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The Equality Virus: The Ideological Outcomes of the Covid-19 Pandemic for Social Policy and the Welfare State

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Abstract

Wars, pandemics, and depressions are large-scale macroeconomic events which have lasting impacts on ideology and institutions both nationally and globally. This paper analyses the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the ideological preferences of states and individuals regarding their welfare apparatus and social policy. It first compares examples of large-scale historical events with the Covid-19 pandemic and contextualises their social-democratic effects to elaborate the effects of the pandemic. Next, the paper demonstrates the ideological outcomes on policy and public narratives through a close study of the USA case. The sharp turn in favour for larger government and social protection is argued based on existing political realities and public opinion. Lastly, the paper considers possible trajectories of the welfare state after the pandemic and refutes the idea of the neoliberal agenda dominating social policy in the future. The degree of shift towards greater welfare and social protection may vary from country to country, but the need for social protection by the state has never been more transparent than with the onset of Covid-19.

Keywords: Ideology, Covid-19 Pandemic, Social Policy, Inequality, Welfare State, Neoliberalism

Introduction

'Inequality is ideological and political; not economic and technological,' writes Thomas Piketty in *Capital and Ideology* (2019), emphasising the central role of ideological narratives and political decisions in shaping the extent and nature of inequality in the states and regimes which he calls 'inequality regimes'¹. Ideologies and cleavages in society develop at a very slow pace, but large-scale crises and shocks (such as pandemics, wars, and recessions) tend to drastically change or catalyse these rather slow processes. The Covid-19 pandemic is one such event which has ripped open inequalities across the world, impoverished millions, and put pressure on governments to rethink the role of the state in social safety and welfare (Adamczyk, 2020). This paper aims to study ideological shifts triggered and catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on the possible trajectories of welfare and inequality regimes it can result in. Whenever uncertainty is high (such as during the pandemic), scholars have turned to historical events to understand current events better. The paper will take an analytically historical and comparative approach rather than being solely predictive; the focus is to be laid on what *can* instead of what *will* happen.

Economically and socially, the pandemic has exponentially increased inequalities of all types – income, gender, wealth, education, etc. – and led to huge setbacks for egalitarian efforts around the world (Oxfam, 2021). However, throughout history, global events and crises such as this have offered opportunities for more just and egalitarian societies. Pertinent examples are the Black Death, the World Wars, and the Great Depression, which left significantly more equal societies in their wake. With heightened levels of social unrest and economic disruption, discourse surrounding social-democratic forces can potentially gain ground in political debates and policy during times of crisis. Since the 1970s, the size and scope of the welfare state has declined in most parts of the world; progressive taxation was largely undone, and inequality rose drastically with these developments – most significantly in the USA due to its already small social state. The social-democratic states established after the World Wars, which still exist in the Nordic countries, have objectively produced the most equal societies in the history of the modern state. They have reduced the gap between the rich and the poor, and provided improved security and higher living standards to the poorest. However, many gave in to hyper-capitalist and neoliberal changes which emphasised the independence and self-sufficiency of markets, significantly reducing state intervention, welfare and social safety nets (Piketty, 2020). The pandemic has challenged this ideological weakening of the welfare state and forced governments to reconsider the size, nature and scope of their respective welfare states and social protection policies.

The paper studies the effect of the pandemic in three sections, starting from historic comparison to past crises, followed by an analysis of current narratives, and lastly an evaluation of possible trajectories of welfare and social policy. This paper puts forward three main hypotheses: (i) looking at past events, the pandemic has laid ideal groundwork for more redistributive and social-democratic policies in democracies, (ii) there is a rising political and public narrative towards social-democracy, and (iii) both markets and the state will see profound changes towards greater social responsibility and larger involvement of the government post Covid-19.

The welfare state itself has had varied forms and functions in different countries and contexts. It forms a part of the larger welfare system of a country or region. Three categories of welfare regimes have been conventionally identified by the specific balance they constitute between the three welfare institutions of society: the market, the (welfare) state, and family. The Anglo-Saxon, market based, 'liberal' welfare regime purports minimal state intervention and employs targeting methods for social welfare. The Nordic 'social-democratic' welfare regime emphasises universalism and employs comprehensive service based social benefits, and Continental European 'conservative' regimes base itself on occupational and familial structures; social spending in the last two often converges (Gosta Esping-Andersen, 2008; Gøsta Esping-Andersen and Myles, 2011). In liberal Anglo-Saxon welfare regimes like the USA and the UK we see higher private social spending, and tax expenditures from the government, with the United States being an extreme example of this category (see Figures 1 and 2).

The case of the United States fits perfectly into the study this paper attempts to conduct. It is as far as a welfare regime gets from social-democratic (Nordic) regimes, and thus any policy shifts towards social democracy here will indicate strong trends in ideology. Moreover, it is one of the largest states in the world, both in size and structure, providing ample space to observe complex narratives. The pandemic hit the country hard, with over 847,577 people (as of January 14 2022) dead (CDC, 2022), and caused significant disruption such as to make observation of its influence possible. The structure of the American welfare regime is such that the government supports markets to provide welfare in society, leading to significantly higher private social expenditure (See Figures 1 and 2). Social spending is viewed in two perspectives, private and public. Public social spending comprises the benefits for which financial flows are facilitated by the government. All other forms of social expenditure come under private social spending – for instance, risk sharing in health.

