from democratic political systems and programmatic, “open” parties, and representatives from radical third-parties or endorsed by them. According to our revised parti-

61. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 1075, 1077.

62. David R. Mayhew, *Party Loyalty Among Congressmen: The Difference Between Democrats and Republicans, 1947–1962* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

sanship hypothesis, a sizeable contingent of these *open and democratic left* legislators are key to support for social spending legislation. Generally speaking, we expect them to be strongly in favor of new permanent national commitments to citizens in social spending legislation; they are arrayed appropriately on the far left side of Table 4. In the middle left-side of the table are what we expect to be less reliable allies of public spending. Patronage-oriented northern Democrats are counted as *left-moderate*, as are representatives running on both Democratic and Republican party lines. Northern Republicans from open party systems, in the middle-right part of the table, are counted as the *right-moderate*. We envision these representatives as susceptible to influence from the president or insurgents, or both.

On the far right side are Republicans from traditional, patronage party systems and Democrats from the nondemocratic South. These *patronage right or undemocratic* legislators are expected to be the least likely to support new national commitments in social spending and most likely to fight them. Also included among these are representatives from conservative third parties or who are endorsed by such parties. By *anti-spenders*, we mean those likely to be opposed to permanent, national social spending programs with generous standards in them. Southern Democrats, for instance, were not averse to gaining national funds raised mainly from a northern tax base. What they opposed were generous national standards in social policy amounts and the national administration of social policy. They also opposed legislative provisions by which other states could raise benefits to a high level and have an open-ended claim on the public purse. For that reason, southern Democrats, especially the Virginia senators, opposed terminating the FERA, which gave the states greater control over relief monies.<sup>63</sup>

The best case for social spending proposals is for a large open and democratic left contingent to co-exist with those likely to support them. A medium-sized open and democratic left group, when faced with less than an overwhelming far-right contingent, is also expected to produce significant if less dramatic gains in social spending legislation. When patronage-right and undemocratic representatives are in a majority, we expect anti-spending legislation.

As Table 4 shows, the fortunes of these groups varied greatly during the period. The left-wing contingent ranged from 28 after the election of 1930 to 106, after the election of 1936. Although the far-left contingent never outnumbered its far-right counterpart, at several points – notably after the elections of 1934 and 1936 – the far-left rivaled the far-right in size. In 1935 through 1936, for instance, the reformers had 99 House seats, as compared to 157 for the conservatives, and in 1937 through 1938, the difference had narrowed to 37 seats. At other points, the left-wing group had a relatively high number of seats, particularly in 1933 through 1934 and 1939 through 1940. If one adds the moderate left contingent to the reform side and the

63. See Edwin Amenta, *Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. 5.

Table 4. Pro- and Anti-Social Spending Contingents in the U.S. House of Representatives: 1931–1944

Years	Open and Democratic Left <sup>a</sup>		Patronage Left or Right-Moderate <sup>b</sup>		Open Right or Right-Moderate <sup>c</sup>		Patronage Right or Undemocratic <sup>d</sup>		Pro-Spending Strength
	Strong Pro-Spending	Weak Pro-Spending	Strong Pro-Spending	Weak Pro-Spending	Strong Anti-Spending	Weak Anti-Spending	Strong Anti-Spending	Weak Anti-Spending	
1931–1932	28	90	90	108	206	(196)	206	(196)	Weak
1933–1934	95	127	127	52	161	(9)	161	(9)	Medium/Strong
1935–1936	99	135	135	44	157	33	157	33	Strong
1937–1938	106	142	142	44	143	61	143	61	Strong
1939–1940	90	86	86	73	186	(80)	186	(80)	Medium
1941–1942	72	107	107	73	183	(77)	183	(77)	Medium
1943–1944	68	57	57	88	222	(185)	222	(185)	Weak

<sup>a</sup> Includes radical third parties, Democrats elected in open democratic states and Democrats or Republicans affiliated with radical third parties.

<sup>b</sup> Includes Democrats affiliated with the Republican Party and Democrats from states dominated by traditional, patronage parties.

<sup>c</sup> Includes Republicans from open, democratic states and Republicans affiliated with the Democratic Party.

<sup>d</sup> Includes Republicans from states dominated by traditional, patronage party organizations and from the South, Democrats or Republicans affiliated with conservative third parties, and Southern Democrats.

<sup>e</sup> The margin indicates the numerical advantage held by representatives in the strong pro-spending and pro-spending columns over those in the strong anti-spending and anti-spending columns. Anti-spending margins are in parentheses.

Sources: Congressional Quarterly, Guide to U.S. Elections, 2nd Edition (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1985); David Mayhew, *Placing Parties in American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

moderate right to the anti-reform side, the left contingent was in a majority from 1935 through 1938. At other times, the left-wing deficit was less than one hundred – notably from 1939 through 1942. By contrast, after the off-year elections of 1942 the far-right group by itself constituted a majority, and the right groups outnumbered the left ones by 185 in the House.

The final column of Table 4, labeled “Pro-Spender Strength,” provides an overall evaluation of the relative size of left groups to the right ones. The evaluations are based not only on the make-up of the House, but also on the existence of a reformer Democrat in the White House and a heavily Democratic Senate. The period 1935–1938 had the largest pro-spending contingent. Its size was more moderate in 1939–1942 and 1933–1934. In each of these “moderate” periods, the strong pro-spending contingent was sizeable, and the strong anti-spending group held less than a majority in the House. The least favorable period for social policy was 1943–1944, when the anti-spenders were in a majority.

