RECRUITMENT, RHETORIC AND REFORM: NEW LABOUR’S POLITICIANS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF BRITISH WELFARE PROVISION

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, the UK had some of the most generous welfare provision in the world, assisting people ‘from the cradle to the grave’, in the words of its designer William Beveridge. Widely supported by voters and politicians of all stripes, it remained largely intact into the early 1980s. Yet since then, the benefits system has been radically transformed into one of the developed world’s least generous, with major implications for poverty and social cohesion. Public opinion has also turned against it to a degree that is unmatched anywhere else. Until recently, both major parties largely embraced the new settlement, using increasingly harsh rhetoric to describe welfare – and its users.

Looking at welfare programs that provide relief from unemployment, poverty, and disability, I ask why this transformation occurred. I offer an explicitly political and top-down explanation, focusing on the role of party competition and a large change in the composition of the UK’s Labour party, which originally set up the welfare state. As it increasingly recruited legislators from outside of the working-class, both its stance and rhetoric on welfare reform shifted dramatically. I show that this rhetoric ultimately turned the British public into welfare skeptics who are willing to endorse far-reaching retrenchment. Hence this case study offers a cautionary tale of how the political coalitions underpinning social policy can quickly unravel. Political and popular support for welfare provision is by no means guaranteed, even in an era of rising insecurity and inequality, particularly as social democratic parties become increasingly unrecognizable compared to their working-class roots, and welfare is subjected to means-testing, drawing lines between recipients and taxpayers.

This thesis includes six chapters, and uses a database I have assembled of every speech made about welfare issues in the British Parliament from 1987-2015, together with a wealth of public opinion data. It combines historical accounts, computational and qualitative text analysis, and quantitative observational and experimental evidence to explain how British welfare provision, rhetoric and public opinion were all transformed in the space of a single generation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: How the UK Changed

This thesis discusses a period of dramatic reforms to Britain’s welfare system from 1987-2015. The changes took place during a number of important transitions in leadership for Britain’s major political parties. Starting in 1987, the Labour party was traditionally a leftwing socialist party representing working class voters, and retained much of this identity up to the General Election of 1992 under Neil Kinnock. However, after the accession of John Smith as party leader (1992-4) and then Tony Blair in 1994, it gradually became more centrist in an effort to woo middle class voters, re-branding itself as ‘New Labour’ after losing four elections in a row. This included embracing reforms that attached many more conditions to the receipt of welfare benefits. This trend continued through Blair’s time as Prime Minister (1997-2007) and into the years of Gordon Brown’s premiership (2007-2010), when the party’s policies had become increasingly unrecognizable compared to the 1980s. From 2010-15, Labour was led by a more leftwing leader, Ed Miliband, and advocated for more traditional left policies.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, have had many different leaders but a more consistent set of policy stances. They have remained well to the right of center, first under Margaret Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister (from 1979 to 1990) and John Major’s (1990-97), followed by a succession of short-term leaders, before the accession of David Cameron (2005-). His governments (2010-16) took a particularly hard line on welfare benefits, considerably reducing their generosity in a series of sometimes controversial reforms. The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, have been a smaller centrist party combining social and economic liberalism, and shared power with the Conservatives in a coalition from 2010-15, before losing most of their seats in the 2015 general election, leaving the
Conservatives to govern alone.

This thesis focuses on the evolution of welfare policies in the Labour party because, as I explain below, the New Labour era was crucial in determining the long-term trajectory of British welfare provision. I seek to understand how and why the leadership introduced far-reaching welfare reforms, why they were successful in doing so, and what effects the changes had on the voting public and on subsequent policy development. To do so, throughout the rest of this work, I highlight four important developments that occurred during in the New Labour era: changes in welfare policies, comprehensive shifts in political rhetoric, big declines in public support for welfare, and changes in the internal makeup of the Labour party. I outline each of them in turn here, beginning with policy changes.

1.1 Welfare Policies

One of the most far-reaching — and in the long-run, most politically consequential — changes made by New Labour was to welfare policies, which are the focus of this thesis. The changes wrought by Blair and his allies were the most important step in a chain of reforms that began in the 1980s, and took the UK from being one of the developed world’s most generous welfare systems to one of the least. Here, I explain the changes made by New Labour, setting them in their historical context and explaining why they have proven to be so important in shaping what welfare looks like today, as well as its future trajectory. I use “welfare” in the American sense of the word, meaning a specific set of policies designed to alleviate unemployment, poverty, sickness and disability that are typically provided in the form of cash benefits to replace or top up income. Other areas of the wider welfare state, like healthcare and public pensions, will be discussed at times along the way, but have not changed in such a dramatic fashion as welfare policies, as I define them here.

The major features of British welfare provision took shape after World War Two under the system of National Insurance designed by William Beveridge. It offered comparatively generous benefits and coverage ‘from the cradle to the grave’, in Beveridge’s words, and was also free of conditions placed on the users in return for its receipt. It was an insurance-based system that, over time, came to be augmented by substantial benefits paid to those on low incomes. Unemployment
assistance and payments to the sick and disabled were part of the insurance system, and were seen as a right that workers had earned by paying into the system. They were universal in scope, making little distinction between those who paid in and those who took out. As in much of the rest of Europe, these measures were originally framed as an extension of the basic rights of citizens, with ‘social rights’ to benefits standing alongside other basic rights and freedoms, and an emphasis on ‘decommodification’, insulating citizens from the vagaries of free markets (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hemerijck 2012).

These arrangements survived relatively intact into the late 1970s, before coming under a first major wave of political attacks from Thatcher’s government from 1979 onward. Her changes initiated a steady march from a universal system to a more targeted and residual system of welfare. The generosity of the benefits system was further reduced in a second wave of reforms under Tony Blair from 1997, with reform efforts peaking in the early 2000s. Then, a third major phase of retrenchment began under Conservative-led governments from 2010 onward. In both of the latter two phases, not only was the generosity of welfare altered, but the form of assistance also changed. A regime that had once been relatively universal and free of conditions and eligibility requirements has become substantially means-tested, and subject to an increasingly draconian system of conditionality and enforcement. In the late 1970s, just 9% of British benefits and social security spending was means-tested, rising to 22% in the mid 1990s (M. Evans 1998) and 43% in 2016 (Hood and Keiller 2016). These figures are also heavily distorted by spending on the elderly, particularly state pensions, which are not means-tested and account for the bulk of welfare expenditure. In 2016, just 6% of expenditure on the elderly was subject to means-testing, compared to 79% of expenditure on assistance for families with children and 87% of expenditure on the unemployed (Hood and Keiller 2016). Thus for spending on the unemployed and poor, the UK represents a particularly dramatic case of liberalizing welfare reforms that ‘re-commodify’ workers.

As a consequence of these changes, British welfare policies became much less generous, both in absolute terms and relative to other countries. Assessing the generosity of the benefits system is not an easy task; comparing it over time and space is even harder. Welfare policies are complex, and their generosity is affected by – amongst other things – the cash value of benefits, how those...
values differ across groups such as the young and old or married and unmarried, the rules governing who is eligible, the extent of conditions that are placed on users in return, and so on. In addition, any given welfare policy regime can become more or less generous depending on the state of the economy and the economic situation of the system’s users (Pallage, Scruggs, and Zimmerman 2013). It is unlikely that any single quantitative indicator can adequately capture every aspect of welfare policies that affects their users’ lives. But while bearing in mind that any over-time comparison of generosity is a qualitative as much as an exact quantitative exercise, the general patterns in British welfare provision over time are relatively uncontroversial and agreed upon in the literature, and can be summarized with some quantitative indicators.