Moreover, the 2020 presidential election conducted in the middle of the pandemic is an analytical goldmine for studying the ideological and policy changes it will trigger and has already prompted. I will be examining these changes in detail later in the paper.

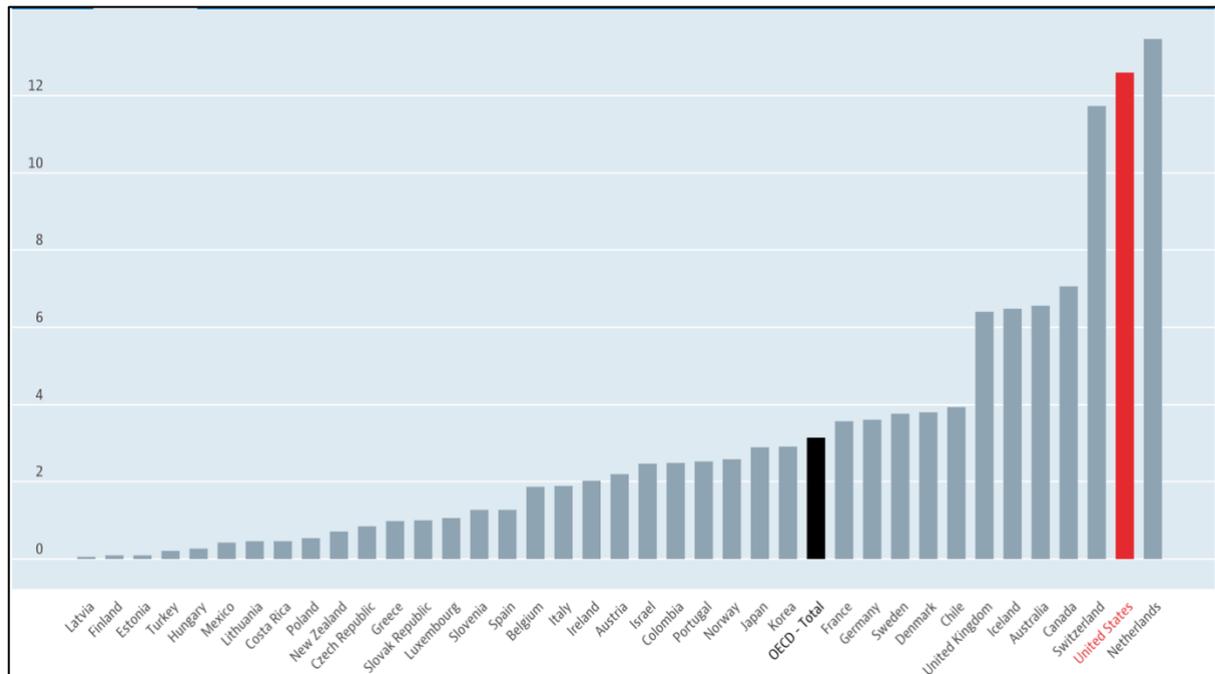


Figure 1: Private Social Spending in OECD countries. Vertical axis: percent of GDP. The United States has one of the highest private social spending figures, and one of the highest shares private social spending takes in the total social spending in the any country. (OECD, 2022)