The historical pattern of these reform contingents is closely reflected in public social spending innovations and legislation. After the off-year 1934 elections, as far as public social spending proposals were concerned, Roosevelt and other proponents for spending reform were in an extremely favorable position. From 1935 through 1938, for example, the left groups numbered greater than the 218 House members required to sign a discharge petition to bring any proposed bill to the floor of the House. It is therefore no surprise that the far-reaching Works Progress Administration and Social Security Act were passed in 1935. Moreover, Roosevelt strove to alter the structure of the executive state and the balance of power among the branches of government after the elections of 1936. With this sort of political configuration, the Roosevelt Administration and its supporters could overcome the opposition of Republicans and rural Democrats – on most issues.

Immediately after the elections of 1936 the Administration saw very few new successes, apparently in contradiction to the expectations of the argument. The bid to “pack” the Supreme Court that had ruled unconstitutional much of the first New Deal, was a conspicuous failure, as was the 1938 reorganization legislation that was designed to grant great powers to the national executive. It would, however, be a mistake to dismiss the important gains for social policy these gambits made possible. The attack on the Supreme Court speeded its acceptance of second New Deal legislation. Without it much of the second New Deal would probably have followed much of the first in being ruled unconstitutional. Similarly, the fight to remake the national executive fell short of passage by only a few votes in 1938. This struggle made possible the more moderate but still significant reorganization legislation of the following year – which led to the consolidation of the WPA. In any case, the administration’s key losses were not explicitly on social spending, but on gaining new and general powers for the executive branch.<sup>64</sup>

64. On the Supreme Court and the first New Deal, see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of*

According to James T. Patterson's famous thesis, a conservative coalition came to power after the elections of 1938 and signaled the end of the New Deal.<sup>65</sup> Although the congressional alignment in 1939 was less favorable to social spending than the previous one, as Table 4 shows, it was far from dominated by conservatives. And there were minor, but significant, social policy successes in the late 1930s – such as the 1939 amendments to the Social Security Act and increased appropriations for the WPA. These gains owed to the fact that the political right was not in a majority in the House or Senate. Similarly, the reform-oriented contingent was still moderately strong after Roosevelt's second reelection in 1940. Yet domestic policy became less central to the president's agenda, magnifying the power of conservatives in Congress.

The real ascension to power of the congressional conservatives followed the elections of 1942. Perhaps because of wartime setbacks and hardships, the Democrats lost many more seats than the president's party typically loses during a midterm election. Needless to say, almost all of the losses were non-southern Democrats. And the left-wing congressional group was much weaker after 1942 than after the 1938 elections because in the latter year it began in a weaker position. Moreover, the president was almost entirely consumed with the war and made little effort on domestic policy aside from taxation. After the debacle of 1942, the New Deal was rolled back. The WPA was discharged, and other programs, including the scheduled tax increases for Old Age and Survivors' Insurance, were cut.

This institutionalized version of the partisanship thesis helps to explain the trajectory of the WPA. The waxing and waning of the general reform orientation of the president and Congress helps to explain overall developments in the WPA and U.S. social spending policy. In addition, the institutional limits to reform-oriented regimes – the existence of large number of representatives from undemocratic districts and from patronage-oriented polities – help to explain why the WPA was never funded at a high level. But this thesis does not explain why the WPA was destroyed during the second World War, while other social spending programs suffered only cuts.

This is because analysis is based on a generic social spending program, run in a routine fashion, with benefits that are relatively automatic and few patronage opportunities. Although the WPA constituted the Roosevelt Administration's most extensive social spending effort, it was not such a generic social spending program. The WPA provided more jobs than were on the payrolls of most cities. Despite an enormous WPA national bureaucracy that was committed to the program, it was far from automatic in its operation. What must be explained is how the specific form of the WPA and the

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*Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), chaps. 23–24. On the bid to alter the court, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, 1963), chap. 10. On the bid to reorganize the executive, see Karl, *Executive Reorganization and Reform in the New Deal*; Polenberg, *Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government*; and Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, chap. 1.

65. James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933–1939* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967).

ways in which it was altered over time led to its downfall during a period in which political support for social spending was generally low.

#### EXPLAINING THE OPPOSITION TO THE WPA AND ITS DEMISE

Why the WPA did not survive in some form to face the postwar world is a question that is often ignored. It is typically assumed that the WPA was designed as explicitly temporary and thus would naturally end as the Depression ended. But neither the demise of the WPA nor that of the Depression was inevitable, and neither was foreseen by policymakers at the time. Although unemployment did decline during the war years, lessening the immediate need for the WPA, policymakers expected high unemployment to resume after the war; notably, the NRPB Committee saw public employment and public works as central strategies to counter postwar unemployment and provide the right to an “American standard” of economic security.

There are many reasons to believe the program could have, or should have, lasted. After all, the WPA was key to the first welfare reform of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and became one of the most popular programs of the second New Deal. The commitment to the WPA was reaffirmed in the recession of 1938, when New Deal planners turned to spending as a solution, focused on social policy generally, and shored up the WPA’s administrative structure. Even if the WPA had been viewed as solely temporary, it seemed a likely candidate for extension given its enormous public popularity and its provision of aid to thousands of beneficiaries. Eliminating programs is not easy. When it happens, it deserves explanation. As Paul Pierson notes, eliminating or even cutting social programs provides direct and substantial harm to identifiable people, while providing only diffuse or theoretical benefits to many.<sup>66</sup> Politicians have a difficult chore on their hands when they want to destroy existing programs and need to devise strategies to shift blame.