Long-run data from the OECD demonstrates that the UK has gone from one of the leaders of the pack worldwide in benefits provision to a very residual system. The effects of welfare reforms up to the middle of the New Labour era are neatly illustrated by Figure 1.1, which looks at comparative data on one measure of welfare generosity, the Gross Replacement Rate (GRR). The GRR simply measures the proportion of an average worker’s salary that is replaced by unemployment benefits, and is a useful measure because unlike spending data, it is not affected by the economic cycle (benefits spending as a proportion of GDP rises in recessions automatically, rather than due to policy changes). The Figure compares two time periods, ranking countries in terms of their generosity in the first period. First, there is the late 1960s: the end of the post-war ‘golden age’ of welfare capitalism, before the multiple crises of the 1970s began to erode governments’ fiscal capacities and commitments to welfare states. Second, it shows the early 2000s: the height of the New Labour period, when some of the most important welfare reforms of the Blair government were in place. The OECD data for this series ends in 2003. The post-2003 period is discussed below, but any reasonable assessment would conclude that generosity was even further reduced under the post-2010 Cameron administration, as I outline below.

In the 1960s, the UK was the fourth most generous of the countries shown. Benefits were provided at a greater rate than any Scandinavian country, and replaced much more income than countries with relatively similar political economies such as the US, Canada and Australia. By the

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1. The OECD changed the way it measures replacement rates; this is the only series that both goes back to the 1960s and covers a large number of countries, making it most useful for my purposes.
early 2000s, the picture was starkly different. The UK had become the third least generous country on the list, only narrowly beating the US and Canada. Two sets of trends explain these changes. First, many countries developed their welfare systems somewhat later than the UK, particularly in Scandinavia. There was very substantial growth in countries like Norway and Sweden. Yet these countries did not merely catch up to where the UK had been in the late 1960s. They very substantially overtook it. At the same time, the UK was the only country on the list that saw any substantial retrenchment over the period, becoming less generous while generosity increased almost everywhere else. By the early 2000s, the countries fell roughly into Gosta Esping-Andersen’s
'three worlds' of welfare (Esping-Andersen 1990). While not all countries fit the bill perfectly, the Scandinavian countries were the most generous overall, followed by Continental countries such as Germany and Austria, with the Anglo-Saxon economies being the most residual systems. But interestingly, the UK did not fit into this pattern in the 1960s at all. Although it has never been as generous as the most generous European systems are today (or were in the 2000s), in the 1960s it was substantially ahead of the rest of the Anglo-Saxon world and on a par with continental systems.

Figure 1.2: Estimated Generosity of Unemployment Benefits, 1971-2002

![Figure 1.2: Estimated Generosity of Unemployment Benefits, 1971-2002](image)

Source: Pallage, Scruggs, and Zimmerman (2013)

Figure 1.2 offers a closer examination of changes over time. It uses data from Pallage, Scruggs, and Zimmerman (2013), who produce a comprehensive estimate of the generosity of the British benefits system using a simulated economic model, capturing all of the influences on welfare generosity that were discussed above, including macroeconomic conditions and the tax system used to pay for benefits. Their model produces a simulated single replacement rate that would provide the same aggregate level of economic welfare to the average worker as provided by the actual overall policy regime, with its many different parameters. Although the measure is volatile in the 1970s
due to turbulent economic conditions, the greater scope of welfare programs in that decade is clear.\textsuperscript{2} Then, under Thatcher in the 1980s there was a large decline in generosity. From the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, generosity changed little, and then under the Blair government from 1997, a second phase of retrenchment is visible, reducing the generosity of welfare to well below the level reached under Thatcher’s Conservative government.

In fact, though, the Blair era actually saw substantially more innovation in the ways in which benefits were delivered, compared to what had gone before. Up to the late 1970s, British welfare policies remained largely untouched from the end of World War Two. The focus of policy continued to be on redistribution and meeting the needs of unemployed people through fairly generous benefits provision, with few strings attached (Taylor-Gooby 1988; Barr and Coulter 1990). While Conservative governments of the 1950s to 1970s had largely accepted this settlement and maintained it intact, things began to change under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher from 1979. The party became concerned about the level of expenditures, as well as the possibility that benefits were trapping people in unemployment by discouraging job-seeking. Despite this, Thatcher’s governments carried out relatively little in the way of major reforms to the format of benefits or the way in which they were administered. Instead, the focus was on cutting the amount of benefits paid out, hoping that less money in their pockets would spur the unemployed into action. The rates of unemployment and sickness benefits were cut, and benefits were made taxable for the first time. Some elements of means-testing were also introduced into the once-universal system of National Insurance (Barr and Coulter 1990; Le Grand 1990). In contrast to the reforms carried out under Cameron from 2010, though, there was not a huge emphasis on making cuts in the total amount of welfare spending. In fact, spending on welfare as a proportion of GDP barely changed over the Thatcher period (Rhodes 2000).\textsuperscript{3}

Although not revolutionary in policy terms, these changes led to hardship amongst welfare recipients and meant that for the first time, unemployment overtook old age as a cause of poverty.

\textsuperscript{2} Indeed, the inclusion of macroeconomic conditions introduces greater volatility into their estimates more generally, compared to the policy parameters alone. For instance, estimated generosity can fall when the duration for which people can continue to claim welfare remains fixed, but the average duration of unemployment rises.

\textsuperscript{3} Of course, this in part reflects greater demand as long-term unemployment rose, which is why I mainly focus on other measures of generosity.
in the UK (Taylor-Gooby 1988). This explains the rapid declines in generosity shown in Figure 1.2. Conservative governments made fewer changes to the level of benefits from the late 1980s to 1997, but they did begin to make some small changes in format. In particular, they introduced some conditions on the receipt of benefits, including requirements to seek work while receiving unemployment benefits, culminating in the renaming (and slightly broader reform) of the system to the ‘job-seekers allowance’ in 1996 (Clasen 2005).

A second major set of reforms was adopted by Labour under Blair’s leadership from 1994, and introduced while in office from 1997. Fewer major cuts to benefit levels were enacted, although the real value of unemployment benefits did fall somewhat. The policy reforms themselves were more far-reaching than under the Conservatives, however, and they also had more important long-term consequences. Emphasizing that rights to welfare should be balanced by responsibilities on the part of its recipients, there was a general shift toward the idea of work as a means of poverty alleviation, with benefits playing only a temporary role. Under Labour’s ‘New Deal’, the long-term unemployed were required to actively seek work, with personal advisers helping them draw up action plans to find jobs. Those who remained unemployed for too long had to undertake compulsory training schemes or subsidized employment, with benefits withdrawn from those deemed to be not complying. This represented a big departure, both practically and philosophically, from the old National Insurance and benefits systems, when assistance had been seen as an automatic right of citizens, rather than something that had to be earned.

In a particular break from the Conservative policy regime, these requirements were also extended into other areas of welfare, including support for single mothers and the disabled, with the aim of rapidly reducing the number of those groups receiving assistance, too (King and Wickham-Jones 1999; Clasen 2005; Lupton et al. 2013). In a set of reforms enacted in 2008, for instance, those in receipt of disability benefits could be sanctioned, including the temporary removal of benefits, if they were deemed to be fit for work but not trying hard enough to find it (Watts et al. 2014). Thus it was New Labour who entrenched the UK’s transformation from a relatively encompassing, no-strings-attached system to a set of residual programs designed only to offer temporary relief for those in need. The benefits system was no longer being used as a tool to tackle poverty in a serious
way.