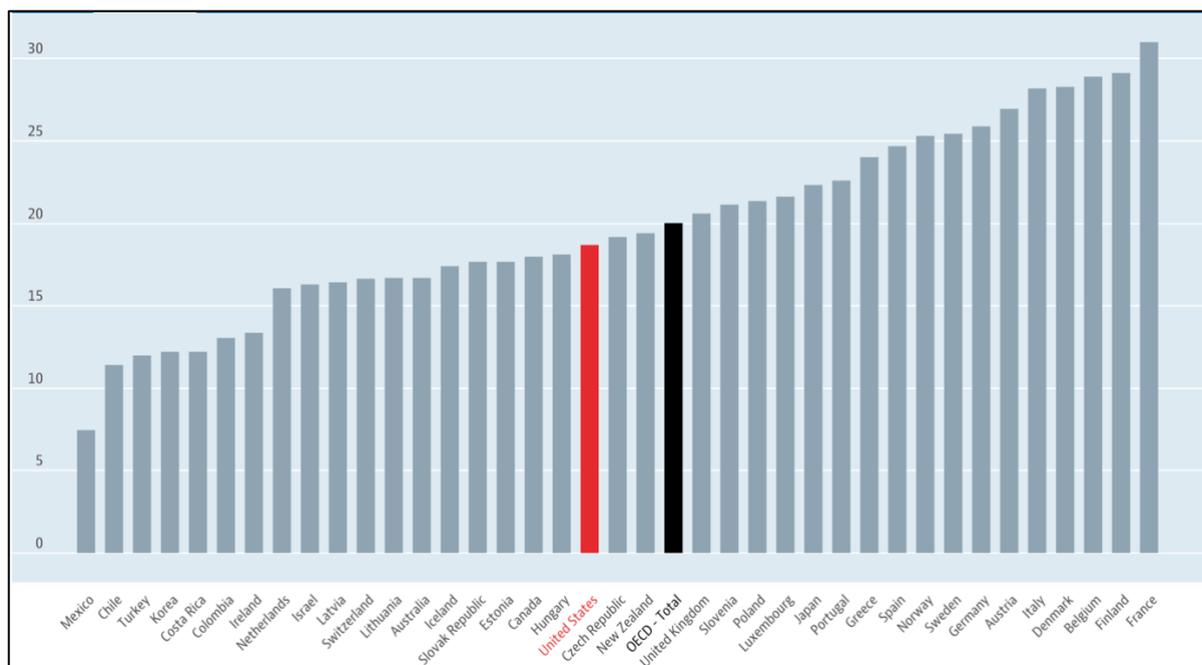


Figure 2: Public social spending in OECD countries. Vertical axis: percent of GDP. Even with only medium public social expenditure, USA has one of the highest total social spending in OECD countries. (OECD, 2022)

A History of Crises: Putting the Pandemic in Context

Pandemics, wars, and recessions are not new phenomena; modern industrial and post-industrial societies have previously interacted with these events at both global and national scales. The Great Depression (1930s) in combination with the World Wars overturned public perceptions of capitalism and government intervention, making implementation of substantive welfare state models possible and giving backing to programmes such as progressive taxation and pensions. Such macroeconomic shifts are ‘belief changing events’ (Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2014). Comparing the Covid-19 pandemic to them offers important insights into its possible effects.

Global Crises and the Welfare State

The relationship of crises and welfare goes as far back as the Black Death which ravaged Europe and the rest of the world in the 14th century. It destabilized feudal systems across Europe because of the severe depopulation it caused. It left the labour classes (serfs) with better living conditions and more influence in the economy. In the twentieth century, the emergence of welfare systems in Europe and America arguably stemmed from lasting damage done by wars and economic depressions. The Great Depression, followed by the

Wall Street crash in 1929, left the global north economically and socially devastated. In the USA, France, Germany and UK, almost a quarter of the labour force was unemployed (Piketty, 2020). The liberal non-interventionist doctrine of the government could no longer serve the demand for public ownership and socially shared risks, exacerbated by anger towards profits made by the already rich during times of crisis. This led to landmark policies such as the New Dealⁱⁱ in the USA, and others in the social-democratic economies of Europe, with increased government regulation, larger governments, and more equal societies.

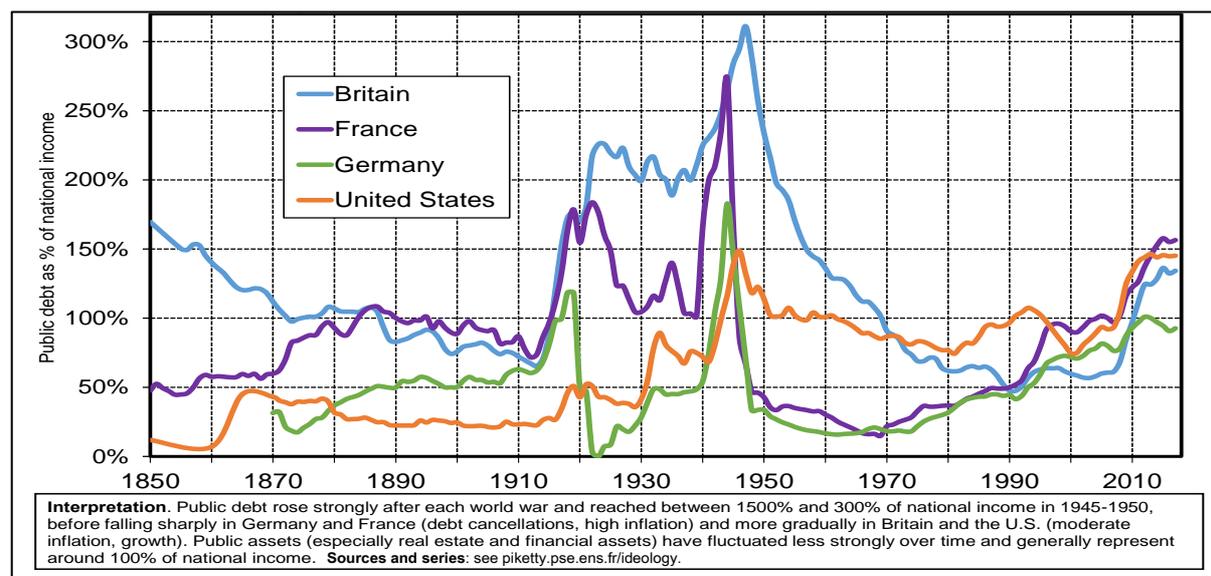


Figure 3. Public debt trajectories. (Piketty, 2020)

High public debt (See Figure 3) and deficit during the wars made it necessary for states to increasingly tax the rich through progressive taxes. Top tax brackets reached as high as 90% in many countries, mainly in two forms: total income taxes and inheritance taxes (See Figure 4).