The work of historian Michael Katz stands out in addressing directly the demise of the WPA. It suggests that work relief is inherently problematic, and that the WPA version of work relief added to the standard problems. Work relief programs have conflicting goals: projects are supposed to provide high-quality output, yet employ the greatest number; high wages provide a disincentive to take private employment, while low wages undermine unions; combining relief with useful job training proves difficult. Katz argues especially that the WPA was launched without enough advance planning and administrative capacities to be run properly. He also argues that the political dependence of the WPA, with its funding subject to congressional whim, undercut the program. In addition, the criteria for selection to the WPA, such as restriction of benefits to one family member, were discriminatory, as would be any criteria that did not provide a job for everyone who needed and wanted one. Allowing wages to vary across the

66. Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State?*, chap. 1.

country, as the WPA did, meant that equal work did not result in equal pay.<sup>67</sup>

Many of these were indeed real problems. The WPA was built very quickly and ran into numerous administrative troubles; however, other New Deal programs had similar difficulties, yet survived. What is more, the WPA worked from the examples of the CWA and FERA work relief, was able to put a great many to work quickly, and carried on throughout the second half of the Depression decade. Katz is also right that the program discriminated, especially against women and against African Americans in the rural South, who were unlikely to be accepted for general relief. But this sort of discrimination was not unlike discrimination found in other New Deal programs, and was not politically unpopular. In addition, many of the conflicts within New Deal's work relief program were identified by New Deal planners, who were ready to modify it. The political dependence of the WPA on Congress is important, but why did it eventually turn against the program?

Some of the general arguments discussed earlier can also be applied to the demise or retrenchment of the WPA. Unemployment dropped to insignificant levels in 1942, eliminating the immediate need for the program and perhaps the numbers of people seeing themselves as potentially benefiting from it. Lowi argues that distributive programs engender interest group support, while redistributive programs, including most social spending, do not. The WPA was a means-tested program, the type that scholars suggest is the most vulnerable in a period of retrenchment of social policy. Skocpol's arguments about "policy feedbacks" apply to the retrenchment of programs, as well as their creation. Lack of administrative capacities can doom a program to failure as well as make it unlikely that it will be chosen in the first place. As Pierson argues, unemployment is typically temporary, and so programs for the unemployed only rarely engender stable interest group support, making them more vulnerable to retrenchment.<sup>68</sup>

Although each of the arguments above provides part of the answer, it seems unlikely that any one of them can mainly explain the demise of the WPA. To be certain, the WPA was means-tested. But other means-tested programs, such as Old-Age Assistance and Aid to Dependent Children, were not attacked by Congress and continued to flourish during the war and afterward. By the end of the Depression decade few New Deal social spending programs had stronger administrative capabilities. At the end of 1939, the WPA included some 1800 central or regional administrative employees, with divisions responsible for statistics, research, investigation, and

67. Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 224–34. The two major contemporaneous studies of the WPA – Howard, *The WPA* and Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief* – were premised on the organization lasting for the long run and were completed before its demise.

68. Lowi, "Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice"; Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, intro. Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State?*, 102–3. Pierson also argues that programs can have "information effects" that influence bids to cut them and that mature programs have "lock-in" effects that counter bids to cut them.

information.<sup>69</sup> Unemployment dropped, but this did not mean the end of unemployment compensation programs, and most experts, conservative and liberal, expected high unemployment after the war. The WPA had forged relationships with local governments around the country, many of which had benefited from its spending, and an unemployed workers' organization developed around the WPA.

Our argument for the demise of the WPA builds on previous ones, but goes beyond them. Certain aspects of the program made the WPA more vulnerable than other social spending programs by making its opponents more determined and supporters more equivocal in their support. The main features counting against the WPA were the size and scope of the program and the national executive authority it embodied. These characteristics mattered more than the fact that the WPA was a means-tested program addressed to unemployment. Because of institutional circumstances of American politics – the lack of democracy in the South and the patronage nature of many local party systems – the opponents of the WPA had weapons to fight it with. Despite the dominance of the Democratic party throughout the WPA era, pro-social spenders could never control the government and make the WPA secure. Other aspects of the program – its centralized administration and its impact on wages – made congressional liberals and organized labor uneasy allies of the program.<sup>70</sup>

#### Determined Opposition to the WPA

Like other means-tested programs, such as ADC and OAA, the WPA gave businessmen, southern plantation owners, and their political representatives a strong motivation to fight the program. In addition, businessmen generally opposed any programs that might lead to their paying higher taxes. Also, although the WPA was supposed to avoid work projects that competed with private business, this line was difficult to draw, and capitalists typically never thought it was drawn sharply enough. The WPA had the added disadvantage of potentially bidding up the wages of workers. A poll taken by *Fortune* magazine in October 1939 asked a sample of businessmen which of many New Deal measures was “the worst of these acts.” The WPA came in third (17.1 percent), behind the Wagner Act (43.9 percent) and the undistributed profits tax (22.5 percent), which was eventually eliminated. Social security came in fifth (3.4 percent).<sup>71</sup> In short, capitalists had

69. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report*, 10–13.

70. For a more comprehensive analysis of Senate roll-call votes and state-level differences concerning the WPA, see Edwin Amenta and Drew T. Halfmann, “Institutional Politics and the WPA: Voting and State-Level Analyses” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Toronto, August 1997).

71. Cantril, *Public Opinion*, 405. George F. Houston, Chairman, Committee on Industrial Financing, National Association of Manufacturers, called for the end of the WPA and the reverting of relief to the localities (U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Unemployment and Relief, *Hearings, Volume 2 [February 28 to April 8, 1938]* [Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938], 903–17). On capitalist opposition to the Social Security Act, see Edwin Amenta and Sunita Parikh, “Capitalists Did Not Want the Social Security Act: A Critique

ample motivation to induce their northern Republican allies to fight the program.