However, it is also important to note that the broader set of tax and welfare state policies under Labour were not regressive, particularly for certain groups in society. Labour generally increased or maintained spending on education and public healthcare, and was relatively generous to pensioners. The overall implications of Labour's overall changes were not as serious for poverty as those of the Conservatives. Poverty actually fell under New labour before the financial crisis, in part because the economy was growing, but also because the Blair and Brown governments enacted a series of reforms designed to increase the incomes of those in low-paid work, including the introduction of a minimum wage and a relatively generous system of tax credits. Families with children were particularly helped, including through increases in child benefits, so that the net impact of Labour's changes on incomes was positive for some groups (Browne and Phillips 2010; Lupton et al. 2013). Labour was an exemplar of a strategy seen across Europe of turning 'vice into virtue', whereby parties target inefficient parts of the welfare state for cuts, such as disability payments being made to people who could feasibly work, freeing up fiscal resources for redistributive transfers to the genuinely needy (Levy 1999).

Instead, while not as important for overall generosity as the Tory cuts of the 1980s (Figure 1.2), Labour's policy changes were more important than those Tory reforms in the long run because of the radical change in the British political landscape that they represented. Labour was the party that originally created the British welfare state, and as recently as the late 1980s it had staunchly opposed welfare cuts and reforms, in particular the very notion of welfare-to-work (King and Wickham-Jones 1999). The transformation to enacting these policies under Blair in only a handful of years is quite remarkable. In terms of entrenching the focus on welfare-to-work and ending the UK's relatively generous system of unemployment assistance, the New Labour period stands out as the most important, because in the past Labour would have instinctively dismantled the Tories' policies and raised the generosity of benefits. As I will explain in Chapter 3, Labour faced little compelling economic or political reason to enact its reforms. It had breathing room to reverse Thatcher's changes, had it wanted to. By not doing so, these policy choices essentially left the table, and welfare-to-work became a permanent feature of the system. By the early 2000s,
there was a remarkable bipartisan consensus on welfare between the major parties, as Labour “out-Thatchered the Thatcherites” (Wood 2001, p.399). With both main parties essentially in agreement on the appropriate path for social policy, New Labour’s real legacy was ideational.

**Figure 1.3: Estimated Impact of Welfare Changes Since 2010**

The Blair and Brown era paved the way for a third, much more extensive set of changes introduced by the Cameron Conservative-led governments from 2010. Figure 1.3 shows the impact of Conservative-led changes since 2010 across the ten income deciles, for average working-age households with and without children and for pensioners, with the impact of changes to date shown on the left, and the estimated future impact of announced plans on the right.\(^4\) The estimates come from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a highly respected non-partisan research center. Several key

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\(^4\) Most plans announced since 2015 have yet to fully come into effect.
patterns emerge. First, the reforms are highly regressive, affecting the poorest families more than the very richest, and much more than those in the middle and upper-middle. Second, families with children are affected the most, families without children somewhat less (or even positively) and pensioners barely affected at all. These are targeted cuts at working-age benefits that carefully avoid harming the elderly, who vote Conservative in very high numbers. There have been very few cuts or reforms to benefits for the elderly: as mentioned above, only 6% of spending on the elderly in 2016 was means-tested, compared to 87% for the unemployed. And third, the cuts are on a very large scale. The poorest households have already lost 6% of their net incomes, and are projected to lose a further 10-15% by 2020.5

In a process that Van Keersbergen, Vis, and Hemerijck (2014) have called “a thorough-going restructuring of the British welfare state towards a highly inegalitarian form of liberalism” (p. 891), many different cuts have been made or planned. The long-term disabled have seen particularly big losses, with around half a million of those who are too disabled to work seeing large cuts in their allowances. Those in receipt of housing benefits have also been penalized under the notorious ‘bedroom tax’, restricting benefits for poor families living in larger homes. The unemployed have seen their benefits cut due to changes in the way they are indexed to inflation and a new maximum cap on weekly benefits that any household may receive. Even payments made to bereaved families with children where one parent dies have been almost totally removed. Large cutbacks are also being made in tax credits, particularly for those with large families, meaning that unlike under New Labour the benefit changes are not compensated for with earnings top-ups (Van Keersbergen, Vis, and Hemerijck 2014; Watts et al. 2014; Daguerre and Etherington 2016; McKay and Rowlingson 2016). The total impact of the changes is likely to be an increase of around 600,000 children living in absolute poverty (Dwyer and Wright 2014).

In addition to changes in the levels of benefits, the system of conditionality has been greatly strengthened too, including the introduction of a particularly draconian new set of sanctions for those who don’t comply. Those in receipt of disability benefits must now undergo regular and invasive ‘capability assessments’ to determine whether they could be working. The unemployed

5. Although other factors, including potentially rising wages, could offset these losses to some extent for some groups. The Figure only shows the impact of welfare changes, not total changes in income.
must now treat job-seeking as effectively a full-time job if they wish to receive benefits, including submitting proof of the number and type of jobs they have applied to. Those deemed to be failing to comply can have their benefits removed entirely for up to three years. The evidence to date shows that the expansion of sanctioning has increased homelessness and the use of food banks for subsistence, and that the young, low-skilled and those with mental illnesses have been particularly affected. In the near future, a very substantial expansion of the sanctioning regime into other areas of welfare provision is planned, including for single mothers and those on low pay receiving tax credits (Dwyer and Wright 2014; Van Keersbergen, Vis, and Hemerijck 2014; Watts et al. 2014; Daguerre and Etherington 2016).

In other words, the UK over the past thirty years has undergone perhaps the most far-reaching set of liberalizing reforms and retrenchment ever seen in a mature welfare state. Why that occurred is the central question that I ask in this work.

1.2 Elite Rhetoric

A large part of the answer, I will argue, is that the New Labour era was also marked by a sea change in the rhetoric used by politicians to describe welfare and its recipients. I will show that Labour’s altered discourse turned out to be more important for the long run evolution of welfare policies than the actual policy changes that it made. To demonstrate why the change in discourse was so important, a crucial first step is simply to show how it changed. In Chapter 2, I present a detailed picture of how political rhetoric toward welfare evolved over time. The analysis is based on an original database of every speech made about welfare issues in the House of Commons – Britain’s main parliamentary chamber – from 1987-2015, which is outlined later in this introduction. As a preview, Figure 1.4 shows quantitative summaries of these changes in discourse. How these are calculated, and precisely what they mean, is explored in detail in Chapter 2. For now, it is sufficient to note that they show the percentage of total British parliamentary discourse on welfare issues accounted for by two opposing sets of rhetorical frames. The first set of frames were positive. Politicians talked about welfare as a legitimate large-scale government endeavor that worked effectively, and should be an unconditional political right of citizens. Over time this was
increasingly replaced by more negative framing, as parties emphasized budgetary cuts, fraud and inefficiencies, and began framing it as a policy that only certain groups, such as those who "work hard", deserve to receive.

Figure 1.4: Broad Patterns in British Elite Discourse about Welfare

There was a remarkable shift in British politicians' relative use of these frames, as shown in Figure 1.4. The left hand side ("poverty/need") shows the prevalence of frames that emphasized poverty and the necessity of benefits, while the right side ("reform/fraud") shows frames that emphasized the need for cuts and reforms, and talked about fraud. There was a very substantial decline in pro-welfare rhetoric, from occupying almost half of total speech in the late 1980s and early 1990s to around 5% in the late 1990s, followed by a slight resurgence during and after the recent financial crisis, although never reaching anything like its former importance. Particularly when Cameron came to power at the end of the 2000s, there had been a near total collapse in positive mentions of welfare. Meanwhile, the right-hand panels show an equally sharp and dramatic rise in rhetoric about fraud and reform, from virtually zero in the late 1980s. There was also an early peak in this type of rhetoric around the accession of Tony Blair's new Labour government in 1997, and since then, the anti-welfare frames have consistently been used more than the pro-welfare frames.
Most importantly, as I will show in Chapter 2, these changes in rhetoric occurred among both parties fairly equally. The fact that Labour shifted is particularly important, given that it had always been a staunch defender of traditional welfare provision in the past. It meant that voters heard very little countervailing messaging. To give a sense of what this type of discourse sounded like, we can consider the rhetoric of Tony Blair himself. He regularly drew contrasts between those who paid for welfare through taxes and those who used it, who became increasingly disparate groups as welfare reforms eroded the insurance-based Beveridgian welfare state. His rhetoric – representing an astonishing change from the Labour party of only a decade earlier – leaves little room for doubt about his attempts to side himself with middle-class voters:

“The basis of modern civic society is an ethic of mutual responsibility or duty. It is something for something. A society where we play by the rules. You only take out if you put in. That’s the bargain… work is the best form of welfare - the best way of funding people’s needs, the best way of giving them a stake in society. The task of reshaping welfare to reward hard work is daunting.”