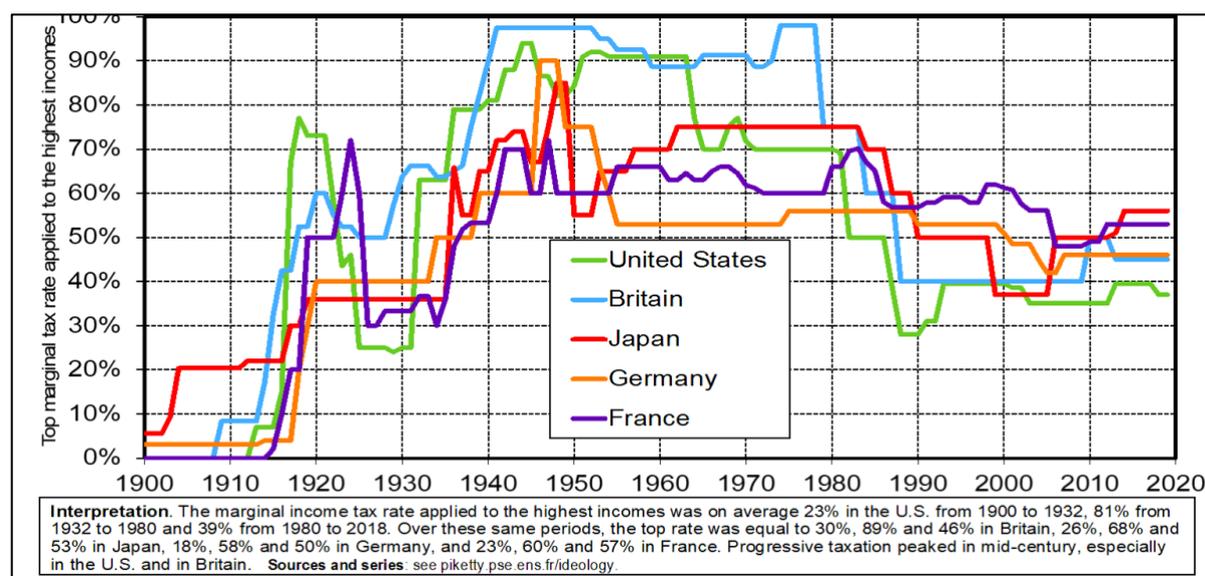


Figure 4. Marginal tax rates for high-bracket groups over time. (Piketty, 2020)

The Great Depression and the World Wars made people realise that the welfare state was not only necessary for demographics in abject poverty, but also to protect from market failures and risks; this is often called the ‘piggy bank’ objective of the welfare state (Barr, 2001). From the 1970s, the nature of welfare states began to change and their focus shifted towards employment and targeted policies for job promotion. To reduce mass unemployment, states moved closer towards deregulation, leading inevitably to increased poverty and inequality. The significant increase in inequality post 1970s, especially in the USA, has shown that by themselves, deregulation and privatised welfare cannot be welfare optimising for the most vulnerable demographics (Gosta Esping-Andersen, 1999).

Covid-19 and Social Welfare

‘COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. [...] The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; The fiction that unpaid care work is not work; The delusion that we live in a post-racist world; The myth that we are all in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.’

– Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General

The pandemic brought with it unprecedented levels of unemployment, debt rates, and subsequent government intervention. The fiscal stimulus packages launched by governments are enormous when compared to other interventions made in the post-industrial economic era, even those during the Great Recession (2007-08). Deficits have not been this high since the World Wars (See Figure 5). The scale and speed of the welfare state's expansion has never been larger and faster. Welfare suddenly is not for the poorest (means testing), for ones who paid in (social insurance), or for those who are employed (conditionality); governments began to bail out citizens almost en masse. The pandemic has made universalism an object of public interest. As during previous crises, support for public ownership, socially shared risks, and anger towards ultra-rich demographics has surged across countries. In the USA itself, more than 76 million lost work and 18 million claimed unemployment (S. Department of Labour, 2021). At the same time, the wealth of billionaires in the U.S. grew by almost 50%, i.e., about 1.3 trillion dollars (Collins, 2021). These significant macroeconomic shocks have the potential to shape preferences for redistribution (Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2014). The Covid-19 crisis has already begun to influence such social narratives and will continue to shape them in our lifetimes.