Republicans were among the most stalwart opponents of the WPA throughout its history. In almost all votes concerning the WPA, Republicans provided the greatest opposition, as a key selection of Senate votes indicates in Table 5.<sup>72</sup> For instance, approximately 75 percent of Senate Republicans supported a failed amendment to reduce the initial appropriation for the WPA from \$4 billion to \$2 billion in 1935. And some 73 percent of Senate Republicans voted for a failed effort to reduce the appropriation for the WPA in 1937. Approximately 81 percent of Senate Republicans voted in favor of the first (failed) effort, in 1937, to induce local sponsors to contribute 25 percent of the costs of the WPA, a measure that would have hindered WPA spending in many localities. In 1939, when the opponents of the WPA began to draw blood, some 91 percent of Senate Republicans joined the successful opposition to the attempt to restore \$150 million to the WPA.<sup>73</sup>

The wage-increasing and job-providing potential of the WPA made it threatening to southern political leaders, who also fought generous standards in OAA and ADC.<sup>74</sup> A WPA that delivered on its promise to employ all those deemed employable but without jobs would doubtless constitute a tempting alternative to tenant farming and agricultural work. High WPA wages, consistent work, fair and routinized treatment of recipients, and moves to make the program permanent were all opposed by southern Democrats. They also wanted to prevent excessive sums being spent on the rest of the country. These concerns were balanced only somewhat by the need of a poor region for federal money.

In its early years, southern Democrats tended to support the WPA, although with important exceptions. On the bill to halve the initial appropriation for the WPA, some 22 percent of southern senators supported the

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of the 'Capitalist Dominance' Thesis," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 124–29. See also, Nancy E. Rose, "Work Relief in the 1930s and the Origins of the Social Security Act." *Social Service Review* xx (1989): 63–91, for complaints by businessmen about work relief before the WPA.

72. In this voting analysis, we include non-trivial, significant and representative votes. We selected the most highly contested WPA votes of their legislative session, but also focused on the content of votes – looking for those which appeared to be meaningful indicators of support or opposition to social spending. This resulted in choosing 9 Senate votes from a universe of 70 spread over the duration of the WPA's existence. The vote totals include legislators' indications of support or opposition through pairings and announcements recorded in the *Congressional Record*. For discussions of the significance of roll-call votes, see William H. Riker, "A Method for Determining The Significance of Roll Calls in Voting Bodies," in *Legislative Behavior: A Reader in Theory and Research*, ed. John C. Wahlke and Heinz Eulau (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959); Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger and Daniel Kryder, "Limiting Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933–1950," *Political Science Quarterly* 108 (1993): 283–306.

73. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), *United States Congressional Roll Call Voting Records, 1789–1991* [Computer file] (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1992); Amenta and Halfmann, "Institutional Politics and the WPA."

74. Jill S. Quadagno, *The Transformation of Old-Age Security: Class and Politics in the American Welfare State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Table 5. Percent Voting Against Spending/Generosity for Notable Senate WPA Bills, 1935–1941

Date	Bill No.	OD	PD	SD	Rep.	
03/19/35	H.J.R. 117	15	25	22	75	Reduces appropriation from \$4 to \$2 billion.
02/02/37	H.R. 3587	31	59	37	73	Reduces appropriation from \$790 to \$775 million.
06/21/37	H.J.R. 361	16	36	55	81	Sets local project contributions at 25 percent of costs.
01/27/39	H.J.R. 83	33	38	45	91	Restores \$150 million to proposed appropriation.
04/11/39	H.J.R. 246	43	50	64	91	Increases appropriation by \$50 million.
07/28/39	S. 2864	23	35	73	50	Eliminates 18-month time limit for WPA employment.
08/04/39	H.R. 7462	21	16	95	47	Allows amendment to maintain prevailing wages.
06/15/40	H.J.R. 544	52	56	79	38	Eliminates 18-month time limit for WPA employment.
06/19/41	H.J.R. 193	44	54	62	80	Increases appropriation from \$875 million to \$1.25 billion.

Notes: "OD" refers to members of left parties and Democrats from "open" polities, defined as democratic political systems and non-patronage oriented party systems. "PD" refers to Democrats from patronage-oriented party systems. "SD" refers to southern Democrats. "Rep." refers to Republicans. For selection of roll-call votes, see note 72.

Source: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), United States Congressional Roll Call Voting Records, 1789–1991 [Computer file] (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1992).

reduction, higher than for Democrats as a whole (see Table 5). However, an amendment to the same appropriation that would have provided wages equal to local prevailing wages drew 80 percent opposition from southern senators.<sup>75</sup> In 1937, southern Representatives led by Clifton Woodrum of Virginia, the chair of a House Appropriations subcommittee, were the vanguard of a failed charge to reduce the WPA appropriation by \$500 million. Southern senators, notably James Byrnes of South Carolina, the head of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on relief, were in the forefront of the first movement, in 1937, to require a local contribution, initially of 40 percent, for all WPA projects. Such extensive local cost-sharing was intended to reduce federal influence and WPA expenditures as a whole. Some 55 percent of southern Democrats supported this measure, compared with 36 percent of Democrats from patronage-oriented party systems and 16 percent of Democrats from open political and party systems.<sup>76</sup>

The voting evidence supports the interpretation that southern Democrats were always uneasy with the WPA, especially with the possibility of a more nationally-controlled and generous version of it being made permanent, and they merely waited for more favorable political conditions to make a stand. Byrnes, for instance, demanded the end of WPA appropriations in 1937, declaring the emergency had passed. All the same, the Roosevelt administration won the easy passage of its requests that year and in 1938, during a recession. The administration did not suffer significant defeats on the WPA until 1939, when Republicans had a much greater presence in Congress.<sup>77</sup> In the 1939 battle to restore \$150 million to the WPA, New Dealers in the Senate, backed by Roosevelt, sought to regain the full amount instead of the \$100 million that had passed. On the failed amendment to restore the remaining \$50 million, only 36 percent of southern Democrats voted in favor, as opposed to more than one-half of other Democrats. Southern senators remained concerned about the effects of the WPA on wages. After prevailing wage requirements were repealed in the 1939 appropriation bill, 95 percent of southern senators voted against a suspension of Senate rules to consider a measure to reinstate them. This blanket opposition came in contrast to the 21 percent of Democrats from open political and party systems who opposed the suspension. Southern senators were also strong supporters of an eighteen-month time limit on WPA employment. In July 1939, 73 percent of southern senators, versus 28 percent of other Democrats, opposed an amendment to soften the time-limit passed earlier that summer.<sup>78</sup>

75. ICPSR, *U.S. Congressional Roll Call Voting Records, 1789–1991*, file DARCS74, votes 38 and 24; Amenta and Halfmann, "Institutional Politics and the WPA."

76. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, 142–43, 170–75. The 40 percent figure was later lowered to 25 percent. ICPSR, *U.S. Congressional Roll Call Voting Records, 1789–1991*, file DARCS75, vote 24; Amenta and Halfmann, "Institutional Politics and the WPA."

77. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, 140–41, 234–41; Amenta and Halfmann, "Institutional Politics and the WPA."

78. ICPSR, *U.S. Congressional Roll Call Voting Records, 1789–1991*, file DARCS76, votes 29, 97, 87; Amenta and Halfmann, "Institutional Politics and the WPA."

The evidence also supports the complementary interpretation that most southern Democrats became opposed to the WPA after the Roosevelt administration took steps to make it permanent. In this way of thinking, these politicians supported a limited WPA at first, but defected later. Such steps included Roosevelt's executive order in June 1938 giving WPA administrative employees civil service status and his placing the WPA in the Federal Works Agency, created through Reorganization Plan 1, enacted in June 1939.<sup>79</sup> In either account, southern Democrats opposed a long-term and generous work program with national standards and control.

Federal control over the WPA and the partisan nature of the Roosevelt regime posed a more specific threat to political conservatives generally, including Democrats outside the South. In 1938, the WPA was perceived by many to be the means by which Roosevelt would "purge" his conservative enemies in Democratic primaries. Hopkins did not want to use WPA funds to reward Democrats more concerned with oiling their political machines than serving the unemployed. In this, his views conflicted with those of James Farley, the head of the Democratic National Committee and a forthright advocate of employing the WPA to aid regular Democrats – conservative and liberal alike. Hopkins became eager to deploy the WPA to aid the New Deal's allies and harm its opponents, and the WPA was potentially an important tool in political struggles. Political organizations could pressure WPA workers to canvass or kick back a percentage of their wages; even if this did not succeed at high rates it might still prove important, as WPA workers usually greatly outnumbered municipal employees. Although Roosevelt's purges were unsuccessful in the South and only marginally successful elsewhere, non-Democrats and conservative Democrats alike feared the WPA was or might be used against them.<sup>80</sup>

#### The WPA's Executive Control and Impact on Wages

The WPA was especially threatening because of the power it gave to the executive branch and the administrators of the program. Although some projects were federal, the WPA relied mainly on projects developed by local and state sponsors. This allowed them to limit how much would be done and who would do it. Yet the program did not automatically fund sponsors' proposals, but made them compete for WPA grants. Denying federal grants was much easier for the WPA than for the means-tested programs of the Social Security Act, for which to deny a grant meant to cut off funds for all of the dependent children or aged in the state – an enormous and potentially self-defeating step that the Social Security Board was reluctant to take. The kinds of denials possible for the WPA were smaller and more pointed, and the threats were accordingly more plausible. By contrast, although Old-Age Insurance was a national program with national administration, it provided benefits according to a formula that was subject to congressional decision, not administrative fiat.

79. *New York Times*, January 11, 1939, 1.

80. The WPA was investigated by congressional committees in 1938, 1939, and 1940. See Howard, *The WPA*, 587–95; and Charles, *The Minister of Relief*, 202.

For those members of Congress favorable to the New Deal generally, but uneasy about bids for power by the executive branch, the WPA was a mixed blessing. Although it had a mission common to social programs of the period, in the control it provided to the executive, the WPA also resembled the Roosevelt administration's plans to reconfigure the Supreme Court and reorganize the executive branch. It should come as no surprise that the history of the WPA is marked by conservative members of Congress seeking to reduce the administration's control. Virginia's Woodrum, of the House Appropriations committee, tried everything from devising a formula for the distribution of the WPA's funds to demanding that appropriations be made month by month. Sometimes these attempts to remove the administration's discretion found unlikely allies. When Senator Byrnes's Special Senate Unemployment Committee called for the earmarking of funds to the states, Senator James Murray, Democrat of Montana and stalwart New Dealer, spoke out in favor of the plan.<sup>81</sup>

As Katz has noted, the wages of the WPA constituted a double-edged sword. Employers opposed any wage high enough to constitute an alternative to the market and treated almost any wage as such a threat. But the labor movement preferred no WPA at all to one that paid wages at "relief" rates. As it happened, in the parts of the country where the labor movement had little influence, including most of the South, relief wages were typically offered. More important, when Congress in 1939 set hours for WPA workers and flattened wage differentials between geographic regions, it reduced WPA wage rates where labor was most unionized. The AFL and CIO lobbied unsuccessfully for repeal of the 130-hour provision. Afterward, the AFL found the situation threatening enough to call a conference of unions in Washington to discuss coordinated action. The AFL authorized its construction locals to make their own decisions about striking at WPA projects; many, representing between 50,000 and 100,000 workers, did so. After failing to repeal the wage provisions, labor turned its attention to obtaining a larger appropriation for the Public Works Administration and for housing construction – where workers could be employed under union conditions and without applying for relief.<sup>82</sup>

An alternative source of organized support for the WPA was the Workers' Alliance of America (WAA), led by David Lasser. The WAA was comprised entirely of WPA workers, counted some 200,000 members at its peak, and engaged in action in support of the program. In July 1939, the WAA organized a one-day strike against the new wage provisions. All the same, the turnout of approximately 50,000 was low, coming as it did in the wake of threats to dismiss striking workers and Representative Woodrum's order to compile lists of strikers. Congressional investigation of the WPA in 1939 and 1940 focused on alleged communist influence in the Worker's Alli-

81. *New York Times*, January 7, 1939, 1.