“If you want to make sure you are not spending billions upon billions upon billions of pounds for people to do nothing, then you have got to reform the benefits system. We must make some impact on the huge and rising social security bill.”

1.3 Public Opinion

Public opinion data from the same period provides a clue as to why the changes in rhetoric mattered. Since the 1980s, the British public has turned against welfare provision in a big way. This is illustrated in Figure 1.5, which looks at answers to questions from the British Social Attitudes Survey in the late 1980s at the end of the Thatcher era, and in the late 2000s at the end of the New Labour era. These coincide with peaks and troughs in over-time opinion. When Thatcher left

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6. Although there were some important differences in tone between Labour and the Conservatives
8. Interview in The Observer newspaper, December 14th 1997
9. In all cases except the bottom question, the figure compares 1989 to 2008. The bottom question is asked very irregularly, and shows 1985 and 2006. Full question and response wordings are provided in Chapter 5. Most
office, before major reforms to the form of benefits had taken place, only one-third of respondents felt that benefits were too high and discouraged work. When Blair left office, this had risen to over three-fifths. There were also large increases in the belief that benefits discourage effort and in the prevalence of fraud. Redistribution became a little less popular, while falls in support for benefits spending and a strong role for the government in supporting the unemployed were more striking. This means that when reforms to the format of benefits began in the early 1990s, they lacked widespread backing from voters. But by the time Cameron’s conservative party began

10. We lack the data needed to assess how popular Thatcher’s reforms were at the beginning of the 1980s, which cut the levels of benefits. [I need to look into this some more]
formulating its draconian reforms to the welfare system in the late 2000s, they did so with a lot of public support. A clear majority of voters was convinced that the system was not working effectively. This is somewhat ironic, given the amount of effort expended by the Blair government in enacting reforms, many of which were successful in achieving their stated aims. Long-term unemployment fell, for example. The public either didn’t notice the changes, or more likely – as I will argue – it was changes in political rhetoric that altered their views. These long-term changes in public opinion matter because they have probably altered what is now politically feasible in the UK. It would be difficult, perhaps suicidal, for any party to advocate a large-scale expansion of welfare provision. This was illustrated most clearly in the recent 2017 election, where Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party – uncontroversially, the most left-wing incarnation of the party in decades – stood on a manifesto that promised to maintain the post-2010 welfare cuts almost in their entirety, including the planned cuts over the next few years, even as it promised to end austerity in other areas such as schools funding.

Figure 1.5 poses a number of obvious questions. For instance, could these patterns be explained by social change in the electorate, by economic cycles, by voters’ responses to economic conditions, or by changes in welfare spending? These issues are tackled in detail in Chapter 5, where I argue that these explanations fall short. For now, it is interesting to compare the UK to other European countries, which were subject to many of those same broad socio-economic trends. There is little available cross-nationally comparable data on how citizens feel about the performance of welfare systems. However, the last question featured in Figure 1.5, on whether the government should be responsible for the unemployed, is also featured in the International Social Survey Program, which co-ordinates shared opinion questions across many developed countries every few years.

Figure 1.6 compares trends in the UK for the dates when surveys were coordinated – 1990, 1996 and 2006 – to trends in other European countries where we also have continuous data over the three years.11 Clearly, declines in support for the welfare state, at least on this one available measure, were substantially larger in the UK than in other similar countries, although other European countries did see a slight decline in support from 1996 to 2006. This suggests that whatever explains changes

11. these are France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland
in British opinion is to a large extent unique to the UK, rather than part of a trend that has affected all countries at once. Moreover, the main change in Britain clearly occurred after the arrival of Tony Blair as Prime Minister (in 1997). The key cause of this shift in opinion, I will argue here – and perhaps one that was not intended by New Labour – was that the large-scale turnaround in political rhetoric that accompanied the reforms changed voters’ minds about welfare provision. An obvious question, then, is why Labour’s rhetoric changed so much.
1.4 Political Recruitment

These changes in British welfare policy and public opinion were accompanied by big changes in the Labour party’s composition in the House of Commons. These were, in part, a continuation of a gradual decline in the representation of working-class people in the party that has been ongoing since it became a mass party at the start of the twentieth century, as shown in Figure 1.7. Working-class people made up 70% of the party in 1920, falling to 8% in the 2010-15 parliamentary term.\footnote{In Chapter 4, I discuss in detail exactly how ‘working-class’ is defined.}

It also shows that working-class people are under-represented relative to the British population, and that their under-representation has grown over the period studied in this thesis.

Figure 1.7: Representation of Working-Class People in the Parliamentary Labour Party Compared to the UK Population, from 1920 to the 2010-15 Parliament

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1_7.png}
\caption{Representation of Working-Class People in the Parliamentary Labour Party Compared to the UK Population, from 1920 to the 2010-15 Parliament}
\end{figure}


Zooming in on the period studied since 1987, we can see in Figure 1.8 that these working-class MPs have been replaced almost one-for-one by a very different type of MP, those whom I term
Figure 1.8: Representation of Occupational Groups in the Parliamentary Labour Party, 1987-2015

Sources: Author's own coding of each MP, using coding scheme and data sources detailed in Chapters 3 and 4

'careerists.' Careerists are described in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, but in short they are not only middle-class, but are also drawn from a very narrow set of professions that are closely related to politics. They are, in other words, professional politicians with little or no experience outside of politics itself. In the 1980s they were rare in the Labour party, but have now risen to become the largest group of MPs, at nearly one-third of the party. At the same time, changes in the representation of other groups have been much less dramatic. There has been a small decline in MPs drawn from 'professional' backgrounds like lawyers, doctors and academics, who were almost as numerous as working-class MPs at the start of my data. This has been matched by a small but noticeable rise in MPs from private-sector backgrounds in business or finance, while there was little
overall change in the numbers of MPs coming from the public sector, such as teachers and social workers.\textsuperscript{13} Overall, the entire decline in the representation of working-class MPs was matched by the increase in careerists. This is part of a pattern that exists across the developed world, where elected politics is becoming both more middle-class and more professionalized (Borchert 2003).

These changes in political recruitment resulted from long-run forces that have made it more difficult for working-class people to enter politics, and at the same time have made it easier for careerists. Any change in the background of a party’s politicians can be thought of as resulting from some combination of shifts in demand, shifts in supply and altered institutions (Hazan and Rahat 2010). In the case of the British Labour party, changes in demand probably played only a minor role. All of the evidence that we have suggests that working-class politicians are extremely popular with the British public, who would readily vote for working-class candidates ahead of other occupational groups and would like to see more working-class people in parliament (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2016). At the same time, professional ‘identikit’ politicians with little real-world experience are unpopular and widely derided in the media. So it is very unlikely that these changes result from voters increasingly choosing to elect careerist over working-class candidates.

