

INTRODUCTION

Unidentical twins: recent social policy developments in Canada and the United States

Daniel Béland^a and Alex Waddan^{a,b}

^aMcGill Institute for the Study of Canada, McGill University, Montreal, Canada; ^bSchool of History, Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

ABSTRACT

There is a vast social policy literature on how Canada and the United States share key characteristics associated with the liberal welfare regime such as significant reliance on both social assistance and tax-subsidized private benefits and services. Yet, a closer look at these two countries points to key differences in areas such as fiscal federalism, health care, old-age pensions, and family benefits. This special issue of the Journal of Comparative and International Social Policy looks at recent social policy developments in Canada and the United States in ways that further illustrate the broad similarities, but also the key cross-national differences in policy design and real-world consequences, between these two countries. This Introduction explains why Canada and the United States are “unidentical twins” in social policy before discussing the contributions comprising this special issue.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 January 2019
Accepted 8 January 2019

KEYWORDS

Social policy; policy change;
Canada; United States

Introduction

In social science and policy research, it is common to compare Canada and the United States, and not simply because of geographical proximity and the fact that the two countries share the longest land border in the world. From a social policy standpoint, much has been written about how these two countries share key characteristics associated with the liberal welfare regime such as significant reliance on both social assistance and tax-subsidized private benefits and services (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Esping-Andersen, 1998). Yet, a closer look at these two countries points to key differences in areas such as fiscal federalism, health care, old-age pensions, and family benefits (Béland & Waddan, 2017; Harles, 2017; Maioni, 1998; Myles, 1998; O'Connor, Shaver, & Orloff, 1999; Théret, 1999). This special issue, in its examination of recent social policy developments in the two countries, further illustrates both the broad similarities yet important distinctions in policy design and real-world consequences that is apparent in these unidentical twins.

This issue is also timely as, perhaps counter-intuitively, it explores how, over the last decade, both Canada and the United States have each witnessed major debates over social policy reform that focused at least as much on expansion as on austerity. The

CONTACT Alex Waddan  aw148@leicester.ac.uk

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expansionary moves in the years since the Great Recession, contrast to the situation witnessed in European countries as different as Greece and the United Kingdom, where the emphasis has been on social policy retrenchment (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, & Chung, 2017). On the one hand, in the United States, the symbol of this expansionary push in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession and during the Obama presidency (2009–2017), was the enactment in 2010 of the Affordable Care Act. This major piece of legislation has many moving parts which have not all been smoothly implemented (Béland, Rocco, & Waddan, 2016). It has nonetheless led to a major decline in the percentage of Americans living without health insurance. On the other hand, in Canada, perhaps the most significant example of social policy expansion during the last decade was the decision to significantly increase the retirement benefits available through the Canada Pension Plan, and the Québec Pension Plan, two highly-coordinated earnings related public pension programmes that are at the core of the country's old-age security system. Yet, as the contributions by Carolyn Hughes Tuohy (2019) on health care in Canada and the United States, and by Daniel Béland and Kent Weaver (2019) on pension reform in Canada illustrate, these expansionary reforms have triggered much contentious debate both at the federal and at the sub-national level. Moreover, despite gaining some traction amongst the left of the Democratic Party, as Tuohy suggests in her article, single-payer health care remains a political taboo in the political centre in the United States, a situation that strongly contrasts with the one in Canada, a country in which single-payer health care has acquired an iconic status similar to that of the National Health Service in the United Kingdom.

Beyond the areas of health care and old-age pensions, our special issue devotes much space to the crucial issue of gender equality, which has long become a key component of contemporary social policy research (O'Connor et al., 1999). In their article on gender and social policy developments in the United States since the 1970s, Marie Laperrière, Ann Shola Orloff, and Jane Pryma (2019) show how these developments have remained rooted in gendered assumptions about vulnerability, employability, and disability, even when there have been attempts to move towards more gender-neutral frames. They also point to the ways in which quite different policy logics can be in process; for example, as mothers have become equally subject to the demands of commodification, policy proposals have taken supportive forms through ideas such as paid parental leave but also coercive ones through measures such as work requirements. In their article on Canada, Susan Prentice and Linda White (2019) focus on the issue of childcare, which has become so central in Canada since the late 1990s. As they suggest, policy contradictions are apparent here too as policymakers try to accommodate the increased anticipation that mothers will join the labour force, within the framework left by the legacies of policies developed in the liberal welfare state tradition and decentralised governing structures. Prentice and White show how, thus far, policymakers have not found ways of reconciling the expectations placed on mothers to enter the workforce with social supports to enable that outcome.

While gender equality is widely debated in both Canada and the United States, the issue of 'race' is especially central in the United States, where much has been written in recent decades about the status of African Americans within existing social policies. For instance, this is the case in the field of education, where school desegregation became such a controversial issue in the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, and the related emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. In their contribution to

this special issue, Richard Johnson and Desmond King (2019) discuss the controversial issue of the re-segregation of US schools. As they suggest, while some states have continued efforts to further integrate schools, there have been moves to reverse desegregation efforts in some Republican controlled states, with that political control bolstered by electoral gains made at state and local level through the Obama presidency. Using language apparently responsive to local concerns, such as ‘neighborhood schools’, Republican political actors have moved to encourage school district secession, effectively resulting in school re-segregation.

Finally, it is impossible to discuss social policy change in North America without discussing poverty reduction, an area in which Canada and, especially, the United States, are performing below many other OECD countries (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>). In his article on the United States, Alex Waddan (2019) focuses on the issue of poverty reduction during the Obama presidency, asking how effectively social policy contained poverty in the aftermath of the Great Recession and examining whether the period witnessed bold policy innovation. Waddan finds that while administration efforts did limit the impact of the Great Recession on poverty rates, this was achieved mostly by expanding existing programmes. Yet, the expansion of the Medicaid programme, as part of the Affordable Care Act, was a more important change to the ideas underpinning the programme than is often understood. In his contribution on Canada, Charles Plante (2019) turns to the sub-national level by assessing the impact of poverty reduction strategies (PRS) on provincial poverty rates. As he argues, poverty rates mostly fell before the implementation of these strategies, with the actual introduction of PRS not correlating to further falls in poverty rates. Political actors, however, have used the wrapping of PRS to highlight the earlier progress. Plante, nevertheless, still sees cause for optimism in the use of PRS as they change institutional relationships and future expectations and do offer opportunities for policy learning about what may actually work in the future.

This special issue addresses key social policy issues confronting Canada and the United States. Recently, tensions have emerged between the two countries due to the actions and declarations of President Donald Trump on issues such as trade and immigration. Beyond these tensions, Canada and the United States remain unidentical twins that face similar socio-economic challenges while frequently mobilising different policy instruments to address them. This is why they should remain fascinating cases for the comparative study of social policy reform in a rapidly changing world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Daniel Béland is Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and Professor of Political Science at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). A specialist of fiscal and social policy in comparative and political perspective, he has published more than 15 books and 130 peer-reviewed journal articles. Recent books include *Advanced Introduction to Social Policy* (Edward Elgar, 2016; with Rianne Mahon) and *Obamacare Wars* (University Press of Kansas, 2016; with Philip Rocco and Alex Waddan).

Alex Waddan is an Associate Professor in the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. He has published numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and four books on U.S. politics and social policy. His most recent book is *Obamacare Wars* (University Press of Kansas, 2016; with Daniel Béland and Philip Rocco).

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