

Sample Proposal for PhD or MA Thesis

Research question and relevance

Contemporary literature on comparative welfare state studies is beset by a confusing puzzle. While there are many recent changes in society that lead us to expect that the modern functioning of the welfare state is in danger, there is little consensus on a scholarly level that Western welfare states have in fact undergone any noteworthy decline (e.g. Pierson, 2001; Ross, 2008). My research project intends to assess the effect of one of the large-scale changes that have taken place over the last few decades that has often been hypothesized to change welfare systems. More specifically, the project I propose asks the following question: “What is the effect that immigration-induced diversity has had on the workings of the welfare state in Canada, the Netherlands, and Sweden?”

Note the proposal clearly identifies a genuine research question

Existing literature

The research to date that has tackled this question has produced little conclusive evidence. If there is any agreement, it seems to be that the effect of immigration on the welfare state has been negligible or non-existent (see Banting and Kymlicka, 2006). It is important to note, however, that most of these conclusions are based on a limited set of causal explanations and methodological choices. The typical research in this area hypothesizes that immigration can hurt the welfare state because more diversity leads to less solidarity, which in turn leads to less support for welfare programs (see e.g. Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Goodhart, 2004; Bay & Pedersen, 2006). To test this hypothesis, most studies rely on social expenditure data or other quantitative indicators of the ‘size’ of a welfare state. However, this does not begin to exhaust the ways immigration can affect the welfare state, nor the ways one can look for evidence of such effects. In fact, it is probable that the effect of immigration on the welfare state is more of a qualitative than of a quantitative nature. In

Note the proposal refers to relevant literature, noting what already has been done and how the proposed research would contribute to existing insight.

this project, I propose to study how the mere fact that welfare programs reach a changing group of people has affected the informal workings, practices, and framing of these programs.

Tentative methodology

I propose to study welfare workings, practices, and framing in two parts. First, I will conduct qualitative interviews with politicians and civil servants in Canada, the Netherlands, and Sweden (in each country conducting 10-20 interviews). The aim of the interviews would be to explore and map how welfare programs work informally in everyday practice. Second, in order to better assess the framing of welfare programs, I will look at party programs and parliamentary debates (all these documents are available in various databases, such as the Documentation Center of Dutch Political Parties and the parliamentary archives of the three countries under study) in order to observe development in the way socio-economic difficulties have been framed as socio-economic or cultural problems. By comparing Canada, the Netherlands, and Sweden, I include an example of each of the three regimes according to which Western welfare states are usually classified in the literature (Esping-Andersen, 1990), which enables me to develop a representative account of change in modern welfare states.

Note the proposal identifies methods that are appropriate given the research question and feasible in light of the program's intended duration (in this case, a four-year PhD).

Fit with department

The University of Guelph offers an excellent environment for me to conduct this research. In particular, I am hoping to work under the supervision of Dr. Edward Koning, who has published widely on the connection between immigration and welfare state change, and who has agreed to supervise the project I describe here if I were admitted to the program.

Note the clear justification for applying to the PhD in Political Science at the University of Guelph.

References

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