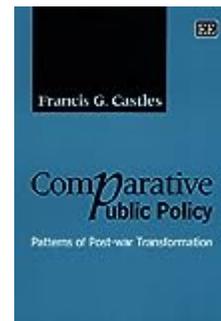


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Francis G. Castles.** *Comparative Public Policy: Patterns of Post-war Transformation.* Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, Mass: Edward Elgar, 1998. xi + 352 pp. \$90 (cloth) ISBN 1-85898-816-0; \$30 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85898-823-8.



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Professor Francis G. Castles of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, has undertaken quite a task in his latest work – that of explaining the growth of government. Castles investigates twenty-one advanced countries that are all long-term members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which enables the author to obtain standardized data. Data are from three periods – 1960, 1975, and the early 1990s.

The pace of governmental growth among nations during this time was uneven. Measuring “national trajectories of public expenditure growth in terms of their changing share in GDP” between 1960 and 1995, “seven countries – Denmark, Finland, Greece, Japan, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland-had experienced growth of government in excess of 100 percent, whilst, at the other end of the distribution, in the USA, outlays had grown by only 22 percent and, in the United Kingdom, by only 35 percent” (p. 100).

Castles begins his analysis of the growth of government with World War II, arguing that the war reshaped society. “Wartime experience had accustomed governments to a more interventionist role, so that the task of running a welfare state, which had seemed beyond most governments in the 1930s, now seemed almost routine” (p. 28).

Next he investigates characteristics of the nations including their economies, their societies, and their political systems and offers explanations for why these characteristics may be related to public policy development. Castles explores a wide variety of possible explanatory variables including voter turnout, Catholicism, trade union membership, international trade, and the seats held by left leaning and right leaning politicians. He provides a summary of the independent variables (pages 106-108) and the justification for their inclusion in the model.

Quantifying these variables, however, sometimes proves to be difficult. For example, Castles calls World War II “the single most important precursor of post-war outcomes” and defines a war impact variable ranging from 0 to 3 to capture the severity of the wartime experience. While the extent of wartime damage is certainly important, a scale with four values is unfortunately arbitrary.

Also included is the age of the population because “countries with a larger proportion of old people are likely to have had higher levels of government expenditures” (p. 107). Castles notes that researchers suggest that large numbers of elderly people can form a powerful interest group that is able to engage in successful rent-seeking. Thus, as the population grows older, seniors

can demand more services from government and the welfare state will grow. Castles ignores Olson's (1965) *Logic of Collective Action* which asserts an optimal group size for cooperative action. Larger groups do not necessarily have greater political clout. Richard McKenzie empirically tests this proposition in his paper "The Retreat of the Elderly Welfare State" (Center for the Study of American Business, Washington University in St. Louis, Publication Number 102, December 1990). McKenzie finds that as the number of seniors in the U.S. has grown expenditures have declined.

Castles rather abruptly changes directions in the later chapters of the book by exploring the sources of cross-national variation in male and female labor force participation, in unemployment rates, in home ownership, and in fertility and divorce rates.

Returning to his original theme, he explains that readers hoping for a single explanatory key to the growth of the welfare state will come away disappointed. Instead, "the causes and consequences of the policy actions of the state differ widely from one policy area to another and within particular areas over time" (p. 300). However, he does identify some surprising relationships. For example, economic development had a smaller than expected role in the growth of the welfare state. Overall, Castles' work is accessible and provides much data regarding public policy after World War II.

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