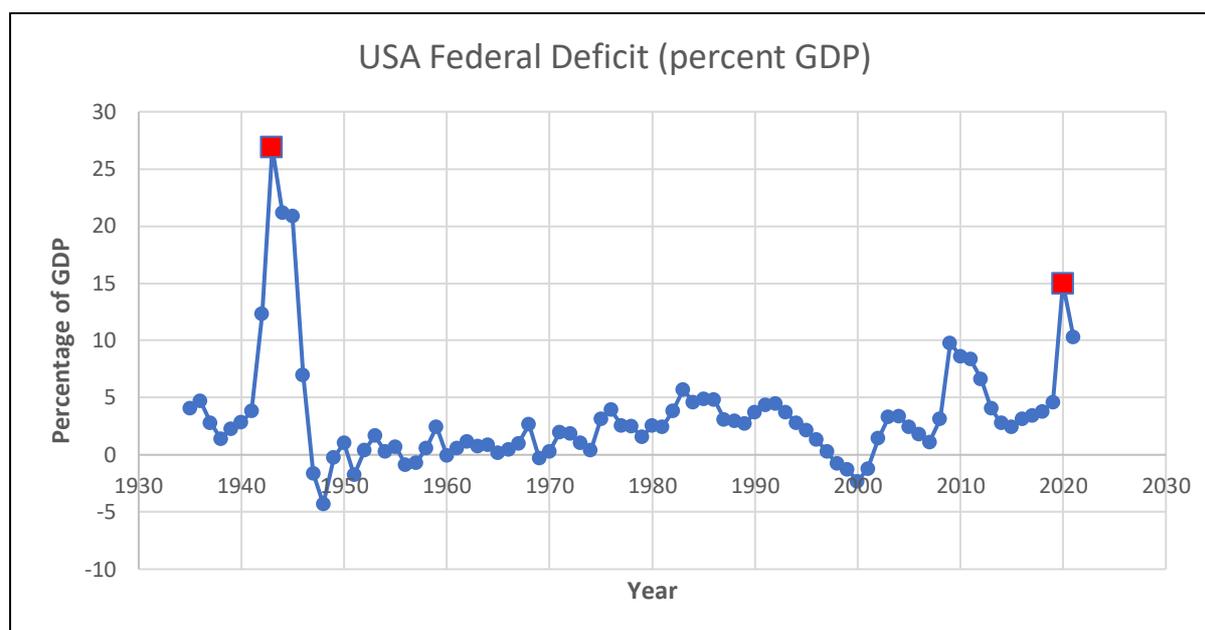


Figure 5. Deficit rates have never been this high since the World Wars. (Since percent of GDP is shown, the exponentially larger size of the GDP now should be considered too.) (Archival FRED, 2021)

State Response and the Public Narrative

Political Response and Policy Narrative

Different countries have reacted differently to the pandemic, but a pattern of large government intervention – \$13.8trn: 13.5% of global GDP (The Economist, 2021) – and its public acceptance is clear across a vast majority. Figure 6 reflects how the USA, the most ‘liberal’ of welfare regimes, reflects this pattern. Joe Biden was elected president in an election conducted in the middle of the pandemic, which demonstrated a change in the way the electorate perceived Biden’s policies and that of incumbent president, Donald Trump.

Research suggests (consistent with the effect of macroeconomic shocks on redistribution preferences) that had Covid-19 cases been 5% lower in the USA, Donald Trump would have been re-elected (Baccini et al., 2021); Joe Biden’s election victory and the policies he will implement are thus directly connected to the pandemic.

The new administration has brought a new era of larger government and redistribution. After implementing a Covid Rescue plan of \$1.9 trillion, reopening the Affordable Care Act (law aiming to provide affordable health insurance), and loosening immigration laws, Joe Biden’s speech to Congress is testimony to a larger ideological shift. Here are some excerpts:

‘Public investment in infrastructure has literally transformed America [...] Universal public schools and college aid opened wide the doors of opportunity. [...] and investments that only the government was in a position to make. That’s why I propose the American Jobs Plan, a once-in-a-generation investment in America itself. This is the largest jobs plan since World War II.’ (The White House, 2021)

The American Jobs is a public investment plan of over 2 trillion dollars, and over which the government plans to spend another 1.3 trillion dollars on free education, health care and childcare. Universalising health care and expanding Medicare was emphasised. ‘Health care should be a right, not a privilege, in America,’ he said.

‘It’s time for corporate America and the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans to just begin to pay their fair share. [...] Recent studies show that 55 of the nation’s biggest corporations paid zero federal tax last year. Those 55 corporations made in excess of \$40 billion in profit. A lot of companies also evade taxes through tax havens in Switzerland and Bermuda and the Cayman Islands. And they benefit from tax loopholes and deductions for offshoring jobs and shifting profits overseas. It’s not right.’

‘[...] The pandemic has only made things worse. Twenty million Americans lost their job in the pandemic, working- and middle-class Americans. At the same time, roughly 650 billionaires in America saw their net worth increase by more than \$1 trillion, in the same exact period. My fellow Americans, trickle-down, trickle-down economics has never worked. It’s time to grow the economy from the bottom and the middle out.’ (The White House, 2021)

The government plans to raise top marginal income tax rates and capital gain taxes for the super-rich to fund social programmes. The administration also began an international mission to set a minimum corporate tax across all countries so that companies do not evade or avoid taxes.