82. *New York Times*, July 7, 1939, 1; July 11, 1939, 7; July 17, 1939, 1; July 22, 1939, 1. Thomas A. Murray, president of the Building and Trades Council, called for the abolition of the WPA activities in the building and construction field and their transfer to the PWA, "where our men would be employed full time without question under union conditions."

ance, and the institution of an eighteen-month time limit on WPA employment was devised partly to make the organizing tasks of the Worker's Alliance more difficult. Such harassment combined with the inherent difficulties of mobilizing unemployed workers to make WPA projects unpromising sites for organization.<sup>83</sup>

### A Program with Patronage Potential Does Not Mean the Support of Patronage-Oriented Politicians

Despite the efforts of Hopkins to reduce standard patronage politics in the WPA, such politics were endemic to the program and would have been even without Farley. State and local officials had various means of influence. All major state-level officials of the WPA had to be confirmed by the Senate, and by usual courtesy procedures the appointees were typically favorable to at least one of the state's senators. Although there were ways to get around this, the great majority of state WPA heads were confirmed by the Senate. Patronage politics also seeped in through the requirement that almost all WPA workers be selected from general assistance rolls, over which the WPA or federal government generally had little say. In the South almost everyone on general relief was placed there only so that they could be added to the rolls of the WPA. If not everyone applying for relief was guaranteed to get it, not everyone on relief was guaranteed WPA employment. In states and localities where many received general relief, nominating people for work relief gave local political officials great influence, even if the WPA had the ultimate legal control over certification.<sup>84</sup> Such problems led reformers to suggest federal grants-in-aid for general relief, to give some federal leverage over the process, and to connect WPA employment to public employment offices.

Furthermore, the WPA was bound to suffer the public-relations problems of any program that left great discretion to politics. Designing a social program as pork may make it easier to build a coalition at first, as politicians not interested in the social mission of the program may find a reason for support. But discretion clouds the long-term prospects of a program, for it may be perceived as unfair or corrupt, or both, and lose the support of the general public who might be otherwise sympathetic. The WPA was neither subject to standard formulas nor administered under tight merit standards,

83. Valocchi, "The Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s," 201; Selden Rodman, "Lasser and the Workers' Alliance," *The Nation*, September 10, 1938, 242-44; *New York Times*, June 15, 1939, 1; July 22, 1939, 1; and Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, 291.

84. Hopkins sought to find WPA heads who were sympathetic to the program - not necessarily Democrats or loyalists of either senator. To dodge senatorial prerogatives Hopkins chose to head the WPA in fourteen states the same person who headed the state emergency relief administration, but this was only a stopgap. The states included a number of southern ones: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Ohio, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Wyoming. An analysis of twenty-two state WPA appointments revealed that twelve were made for political reasons, and only four of these were competent administrators (Macmahon et al., *Federal Work Relief*, 270, 271, 274). At the end of 1939, the ratio of WPA workers to general assistance recipients was twenty-nine to one in Mississippi, the state with the highest ratio, and more than five to one in seven other Southern states (see Amenta, *Bold Relief*, chap. 5).

as other social programs were constrained to be by the Social Security Act amendments of 1939. The Roosevelt administration continued to allocate WPA jobs according to criteria it never fully disclosed, inviting suspicion from state and local leaders that they were not getting their fair share. Inequities of whatever sort provided ammunition for WPA's foes, who may have opposed it for other reasons.

Roosevelt had difficult decisions to make in the thirteen states Mayhew characterizes as *regular organization* or *persistent factionalism* states, where patronage-oriented political parties predominated. The administration often found itself in a situation where it was damned if it did and damned if it did not run the WPA through the regular Democratic organization. Supporting the regular organization might have been the only way to ensure the votes needed to continue the New Deal, but regular organizations were often indifferent or even opposed to the New Deal's ideology. Worse, they were often corrupt and their administration of New Deal programs tended to bring discredit through bad publicity. Running around the regular organization avoided such problems but made the regulars sworn enemies of the program. Nearly every possible configuration was tried by the administration, and only a few worked to the long-term advantage of the program and social policy generally.

In some cases the administration threw in its lot with corrupt political machines. As Stephen P. Erie has argued, this devil's bargain was made in places where the machine was dominant in a state considered electorally crucial to Roosevelt. The most notorious examples were Frank Hague in Jersey City and Thomas Pendergast in Kansas City. Hague was the model of the urban boss, controlling New Jersey's congressional delegation and its governor, and Roosevelt probably thought he would not win the state without Hague's support. Roosevelt granted Hague control of all federal patronage, and Hopkins appointed Hague's man William Ely as the state WPA director. Roosevelt also ignored widespread allegations of political corruption in New Jersey, although it was known that many WPA workers were pressured to contribute a portion of their wages to Hague's campaign fund. This in turn further propped up a regime that openly opposed New Deal labor policies.<sup>85</sup> The arrangement with Pendergast resulted in similar problems. Pendergast gained control by inducing his allies Senators Harry Truman and Clark to put forward his close friend Matthew S. Murray to run the program. WPA supervisors worked for the machine and workers were pressured to vote Democratic. When Pendergast was jailed for income tax evasion in 1939, the WPA had to take over its administration.<sup>86</sup>

85. Stephen P. Erie, *Rainbow's End: Irish Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 131-32; Lyle W. Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Big City Bosses* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977), 103-5.

86. To a man seeking WPA employment, Truman wrote: "If you will send us endorsements from the Kansas City Democratic Organization, I shall be glad to do what I can for you," quoted in Lyle W. Dorsett, "Kansas City and the New Deal," in *The New Deal: The State and Local Levels*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 407-19; quote on 414.