Instead, the changes result from some institutional changes within the party, and more importantly, changes in supply. Candidates for office in the UK have always been selected by a system of closed primaries made up of party members, who have always tended to be to the left of the party leadership and often favored more socialist candidates. On the other hand, party leaders, particularly during the ‘New Labour’ era of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, have been more supportive of careerists. Not only do careerists enjoy close relations with party leaders, they also tend to be more politically centrist (as this thesis demonstrates), and Labour was perceived by its leaders as being too left-wing. Recruiting more careerists to office became an important means for Blair and his allies to reform their party. During the 1990s and 2000s, there was some increase in informal control by the party leadership over the closed selection contests, including pre-screening candidates for selection, and occasionally reserving the right to pick a shortlist to present to local members. The

\textsuperscript{13} A very small number of MPs with atypical backgrounds fall into a residual ‘other’ category, not shown.
phenomenon of ‘parachuting’ favored candidates into safe seats by the central party apparatus has become a recognizable part of the British political lexicon. This allowed the party leaders to select more careerists for parliament.

More importantly though, these changes in political recruitment reflected changes in the supply of people coming forward for office. One reason for the rise in careerism is that until relatively recently, being an MP was not financially rewarding, and was therefore unattractive as a career in its own right. Until the early 1970s, MPs were so poorly-paid that most had second careers outside of parliament, doing their parliamentary job part-time, and they tended to serve for relatively short periods of time. MPs’ salaries, pensions and expense allowances have only quite recently reached parity with, or overtaken, other comparable white-collar occupations. There has been a lot of growth, too, in professions closely related to politics such as lobbying, political PR, think tanks and interest group representation. Party organizations have also developed and become more professional. These trends have provided lower rungs on the political ladder that did not exist in the past, making political careers more viable and rewarding for young university graduates and increasing the supply of careerists (Rush 2001, Jun 2003).

Meanwhile, the under-representation of working-class people reflects growing barriers to participation. In the past, the main route into elected politics for such workers was through trade unions, who enjoyed tremendous influence in selecting Labour MPs. They supported their members both financially and organizationally in becoming MPs. This is particularly important because, as with other forms of political participation such as voting, working-class people wanting to be involved in politics face many hurdles that do not exist for middle-class people. Trade unions used to provide political information to their members, as well as crucial experience in political campaigning, public speaking and other skills that are useful when standing for selection as an MP as well as easier for middle-class graduates to acquire in their jobs. But trade unions no longer cover as much of the workforce as they used to, and their influence within the party has fallen. They have also increasingly taken to sponsoring middle-class careerists for office, who have no occupational connection to the union. These factors have combined over time to effectively close off a key route into national politics for working-class people (Norris and Levendusky 1995, Jun 2003).
In addition, being a candidate for office has itself become more professionalized over time, requiring much greater time and effort in campaigning than in the past, such that being a candidate is almost a full-time job in the run-up to an election. Candidates either need employers who will offer them flexible hours or leave, or the possession of enough savings to take time away from work altogether. Many employers in sectors such as political PR may actively encourage their staff to stand for office, because even if they lose, the experience will tend to deepen their staff’s web of contacts within politics. Manual employers such as factories, on the other hand, are much less likely to allow flexibility to their workers. Many candidates also incur considerable personal expenses in the process of seeking selection to a seat and then campaigning to win it, including frequent travel away from home. Working-class candidates are unlikely to have as many savings to draw on to fund their candidacy or to enable time away from work, further reducing their ability to stand for office (Norris and Levendusky 1995, Cairney 2007).

The increased control of party leaders over candidate selection has also heightened the importance of gaining a strong network of contacts for those seeking high office. In Britain’s first-past-the-post system, most seats are relatively ‘safe’, in that they reliably elect MPs of one particular party regardless of national trends. The main hurdle to entering parliament for a would-be candidate is to gain enough favor in the party to win selection for a seat, increasing the incentives to gain contacts and popularity within the party early in life, as compared to other countries (Rush 2001, Jun 2003, Cairney 2007). In addition, it is exceptionally rare for government ministers to be drawn from outside parliament: anyone aiming for high office needs to become an MP first. Once elected as an MP, having a careerist background has become very beneficial for this: Labour MPs from ‘stepping-stone’ occupations were much more likely to reach high ministerial office than others under Blair and Brown (Allen 2013; Goplerud 2015). All of these factors increased the supply of ambitious would-be politicians into careerist occupations.

Many works have both documented and explained these changes in representation, as the numerous citations suggest. Merely tracking these changes in descriptive representation is important, not least because we might view the increasingly low participation of working-class people in politics as morally unjust. However, we know strikingly little about their political impact. Presumably, the
main reason why all of these studies care about shifts in representation in the first place is because the authors assume that different types of MPs behave very differently. While descriptive representation is an important first step, what really matters are changes in substantive representation: whose interests and opinions are represented in politics? If changes in descriptive representation lead to changes in substantive representation, then MPs from different backgrounds must behave very differently. And for welfare reform in the UK, that is indeed the case. A key finding of this thesis is that these long-term changes in the makeup of Labour’s MPs had important political effects on welfare policy. While working-class MPs opposed welfare reform and spoke out against it, careerists were the opposite: strongly supportive in both word and deed.

The reason why the two groups behaved so differently with respect to welfare policy is that politicians’ occupational backgrounds shape their political beliefs and priorities. MPs’ prior experiences affected how each set of MPs responded to the Labour party leadership’s decision to embrace welfare reforms from the mid 1990s. In Chapter 3 I build a theory of the relative behavior of the two sets of MPs. In brief, one key difference between them is that careerists place a higher priority on electoral success and career advancement. This means that they responded much more than other legislators to perceived incentives to enact reforms. They were much more likely to share the leadership’s worries about Labour’s electoral prospects, and were much more concerned with going along with party leaders in order to further their own careers within the party. On the other hand, working-class legislators had a greater ideological attachment to welfare provision compared to others, due to the influence of their background. Because of these differences, the change in the balance of power between the two groups is a very important part of the story of how welfare reforms happened in the UK, how discourse on benefits changed, and how in turn, discourse re-shaped public opinion.

1.5 Outline of my Argument

The aim of this thesis is to understand how the UK went from being a leader in welfare provision to a laggard, and why public opinion endorsed this shift, making it politically viable. My core argument is that the four key changes just outlined – in welfare policy, political rhetoric, public
opinion and political recruitment – are all connected, and have a clear ordering, both temporally and causally. Changes occurred first at the elite level, in reforms, rhetoric and recruitment, and then spread to voters, as politicians influenced their opinions.

Most importantly, I strongly argue against what might seem, at first, like an obvious explanation. It is one that is rooted in an intuitive and normatively appealing, yet naive, view of democratic politics: that politicians were merely responding to shifting public opinion, doing what voters demanded. After all, by the end of the 2000s, it is very clear that welfare provision had become much less popular. This is also a perspective that appears throughout the field of comparative political economy, which seeks to understand the nature and origins of different economic and social policies, and the reform programs that alter them over time. Many works see voters as a starting point in determining how and why parties make particular policy choices. Or at the very least, they view public opinion as a relatively stable and enduring feature of particular countries; one that is explained by the economic and social structures in which voters are enmeshed. Countries with different levels of support for welfare reform, therefore, may be expected to embark on very different processes of reform.