‘We’re going to reform corporate taxes so they pay their fair share and help pay for the public investments their businesses will benefit from as well. We’re going to reward work, not just wealth. We take the top tax bracket for the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans, those making over \$400,000 or more, back up to where it was when George W. Bush was president, when he started, 39.6 percent.’ (The White House, 2021)

The weakening of unions has been claimed as a major contributor to inequality in the neoliberal world, social-democratic forces have historically gone hand in hand with stronger unionisation (Piketty, 2019: 499). Biden laid out a policy objective for stronger unions and equal pay as well:

‘The middle class built the country. And unions built the middle class. So that’s why I’m calling on Congress to pass the Protect the Right to Organize Act, the PRO Act, and send it to my desk so we can support the right to unionize. [...] Let’s get the Paycheck Fairness Act to my desk as well. Equal pay.’ (The White House, 2021)

Landmark speeches such as these reflect deep political and public narratives, they shape and are shaped by preferences of the masses and administrators (Nussbaum, 2013). This paper was first written in July, just after these policies were announced in the USA. Not enough time has passed to observe significant implementation and tangible effects. Moreover, my primary aim is to scrutinise the development of *ideological narratives*; speeches by powerful elected officials are a powerful method with which to do so.

Even besides the newly elected government in the USA, other national preferences surrounding state intervention have shown significant shifts. In the case of Britain, Jeremy Corbyn's welfare plans were deemed 'money tree' socialism by Boris Johnson in 2019, but a few months later his government paid the wages of all those who lost jobs – a policy described as 'unprecedented in British history' by the Chancellor to the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak. Welfare policies which are not directly connected to the pandemic, such as the Protect the Right to Organize Act proposed by President Biden, are also relevant to discourse surrounding ideological influence because of the public and political support the pandemic has generated for them. The pandemic appears to have been crucial for the strength and advertisement of these policy changes.

Public Discourse: Media, Academia and Masses

The President of the American Economic Association in 1919, Irving Fisher, alarmingly declared the rising wealth inequality the USA and argued for high inheritance taxes in the USA (Piketty and Zucman, 2015). This was the beginning of the intellectual groundwork for the New Deal in the 1930s. In 2020, Emmanuel Saez (2021), the keynote speaker at the American Economic Association, urged economists and policy makers to rethink welfare and resolve wealth inequality – a task him and his colleagues Gabriel Zucman (in the USA) and Thomas Piketty (globally) have taken upon themselves. Their propositions have been consistent with the progressive policy suggestions of Democratic Party.

It can be established that there has been support for progressive welfare policies in the academic world, but this is tangential to the paper's thesis. What is surprising (and significant) is the surge in support for them amongst the masses and mainstream media. The pandemic has increased income and health inequality aversion among the public (Asaria et al., 2021). A poll conducted by ABC News/Washington Post every two to four years shows that public approval for larger government with more services (as President Biden has proposed) is at 45% and has never been higher in comparison to polls dating upto 30 years back. In 2002, the figure was at 34%, and in 2010 at 37%, both significantly lower in terms of public approval patterns. Moreover, public preference for smaller government at 48% is the lowest in 30 years in comparison with 62% in 2002 and 57% in 2010.