At least some key factions were displeased in almost all of the rest of the states with patronage-oriented parties. In Illinois, another electorally important state, Roosevelt chose between the incipient patronage machine of Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago and the downstate machine of Governor Henry Horner. Hopkins had tangled with Horner over Illinois's passing taxes to pay its share of FERA in 1935; after Kelly's landslide victory that year, Roosevelt, following Farley's advice, sided with the mayor. Kelly's ally Robert Dunham was placed in charge and oversaw approximately 200,000 WPA workers. Although there was little hard evidence that Chicago Democrats contaminated the processes by which workers were declared eligible or granted WPA jobs, the machine was not idle. Before elections, Kelly added workers to the WPA rolls to canvass in behalf of Democrats. In 1936, two-thirds of machine lieutenants held jobs as welfare and employment brokers. Still, the tilt toward Kelly was not cost-free, as Horner maintained a downstate base of support and remained governor through 1940. Illinois deflected most of the remainder of New Deal social policy.<sup>87</sup> Roosevelt also chose between factions in West Virginia, where the machines of Governor Herman Kump and Senator Matthew Neely were at war. In 1935, Kump controlled state relief and Senator Neely controlled the WPA.<sup>88</sup> In the states where the administration chose among warring patronage-oriented Democratic factions, the WPA not only received bad publicity due to partisan abuse, but also earned enemies from within the Democratic party.

In places where there were plausible alternatives to conservative Democrats, Roosevelt and Hopkins were inclined to support New Dealers, regardless of party labels, such as the Progressives in Wisconsin and the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota.<sup>89</sup> The most prominent example of the administration's aid to non-Democratic New Dealers in a patronage-oriented state was New York. Roosevelt saw the New York City Tammany machine as a potential liability as Mayor Jimmie Walker resigned in the face of corruption and graft charges. Bronx Democratic boss Ed Flynn and Governor Herbert Lehman, both allies of Farley and Roosevelt, hoped to take over Tammany themselves. But Roosevelt ran the WPA through Fiorello La Guardia, a New Deal supporter elected on the Fusion Reform ticket in 1933. La Guardia was granted a separate relief unit for New York City, making the city the forty-ninth state, as far as the WPA was concerned, with one-seventh of all the WPA

87. Searle F. Charles, *Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 41–42; Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1984), 51–52, 74–81. For a discussion of Kelly's claims about how he would aid Roosevelt, see David Plotke, *Building A Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 138; Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Big City Bosses*, chap. 6; and Erie, *Rainbow's End*, 131, 134. For other New Deal spending programs in Illinois, see Amenta, *Bold Relief*, chap. 5.

88. James T. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 83.

89. John E. Miller, *Philip F. La Follette, The Wisconsin Progressives, and the New Deal* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1982), chap. 4; Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

expenditures. La Guardia helped the WPA select several successive nonpartisan WPA administrators – many drawn from the Army Corps of Engineers. In return La Guardia campaigned for Roosevelt and lobbied for New Deal programs as head of the National Conference of Mayors. At Roosevelt's urging, he founded the American Labor Party in 1936 to provide a liberal alternative to the Democratic party in New York City.<sup>90</sup> The New York City WPA was run well and relief was generous, but no durable pro-New Deal faction of the Democratic party was built by way of it.

Finally, in some states, the Roosevelt administration neither wanted to ally with the existing patronage party organizations, nor could it delegate the WPA to a pro-New Deal political alternative. This was the case in Ohio. Democratic Governor Martin L. Davey, elected in 1934, was eager to use both the FERA and WPA for his own political ends, but was countermanded by Hopkins. After Davey dismissed the state FERA administrator, Charles C. Stillman, for refusing to appoint his supporters to FERA positions, Hopkins investigated, placed the national FERA in charge of Ohio relief, and rehired Stillman, who stayed on as state administrator for the WPA. Later Hopkins replaced him with Dr. Carl Watson, a career welfare worker and an excellent and neutral relief administrator. In response, however, the regular Democrats in Ohio proved stingy in relief spending. In 1936, Ohio and Illinois had approximately the same number of persons on relief, but Ohio spent only 58 percent as much as Illinois. Pennsylvania had relief rolls 150 percent greater than Ohio's, but spent three times as much. For their efforts Roosevelt and Hopkins gained a Democratic regime that opposed all the more the national New Deal and was eventually dislodged by an unfriendly Republican one.<sup>91</sup>

It is probably no surprise then that, as a group, patronage-oriented Democrats were weaker allies of WPA spending than members of left parties and Democrats from open and democratic states. On one occasion, Democrats from patronage party systems provided greater opposition to work-relief spending than all other Democrats. In February 1937, 59 percent of Democratic senators from the 13 patronage-oriented states voted to reduce the appropriation for WPA, compared to 37 percent of southern Democrats and 31 percent of left party members and Democrats from open and democratic polities (see Table 5). Usually, however, patronage Democrats fell somewhere between southern Democrats and other Democrats. An example is a June 1937 measure to reduce WPA expenditures by requiring a 25 percent local contribution for all projects. Of southern Democrats, 55 percent supported the requirement, compared to only 16 percent of left party members and Democrats from open political systems. Patronage-oriented Democrats fell in the middle – 36 percent supported the measure.<sup>92</sup> On most other votes, differences between them and other Democrats were less pronounced, but still evident.

90. Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses*, 49–61; Erie, *Rainbow's End*, 133.

91. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States*, 168; David J. Maurer, "Relief Problems and Politics in Ohio," in *New Deal: The State and Local Levels*, 77–102.

92. ICPSR, *U.S. Congressional Roll Call Voting Records, 1789–1991*, file DARCS75, vote 42; Amenta and Halfmann, "Institutional Politics and the WPA."

