

## Book

### *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Citizen Activism and the American Welfare State*

By Andrea Louise Campbell

Princeton University Press, 2003

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#### **Description:**

Some groups participate in politics more than others. Why? And does it matter for policy outcomes? In this richly detailed and fluidly written book, Andrea Campbell argues that democratic participation and public policy powerfully reinforce each other. Through a case study of senior citizens in the United States and their political activity around Social Security, she shows how highly participatory groups get their policy preferences fulfilled, and how public policy itself helps create political inequality.

Using a wealth of unique survey and historical data, Campbell shows how the development of Social Security helped transform seniors from the most beleaguered to the most politically active age group. Thus empowered, seniors actively defend their programs from proposed threats, shaping policy outcomes. The participatory effects are strongest for low-income seniors, who are most dependent on Social Security. The program thus reduces political inequality within the senior population--a laudable effect--while increasing inequality between seniors and younger citizens.

A brief look across policies shows that program effects are not always positive. Welfare recipients are even less participatory than their modest socioeconomic backgrounds would imply, because of the demeaning and disenfranchising process of proving eligibility. Campbell concludes that program design profoundly shapes the nature of democratic citizenship. And proposed policies--such as Social Security privatization--must be evaluated for both their economic and political effects, because the very quality of democratic government is influenced by the kinds of policies it chooses.

#### **Endorsements:**

"Many political scientists share a hunch that Big Government has a large influence on civic engagement, but there are precious few studies that offer convincing evidence of this impact and even fewer that trace individual-level policy feedback effects over time. In this meticulous yet

creative analysis of political mobilization around the Social Security program, Andrea Campbell demonstrates empirically just how powerful a force American government has become in the lives of citizens. In so doing, she advances a compelling framework for future research on the links between public policy and political participation. This excellent book will be read with great interest by scholars of political behavior, the policymaking process, and American political development."--Eric Patashnik, University of Virginia, author of *Putting Trust in the U.S. Budget*

"Beautifully written and organized, this book makes a very important contribution to our understanding of the linkages between citizen participation and public policy. The writing is clear and jargon-free, the scholarship is sound, the analysis is sophisticated and innovative, and the topic is timely."--Christine L. Day, University of New Orleans, author of *What Older Americans Think*

**Series:**

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### **Book Review:**

Perspectives on Politics (2004), **2**: 368-369 Cambridge University Press  
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### BOOK REVIEWS

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### **How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State.**

By Andrea Louise Campbell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 256p. \$39.50.

This is a persuasively argued, well-researched, and nicely written work that makes a key contribution to our understanding of the politics of Social Security retirement insurance. Because of the singular importance of Social Security as a domestic federal program, Andrea Louise Campbell's study fills a significant gap. At a broader level, the book explores

a subject to which political scientists are only starting to turn: the relationship between public policy and political participation and its implications for democracy.

Relying primarily upon mass survey data, the author describes what she calls an “upward participation-policy cycle.” Social Security has stimulated and shaped senior citizens’ political participation, which, in turn, has greatly influenced policymaking for Social Security. Before Social Security, seniors participated equal to or less than younger groups of Americans; afterward they became the most active segment of the population. Thus, the program gave rise to a formidable political constituency that lent critical support to the program’s further expansion in the 1970s and staved off threats to it during the 1980s, when it experienced financial difficulty.

Seniors participate in politics at higher rates than their relatively lower levels of income and education would lead one to expect. Campbell traces how Social Security “changes the level of resources, engagement and mobilization seniors bring to the participatory arena” (p. 40). By allowing seniors to retire earlier and augmenting their incomes (lifting many of them out of poverty), Social Security provides them with the wherewithal to participate. By supplying them with 40% of their income, on average, the program induces a high level of interest in the politics of Social Security. By stimulating seniors’ political interest, the program transforms a mere demographic category into a politically relevant group that is the object of political parties’ efforts to mobilize voters, campaign contributors, and volunteers. Another important finding is that Social Security has differential effects on participation rates *among* seniors. Again, Social Security recipients are something of an exception to the usual relationship between higher socioeconomic status and higher rates of participation. Campbell finds that low-income seniors display a higher level of interest in Social Security than their more affluent cohorts because the benefits that they receive constitute a larger proportion of their incomes.

The cycle is completed when politicians respond positively to seniors’ demands. Campbell’s analysis of roll-call voting of conservative Republicans in Congress reveals seniors’ political muscle. Notwithstanding their antigovernment conservatism, these legislators vote in a more pro-Social Security direction as the proportion of elderly constituents in their state or district rises. In short, constituency interest trumps ideology.

Campbell also compares the participation rates of Social Security recipients with those of other welfare state programs. Consistent with Joe Soss’s study (*Unwanted Claims*, 2000) of how the different designs of welfare programs shape recipients’ attitudes toward government and their rates of participation, she finds that recipients of means-tested programs like public assistance and food stamps participate less than non-means-tested programs like Social Security and veterans’ benefits. This relationship holds when we control for recipients’ socioeconomic status, indicating the independent impact of policy design.

The argument that policy design shapes citizens begs a critical question—why do different groups receive programs with different designs, some which facilitate the development of their citizenship capacities and others that stifle it? This question is not central to the author’s study, but part of the answer must be the different ways in which groups are socially constructed, as discussed by Helen Ingram and Anne Schneider (“The Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy,” *American Political Science Review* 87 [June 1993]: 334–47).

Campbell thoughtfully teases out the implications of her findings for democratic citizenship, equality, and governance. That Social Security has been a success in lifting many seniors

out of poverty and improving their material well-being is beyond question, as is the widespread political support that the program enjoys among all age groups. However, seniors' mobilization behind Social Security is more complicated when it comes to its ramifications for political equality. On the one hand, the program has helped greatly to mobilize seniors and develop the citizenship capacities of a large group of lower-income Americans who would otherwise be much less involved. Thus, Campbell argues, Social Security mitigates the dampening effects on participation among low-income Americans that is due to the absence of strong working-class political organizations in the United States. On the other hand, the disproportionate influence wielded by seniors on Social Security may constrain policymakers' ability to address other important social concerns and less politically resourceful groups whose claims upon the government are as legitimate as those of older Americans. Finally, as policymakers contemplate reforms to Social Security that the impending retirement of the post-World War II baby boom generation necessitates, Campbell cautions that they need to be concerned about more than the likely impacts of reforms on the recipients' financial situations and the program's fiscal health. They must also carefully assess any reforms' effects on political participation and equality.

The author might have enriched her findings from the survey data by conducting interviews with Social Security recipients. It would have been illuminating, for example, to hear seniors articulate their sense of internal and external efficacy, how the design of the program shapes their sense of entitlement and deservedness, and how their status as recipients and political participants affects their identity and solidarity as members of a politically meaningful group. Using survey or interview data, she might also have distinguished between the effects of Social Security on the underlying political values and beliefs of the elderly (if any) and their specific policy preferences.

Nothing detracts, however, from the high quality and significance of Campbell's work. For students of Social Security, *How Policy Makes Citizens* takes its place alongside Martha Derthick's (1979) *Policymaking for Social Security*, and perhaps one or two others, as mandatory reading. Those interested in the nexus between public policy and citizen participation should also welcome this addition to our knowledge about a subject that has not received the attention it deserves.

Link to chapter 1:

<http://pup.princeton.edu/chapters/i7652.pdf>

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