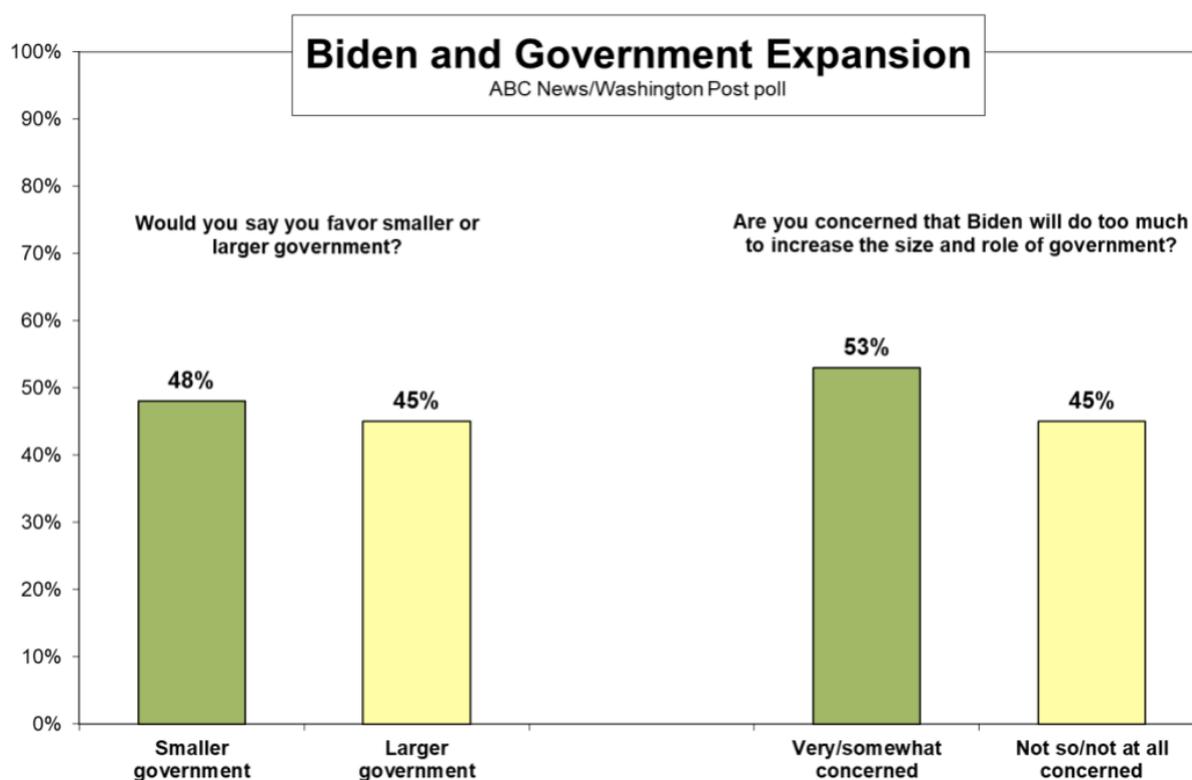


Figure 6. Public preference for the respective subjects is shown in percentage. (ABC/Washington Post, 2021)

The poll also observed high rates of approval for the pandemic relief package launched by the government, the proposition for higher taxes, and increase in public investment. A clear trend of support for higher public social spending can be observed in the population. The largest media houses, newspaper and magazines have continuously publicised this support for welfare schemes and promoted their implementation. The Economist (2020, 2021), The New York Times (Tankersley, 2021), The Guardian (Sparrow 2020; Spinney 2020; Singh 2021), The Washington Post (2021) etc., have regularly published reports and articles building on the same narrative. They have applauded large welfare packages of governments, such as the Biden administration and EU, criticised those who acted contrarily, and offered various possibilities of building a better social-safety net post-pandemic. An ideological shift can be observed, ostensibly in favour of welfare states and public social responsibility.

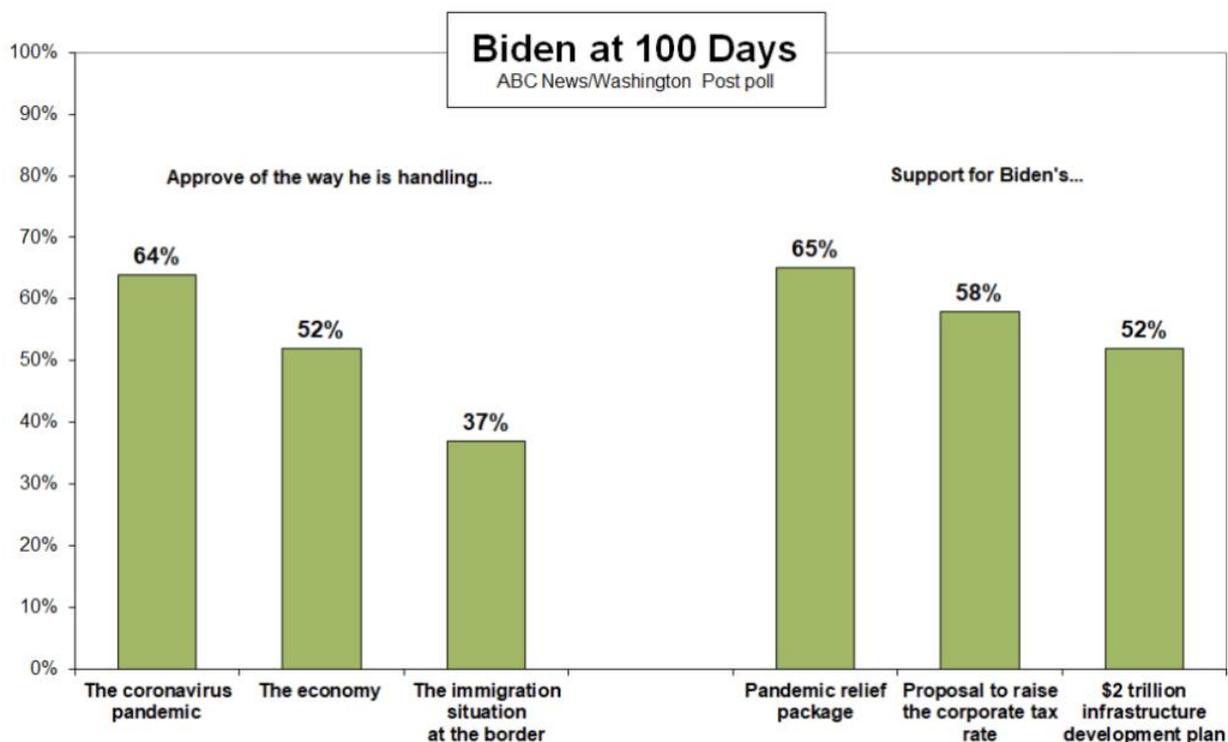


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Possible Trajectories Post-Covid-19: A Global Welfare Policy?