As a form of patronage, the WPA had attributes that made it less attractive to members of Congress. Many of the negotiations central to the WPA were between the national administration and localities and thus ran somewhat outside the bounds of congressional deliberation. The WPA also had uneven support in the two houses of Congress. Although the confirmation of WPA officials provided many senators with significant control over WPA activities, it offered no such advantages to Representatives. The WPA was investigated in both the Senate and the House, but the House investigation led by Woodrum was far more mean-spirited. The House was also the site of the drastic restrictions enacted as part of the fiscal year 1940 appropriation bill. The Senate softened these provisions considerably, but lost decisively in the conference committee when House members indicated that they would let the WPA program expire at midnight if they did not get their way.<sup>93</sup>

The WPA, then, was a threat to certain influential groups and to political conservatives. The centralized aspects of the program and its influence over wages and employment prospects gave them strong incentives to fight the program. Its congressional supporters were ambivalent. Wage rates could be made too low, and congressional support for the mission of the program did not translate into support for administrative discretion. In addition, the institutional limitations on pro-spending regimes ensured that the WPA would not be funded at an adequate level. These limitations also provided a kind of platform of strength for political conservatives to fight the program and alter it in ways that made its supporters uneasy with it. All the congressional conservatives needed were greater numbers in Congress and plausible economic reasons to end the WPA and during the war they received both.

## CONCLUSION

Returning the WPA to the center of the debate over New Deal social policy forces a rethinking of U.S. public social provision. The political and fiscal effort spent on the WPA suggests that the United States did not set out to build a divided social security and welfare state. Instead, America began to build a work and relief state, which according to standard measures vaulted the United States ahead of other capitalist democracies.

The work and relief policy also upsets conventional understandings of the nature of U.S. social policy. The policy had much in common with the so-called social democratic welfare-state regime, not the liberal regime that U.S. social policy is typically considered to resemble. For the WPA provided wages that were often comparable to and sometimes better than those available in the market. That said, the policy fell far short of promoting "autonomy" for all citizens. It provided work mainly to married men with families and often reinforced divisions between "men's" and "women's" work. Although the program made some significant inroads into racial inequalities, it also was greatly limited in that respect.

More than that, the WPA stood at the center of what would currently be called welfare reform. Indeed, there were three separate welfare reform

93. *New York Times*, June 29, 1939, 1; July 1, 1939, 1.

debates, the first resulting in the creation of a work and relief policy, the second resulting in its consolidation, and the third resulting in its demise. Omitting the WPA from the discussion of the formative years of American social policy makes it difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of the debates over other social programs enacted and expanded around the same time.

Needless to say, the lack of work on the WPA means that social scientists have spent little time trying to account for it – a long overdue task. The WPA is explained best by arguments relating to institutional and partisanship theories. It was designed mainly by actors within the state apparatus, especially FERA officials. These actors, however, were not on a bureaucratic mission, but a political one. They were constrained by partisan politics and by programs already in existence. The centralized nature of the WPA was due in part to the fact that there were no permanent work relief programs run at the state level. By contrast, the Social Security Act's power-sharing programs – Old-Age Assistance, Aid to Dependent Children, and unemployment compensation – had state and local antecedents.

The legislative trajectory of the WPA can be explained by way of an institutional modification of partisanship theories. The WPA was enacted and expanded during times when the Democratic party was in power. The Democrats, unlike the Republicans, were not wedded to a policy of low taxation and thus low social spending, and the new Democratic president had always been a strong proponent of social spending. His openness to reform would have meant little, however, without a like-minded Congress to back him. During his tenure in office the fate of the WPA closely followed the fate of “reform-oriented” contingents in Congress – Democratic and third-party representatives from outside non-democratic political systems and patronage party systems. These groups reached their zenith of power from 1935 through 1938, making it possible to create and consolidate New Deal social policy. Because there were always many legislators from the non-democratic and patronage-oriented parts of the polity, however, the reformers were never fully in control of the government. The structural hindrances that had thwarted social policy before the New Deal slowed social policy during it.

The WPA's peculiar construction also fostered its demise in the middle 1940s, a politically inauspicious period during which other social programs were merely cut or ignored. Because it was the best-paying program, the WPA was more threatening to many capitalists and other economic elites. For these reasons Republicans and southern Democrats were determined opponents of a WPA that promised to be long-standing and generous. Because of great executive control over the WPA, conservative politicians of all sorts feared that it might be deployed against them. Even proponents of the WPA, however, were not happy with the executive control in it. A supporter of public spending generally, the labor movement feared the program's impact on private wages and cooled toward it when it was revised in 1939 to provide lower wage rates. Although the WPA provided a large number of jobs, the program elicited uneven support from the patronage-

oriented party organizations around the country. As a result, the program gained few of the advantages of its discretionary nature, but suffered all the disadvantages – especially charges of corruption and unfairness.

That the WPA went to an early grave does not mean that research on New Deal work programs should have done the same, however. Scholars of comparative social policy and state-building can no longer afford to ignore these programs. To pay attention to the WPA and allied programs is to ask why the American response to the Depression differed so greatly from the responses of other countries, and why American policy veered from its supposedly perpetual “liberal” nature and stingy welfare “effort.” In addition, to take the WPA seriously means to rethink ideas at the center of current U.S. social policy research, including arguments about the origins of America’s two-track social policy and the incompleteness of its programs. But the reasons to pay attention to the WPA are not all theoretical. The history of the WPA may provide insights and lessons for those who would seek to place work at the center of contemporary American welfare reform efforts.<sup>94</sup>

94. For a discussion of recent failed efforts at the national level, see David T. Ellwood, “Welfare Reform as I Knew It: When Bad Things Happen to Good Policies.” *American Prospect* (May–June 1996): 22–29. For a call to create a modern WPA, see William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996), chap. 8.