Often, the assumption is that voters understand their own interests, forming preferences based on their own material circumstances such as income and unemployment risk (Iversen and Soskice 2001; Rehm 2011; Rehm, Hacker, and Schlesinger 2012). Parties are assumed to translate their voters’ needs into policies, so that left parties support redistribution (Hicks 1999; Bradley et al. 2003). In short, voters recognize their own needs, and parties act on them. When voters’ interests and preferences change, policies will change in turn. Other authors have examined changes in traditional class politics and the welfare state. Rueda (2007) has made the influential claim that societies are now divided sharply into “outsiders” lacking in secure employment, and “insiders” with long-term, protected, jobs. The former are argued to favor policies that reduce long-term unemployment much more than the latter due to their economic needs. In turn, he argues that social democratic parties have chosen to represent insiders, and implement their preferred policy mix. This may include cutbacks in traditional welfare programs in favor of those that benefit the middle classes, like education and childcare. This approach suggests that voters are continuing to
support policies in line with their self-interest. Only the objective interests of voters are said to have changed, with preferences following.

Useful as these perspectives are for understanding cross-national differences, their applicability to over-time changes is limited. There were certainly transformations in Britain’s economic structure over time. It has transitioned toward a post-manufacturing service economy. This would be expected to change the structural need for certain types of welfare provision, which was predicated in the past on a manufacturing-based workforce in relatively secure, long-term employment. It also surely alters voters’ values and preferences. ‘Post-industrial’ political cleavages differ from those of the post-war era, with middle-class urban service-sector workers often the most vocal supporters of the welfare state (Kitschelt 1994; Pontusson 1995; Wren 2013; Thelen 2014). The relative number of voters that favor traditional welfare provision has fallen, too, as industrial working-class voters declined in number over the period (Evans and Tilley 2012). These developments undoubtedly affect aggregate public opinion over the medium to long term, and in turn are likely to have an impact on left parties’ strategies. But the shifts in public opinion observed in the UK in Figure 1.5 occurred much too quickly, and over much too large a scale, to be accounted for by slow-moving structural change. That is where my argument comes in. A crucial part of it, developed throughout this thesis, is that the timing of British welfare reforms is wholly inconsistent with a bottom-up, voter-led theory of policy change. Instead, Labour’s welfare reforms were formulated and enacted in earnest before public opinion began to turn against welfare. In fact, as I will show – and this is a crucial detail that is often missed in accounts of the Thatcher era – support for welfare provision was at its very highest after Thatcher left office in the early to mid 1990s, precisely at the time when Labour began to alter its discourse and its policies.

Instead of change coming from the bottom up, it began with the Labour party elites themselves. Traumatised and disillusioned by four consecutive election defeats from 1979 to 1992, Blair and his allies felt that the party had to change. They wanted to appeal more to middle-class voters, who they thought had been put off the party by its overly socialist image in the 1980s. Welfare reforms, including greater conditionality and means-testing, offered a perfect policy with which party leaders could place themselves firmly on the side of the middle classes. The reforms emphasized personal
responsibility and limits to government spending, and represented a very clear break with the Labour party of the past. Thus Labour’s policy shift had little to do with moving toward the median voter, which was supportive of traditional welfare provision yet suspicious of the Labour party itself.

What really altered public opinion was the rhetoric that accompanied these welfare reforms. As politicians increasingly criticized the operation of the welfare system and drew lines between those who received benefits and those who paid for them, the public responded by becoming much more skeptical about welfare. These shifts among voters may not be in line with some traditions in comparative political economy, but they do fit very well with what we know about voters from the political behavior and political psychology literatures. Here, we find that voters are heavily influenced by political discourse, particularly from politicians and parties that they trust to ‘look after’ particular policy areas, just as Labour have always been more trusted by voters to look after, and invest in, public services and the welfare state (Berinsky 2007; Lenz 2012; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). So when Labour changed its tune, voters followed; public opinion changed from the top down, not from the bottom up. By the time that David Cameron came to enact more comprehensive cuts after 2010, the public was right behind him. Far from being a crutch that supports and sustains certain types of welfare states, as some have argued (Brooks and Manza 2007; Rehm 2011), public opinion is instead a dependent variable that responds as welfare states themselves are changed by politicians.

So much for two of the three ‘R’s considered in this thesis: reforms and rhetoric. The third, recruitment, was important for two further reasons. First, by substantially reducing the social diversity of Labour’s MPs, in turn it reduced the diversity of discourse from the party that the public heard. If by the mid 2000s Labour’s MPs had been 40% working-class, as they were at the start of the Thatcher era, rather than close to 10%, its MPs would have been on average much more supportive of traditional welfare provision. The public would have heard many more countervailing opinions that pushed back against the dominant New Labour narrative of welfare reforms. This matters because voters’ opinions are much more likely to shift in response to discourse when it is one-sided, with few dissenting voices (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).
Second, as I explain at length in Chapters 3 and 4, changes in the composition of the parliamentary Labour party also mattered because they made a major contribution to enabling Tony Blair to carry out his reform program, and in changing the overall rhetoric of his party. Any party leader must obtain the cooperation of his or her MPs in order to enact changes. The current Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, provides an example of what happens when this goes wrong, at least before his unexpected success in the election of June 2017. With much of his parliamentary party unwilling to endorse his far-left views, he is unable to make major changes to his party’s platform, and his messaging is regularly contradicted in the media by dissenting voices from his back-benches.

Blair, on the other hand, faced a much less hostile climate. With MPs increasingly drawn from the middle-classes, and particularly from ‘careerist’ occupations, he found ready support for alterations to his party that were meant to make it more electable and more appealing to the middle classes. I show in Chapter 4 that without such a dramatic transformation in Labour’s ranks, the party would have sounded and voted very differently on welfare reforms.

This story—that British welfare provision was transformed largely as a result of elite responses to party competition and of changes in the composition of those elites—unfolds below over five chapters. In the second Chapter, I look in detail at how rhetoric toward the welfare state was transformed, using the database of speeches that was briefly introduced earlier, and is outlined in more detail below. With a combination of quantitative computational techniques and close, focused interpretation of key speeches, I document a remarkable transformation in discourse that has occurred in both parties, Labour as much as the Conservatives. I also discuss some initial potential explanations for the shift, such as government-opposition dynamics and the economic cycle; that fall short.

The third Chapter presents a historical and theoretical account of why Labour’s rhetoric and policies changed so much. I go through a series of economic and functionalist arguments that cannot account for the changes. Neither changes in Britain’s economic structure nor problems with the operation of the welfare system, nor shifts in the composition or values of the electorate made the adoption of welfare reforms compellingly necessary for Labour. Instead, the policies that were brought in by Blair and his allies were a psychological response to years in the electoral
wilderness, as they sought ways to change the party’s image. I use historical literature on the period, including biographical and autobiographical accounts, to demonstrate this collective sense of crisis in the party’s leadership, and explain how and why welfare reform made sense for them as part of a wider reform effort. I go on to explain just how controversial welfare reforms were within the Labour Party; the party that was originally responsible for founding the welfare state. Blair expected much more trouble from the back-benches than he actually encountered, and it is often tough for reformist leaders to prosper in the House of Commons. I then outline my own theory of how changes in the social composition of Labour’s MPs made the party uniquely amenable to embracing welfare reforms.

In Chapter 4 I delve more deeply into the political effects of Labour’s changing composition, systematically testing the idea that careerist and working-class MPs speak and behave very differently when it comes to welfare provision. I measure each MP’s stance on welfare from their rhetoric, based on a textual scaling method, and use this scale, combined with detailed biographical information on Labour’s MPs, to show that the groups did indeed behave and speak very differently. A variety of tests, including regressions, matching, and an examination of quasi-experiments induced by the deaths and retirement of MPs, show that the results are robust to alternative explanations, including other characteristics of both MPs and their constituencies, as well as the impact of ministerial office. Finally, I show that the combination of differential support for reform and differential representation could have changed the outcome of votes in the House of Commons, using an analysis of parliamentary rebellions on welfare reform bills during the Blair era.