Accurately predicting the future of social policy and welfare is difficult and arguably futile, as each country has its own notion of best policies and requires different issues to be addressed. However, I will discuss whether ideological developments of the welfare and social policy will continue to be dominated by neo-liberal forces or not. That is, will this social-democratic trend persist?

Moving Beyond Neo-liberalism

Careful historical comparison and an analysis of current developments in response to the economic and social unrest caused by the pandemic suggests that avoiding a change in the status quo of neoliberal social policy is contrary to logic and efficiency. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the irreplaceable role of the state in delivering and implementation of social welfare, especially during crises (Aysan, 2020). The patterns of public response, debt and social policy closely demonstrate features of past macroeconomic and crisis events which

brought significant ideological changes in favour of the welfare state. The emphasis should be laid on the impact this pandemic has had and will continue to have on the basic paradigm of the neoliberal narrative, i.e. minimum government involvement in the economy and welfare. With Covid-19, the minimal involvement purported by neoliberal forces has been altered intrinsically, and potentially for a long time due to the lasting economic, psychological and social effects of an event of this scale and intensity.

A mass support for larger government and public social programmes has never been higher in recent history, and it would be hasty to argue that this support will die out once countries open up and infections diminish. The Covid-19 pandemic has structurally changed economies, impacting societies and individuals in varied and devastating ways. Macroeconomic shocks shape long term individual preferences for public policy; their deep social and personal disruption ingrains certain preferences for all generations which experience them. In the paper *Growing up in a Recession*, Giuliano (2014) and Spilimbergo (2014) empirically prove using a triple database analysis that experiences of macroeconomic shocks by individuals during their early adulthood (18-25 years) significantly shape pro-welfare and pro-redistribution preferences in both the short and the long term. Thus, on a microeconomic and individual level, there is evidence in favour of a shift towards larger governments, universal social policies and a more active welfare state.

An Ideological Shift at the National and Global Level

The pandemic has established that the non-interventionalist state promoted in the neo-liberal era is not viable – and not preferred as strongly anymore. National governments and public narratives already show a shift towards an increase in public intervention in social safety and increased services provided by the government. Secondly, it has established the global nature of social risks and a need for global coordination in managing them. An unprecedented wave of global integration in health security measures and response coordination is inevitable and required. It exposed global inequalities between countries and individuals, strengthening movements for equality and social democracy. Calls such as those for a global minimum corporate tax are early indicators of this trend. A change can be seen and is expected in market philosophy too, with prosocial behaviour increasing in amongst both consumers and businesses (He and Harris, 2020).

It may be often assumed that consumers and firms behave irrationally or rationally in their self-interest during crises by indulging in actions such as panic buying and price inflation. However,

events such as pandemics differ from shorter crises such as a floods or national economic slowdowns. Over periods of 2-5 years of such crises, it could be argued that people gain an intuitive understanding of the interconnected nature of their health and well-being, and firms understand the importance public reputation. Taking into account historical, behavioural, economic and political factors, a speculative yet important argument can be made that the ideological shifts that the Covid-19 pandemic will bring about will be (in varied ways) for the greater involvement of the welfare state and more extensive social policy.

Conclusion

The paper establishes the ideological effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the welfare state and active social policy for both markets and the state. Through the analysis of public preferences and public policy in the USA, the extent of the pandemic's influence on ideological shifts is demonstrated. The pandemic has led to unprecedented public social spending and set a favourable path for social-democratic policies at both national and global levels. It is likely that there will be no turning back to pre-pandemic ideologies of state intervention and social policy. The way forward consists of varying degrees of increase in the size of government and prosocial markets. The pandemic has undoubtedly increased inequalities of all forms, but it has put forward an opportunity for more equal societies and egalitarian movements. It is the 'New Deal' or 'War Reconstruction' moment for our generation. The measures taken now could set standards for challenges to inequality in our lifetimes.

Notes

- i. For further insight into the justifications developed by societies for existing and future inequalities through narratives and institutions see: Thomas Piketty, 'Capital and Ideology' (2019). The combination of narratives and institutions chosen by a society according to him is an inequality regime. The meritocratic narrative with institutions of property and open markets, along with various other elements comprise inequality regimes of countries such as USA and the UK in the 21st century. Welfare regimes discussed in the paper are a synonymous concept.
- ii. The Roosevelt administration from 1933 to 1939 launched a series of public projects, fiscal reforms and welfare programs which were collectively called 'The New Deal'. Its legacy revolutionized the perception of government responsibility in the USA, Social Security Act, 1935 and labour regulations being prominent examples.

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