Chapter 5 focuses on public opinion, testing the idea that declines in support for welfare are explained by altered political discourse. After outlining how opinion has shifted, I present a number of theoretical arguments showing that alternative theories are unlikely to explain the changes. These include changes in the efficacy of British welfare policies, changes in the values and composition of the electorate, and the economic cycle. I then present a further set of arguments for why discourse is the most likely driver of changes. A series of empirical tests turn out to support my theory. Changes in rhetoric clearly precede and predict changes in opinion. Panel data analysis shows both that individuals changes their minds over time, and that younger cohorts began their political lives
more opposed to welfare than previous cohorts in ways that are wholly consistent with discourse
being the main driver. The opinion shifts were also strongest amongst groups who we would expect
to have been most receptive to rhetoric, including the young and Labour supporters. Finally, a
survey experiment carried out with British subjects shows that being exposed to the type of rhetoric
that New Labour used clearly changes individual opinions in exactly the patterns we would expect,
and even leads voters to adopt anti-welfare rhetoric in their own language.

Chapter 6 summarizes my arguments and draws out wider lessons from the British experience.
As I discuss below in this Chapter, the UK is an early adopter of a policy mix that is becoming
common across Europe, of conditionality, means-testing and the activation of welfare recipients.
For other welfare states, the UK points to a perhaps overlooked danger, that the divisive rhetoric
that can accompany these reforms, pitting the users of welfare against those who pay for it, can
undermine public confidence in the system. In the sixth Chapter I discuss this process as a form
of ‘negative feedback effect’, and argue that welfare states may be more politically fragile and less
fundamentally stable than many existing accounts suggest, especially when we start to think of
public opinion as something that can be actively shaped by political elites. I also examine in more
detail the implications of the changing composition of those political elites. While current theories
of parties and welfare states see shifts in party positions as a response to voters, parties may in
fact be changing their positions on welfare simply because they are made up of different, more
middle-class legislators, compared to the past.

1.6 Database of Parliamentary Speeches

Throughout this thesis I make extensive use of an original database of every speech made about
welfare in the House of Commons from 1987-2015. It allows me to systematically examine how and
when discourse changed, and how it differed between MPs and parties. I carry out a number of
quite technical estimation procedures with the data, including topic modelling and scaling, and the
data collection itself was also computationally intensive. To free readers from the burden of wading
through extensive technical material, I include full details of the data collection and estimation
procedures in appendices to the relevant chapters, allowing interested readers to learn more about
what lies beneath my estimates. Other readers, though, should be able to skip this material without too much loss of understanding. Nonetheless, because the database is not only new, but also central to all of my findings, I briefly introduce it here and outline the philosophy behind how and why I chose to use it.

All of the speeches come from the lower chamber of parliament, the House of Commons. It is by far the more important of the two British parliamentary chambers; the upper house (the House of Lords) is unelected and has very little power to legislate. The speech collection includes all speeches about welfare made by politicians from the three largest parties: Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat. Throughout the period considered here, these three parties accounted for virtually all seats (and therefore speeches) in the House. A few additional seats were held by Northern Irish parties, whose divisions are primarily about national identity and religion, as well as Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties, whose main aims are to achieve independence for their respective countries.

Parliamentary speeches and debates, which are widely reported in the British media, are very well-suited for measuring changes in elites' rhetoric about welfare. They provide a constant medium of discussion over a long period; the format of parliamentary debates has barely changed since 1987, meaning that any changes in rhetoric represent real changes, rather than reflecting changes in the formats available for discussion. For example, it is very challenging to measure this over time in the media because newspapers and TV programs are very different now, compared to the 1980s, and the internet did not exist at that time. But virtually no changes have occurred in the way that debates happen in the Commons. In addition, parliamentary speeches appear very regularly, unlike alternatives such as party manifestoes, which are only available at elections every 4-5 years, and often devote little space to discussing welfare issues (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006). Parliamentary speeches also give access to vastly more text, conveying much more detailed and nuanced positions for many different MPs, which is essential for this project and could not be achieved with manifestos or media quotes. Indeed, British MPs enjoy comparatively high autonomy to speak as they choose in parliament (Proksch and Slapin 2012, 2015), meaning that their speeches

14. Even so, future work will extend the analysis to the media.
reveal a lot about their individual beliefs, priorities and rhetorical strategies.

The data begin after the general election victory of Margaret Thatcher in June 1987, and end at the general election of May 2015. This covers the period over which major welfare state reforms occurred. While it would of course be technically feasible to begin the analysis of discourse earlier, this would not be advisable from a methodological standpoint, because the computational techniques that I use work most effectively when the form and vocabulary of language is relatively constant, allowing comparisons of speech over time that focus on relative word usage. If completely different sets of vocabulary are used at different times, the algorithms will mainly pick up this linguistic difference, which may not signify anything politically meaningful. This is more likely to occur, the further back in time the analysis begins. The political lexicon of the 1950s, 60s and 70s was very different to that of the 2000s.

1.7 The UK as a Case

The UK’s experiences with welfare reform are dramatic and interesting in their own right. But they also hold wider lessons for scholarship on the welfare state, and may provide a glimpse – or a warning – of the possible future of other European countries. That is because the UK is arguably an early adopter of policy changes that are beginning to be visible in much of Western Europe today. Although the traditional literature on European welfare states has often tended to focus on enduring cross-national differences (Esping-Andersen (1990) being the best-known example), there is increasing evidence of cross-national convergence in welfare provision, especially for the unemployed (Clasen and Clegg 2013). Britain represents a particularly extreme example of liberalizing reforms, and has certainly gone much further than the rest of Europe has to date. Nonetheless, much of Europe is now adopting policies that were first introduced in Britain over twenty years ago. In the language of comparative politics, the UK represents an ‘extreme case’ (Seawright and Gerring 2008), that most clearly or typically exemplifies the broader phenomenon of radical welfare-to-work reforms.

15. Although institutional convergence is arguably less marked in other areas, including public-sector employment patterns and broader labor market policies (Thelen 2014)
Specifically, the policy changes in the UK involve three broad – and not wholly distinct – trajectories of change that have been occurring across Europe in recent years: a shift from universalism to means-testing, an emphasis on the activation of welfare recipients, and the increasing use of conditionality in the provision of benefits (Van Oorschot 2002; Palier 2010; Bonoli 2012; Clasen and Clegg 2013; Hemerijck 2013). The first implies greater targeting of welfare at the needy, with benefits increasingly paid for out of general taxation rather than accruing to individuals as a form of insurance based on past contributions. Particularly in Continental Europe, this involves the loss of links to previous earnings, with unemployment benefits becoming homogenized, and failing to replace as much income for middle- and upper-class recipients as was once the case. Systems are slowly evolving away from an insurance logic toward more residual provision aimed at providing immediate relief to the poorest citizens. Although the UK never featured strong differentiation of National Insurance payments by past earnings, it does share with other European reform efforts a crucial feature: unlike in the original system set up by Beveridge, benefits are no longer earned individually by past ‘good behavior’ whilst in employment. Instead, they are paid for by taxpayers to other people, the recipients.

The second trend, activation, involves an increasing emphasis on using the benefits system not as a means of poverty relief or even insurance, but instead as a tool to increase the labor-market participation of certain groups, like the disabled and low-skilled. This arguably includes a re-casting of the very notion of ‘unemployment’ to include groups like the long-term disabled, whose inability to work was not widely questioned in the past. If anything, the opposite occurred in the 1980s, with former industrial workers encouraged to effectively take subsidized early retirement through expansive definitions of disability, using mass exit from labor markets as a tool to manage long-term unemployment. To differing degrees – the UK being actually something of a laggard – the new emphasis on activation has also included the creation of ‘active labor market policies’, notably human capital investment, focusing on re-training the long-term unemployed. But it includes sticks as well as carrots: to prevent welfare ‘dependency’, the length of time for which benefits can be claimed is being reduced across the board, and the generosity of benefits is generally falling, in the hope of making paid work more attractive. Here, the UK leads the field internationally. This focus
on activation is closely related to the third major policy trend, conditionality. Whereas benefits were once available unconditionally, as a social right earned by past contributions or even simply as a citizen, many countries are now placing greater conditions on the receipt of benefits, as in the UK. Recipients increasingly need to actively seek work or undertake training, with the threat of benefit withdrawal dangling over them, should they fail to comply.

This is a stylized picture, and different countries exhibit these three trends to differing degrees. Some have gone much further than others. Nonetheless, almost all European countries have begun to adopt at least some of these changes, with Germany (Hinrichs 2010), the Netherlands (Hemerijck and Marx 2010; Hoogenboom 2013) and Denmark (Andersen 2013) standing out as particularly strong examples. I am also not arguing that these changes are necessarily a bad idea in policy terms. Most economists and social policy experts in the 1990s saw a clear need for reform in most European welfare states, which were seen as trapping people in unemployment (Ljungqvist and Sargent 1998).

Instead, the adoption of such changes leaves other countries vulnerable to the sorts of political changes that have occurred in the UK, threatening the long-term political viability of Europe’s relatively generous welfare states. As benefits cease to have an insurance logic and are no longer as useful to the middle classes, the deservingness of recipients may be increasingly questioned. Why should working taxpayers pay for other people’s idleness, politicians might ask? Now that the receipt of benefits increasingly comes with conditions attached, what happens if recipients don’t seem to be trying hard enough to meet them? They can increasingly be framed as failing to live up to their side of an implicit bargain made with those who pay for their benefits, the working taxpayers. And as existing welfare systems are increasingly criticized by politicians as inefficient and failing to promote employment, doubts may be sown in the minds of voters about whether generous welfare provision is a sensible idea. The crucial point, exemplified by Britain’s experiences, is that the rhetoric that may accompany liberalizing reforms is much more dangerous for the long-term viability of generous welfare states than the policy changes themselves. It can lead to an unravelling of the coalitions of voters and politicians that once underpinned generous welfare provision.

There are, of course, some features of the UK experience under New Labour that may be
unique to Britain, including the extent to which Blair and his allies felt scarred by their long years in opposition, and adopted welfare reform as a means to change Labour's image. But the UK also shares some other key patterns with the rest of Europe. Most importantly, social democratic politicians everywhere are also becoming more middle-class, with working-class citizens, who more heavily use welfare policies, increasingly excluded from elected office and replaced by professional politicians with more of an eye on electoral success (Borchert 2003). Thus other countries may see their social democratic parties becoming more willing to adopt policies and use rhetoric that contradicts the interests of their old working-class core vote, with whom politicians are less likely to instinctively sympathize. I come back to this in the sixth, concluding Chapter.

Of course, the extent to which Britain really represents a glimpse of the future may also be tempered by differences in electoral institutions. Due to the first-past-the-post system, New Labour faced little serious opposition from the left, unlike in Germany, for instance, where the SDP must contend with Die Linke and the Greens. This might reduce incentives to appeal to middle-class voters, for fear of other voters defecting to the left. Labour is forced to target centrist voters in marginal seats with both its policies and its rhetoric if it wants to win elections, which is less clearly the case in other countries. Nonetheless, social democratic parties across Europe are contending with similar sets of political challenges, namely the erosion of their traditional working-class base of support. Many are arguably morphing into parties that mainly represent the urban middle-classes, who are much less likely to depend on welfare payments. The temptation to engage in divisive rhetoric could exist anywhere, even if the exact circumstances that trigger it are idiosyncratic. I also return to these themes in the final Chapter. For now, having explained the importance of New Labour's altered discourse, I turn in the next Chapter to a closer examination of what its rhetoric sounded like.
Chapter 2

Elite Rhetoric on Welfare in the UK: Patterns and Puzzles

Here I investigate how British politicians' rhetoric toward welfare provision changed over the period 1987-2015. Using the database of parliamentary speeches introduced in the previous Chapter – consisting of every speech made about welfare in the House of Commons from 1987-2015 – I broke down politicians' rhetoric by day and by party over the whole period. As will become clear below, this allows me to give a broad but also detailed overview of how politicians talked about welfare, and how that changed over time. I not only document their speeches, but also draw conclusions about what types of rhetorical frames they used, what these frames mean, and what they reveal about the underlying mental models that political elites held about welfare.

Much of this Chapter uses topic modeling, a machine-learning technique that breaks down a set of speeches into defined topics, providing a broad quantitative overview of the content of discourse. Later in this thesis, the results are used to assess the impact of elites' rhetoric on public opinion. Here, I follow up these computational results with close reading and qualitative description of key debates in the House of Commons to dig deeper into the tone and valence of the different topics, helping strengthen and refine the conclusions. To avoid over-burdening the reader with technical material, I present an overview of my data collection and analysis methods in an Appendix to this chapter. Readers interested in the details may wish to read it first; for others, it can be skipped.
The analysis serves as a detailed window into how politicians have thought about welfare, demonstrating how they gradually came to favor welfare reform. It illustrates a very dramatic change in British politicians’ depiction of welfare between two competing sets of frames, that occurred in both main parties. At the beginning of the period considered here, politicians used positive framing, talking about welfare as a legitimate large-scale government endeavor that worked effectively and should be an unconditional political right of citizens. Over time this was increasingly replaced by more negative framing, as parties emphasized budgetary cuts, fraud and inefficiencies, and began framing it as a policy that only certain groups, such as those who “work hard”, deserve to receive. To begin the analysis, I discuss the results of the computational topic models.

2.1 Computational Results

Computational methods are used here to give an overview of how discourse has changed over time, and to provide guidance for subsequent close reading to interpret the tone, meaning and content of texts. The corpus of speeches is vast, containing hundreds of thousands of individual speeches. It would clearly be infeasible to read the entire collection manually. However, it would be arbitrary to simply select at random some speeches to read, and any rule imposed to subset the database, for example selecting some key parliamentary debates to focus on, risks missing important parts of the story, or inadvertently introducing bias if I were to select texts with a particular goal in mind. Instead, the computational technique of topic modeling requires very little input from the analyst, but provides strong guidance on which texts to read more closely. In addition, the quantitative measures it produces provide an excellent overview of changes in discourse in their own right, and will be crucial in later Chapters where I use them to assess the impact of elites’ rhetoric on public opinion.

Estimates were produced using a structural topic model with 30 topics. The output of the model is a set of topics, each of which discusses a defined concept, such as ‘welfare reform.’ More details are available in the Appendix. Figure 2.1 plots the overall prevalence of each of the 30 estimated topics across the whole corpus of speeches from 1987-2015. “Prevalence” has a specific
Figure 2.1: Topic Composition of the Corpus

Table 2.1: Proportion of Corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Proportion of Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Deal</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Administration</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension Levels</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit Increases</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing &amp; European Issues</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit Levels</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment and Training</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Debate II</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and Hardship</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Unemployment</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare and Benefits</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax Credits</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Procedure II</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Debate I</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Support</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensions</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Benefits</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and Inequality</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Reform II</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes and Public Spending</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Procedure I</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Reform I</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Wage</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Insurance</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion and Mobility</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit Fraud</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy Prices</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and NHS</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc. Local Issues</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each bar shows the average proportion of the corpus accounted for by each topic meaning: the estimated proportion of rhetoric accounted for by each topic. Virtually all of the topics proved easily interpretable, based on the words that each contains. In Figure 2.1, I have simply labelled each topic based on these words; the actual content of important topics is discussed in much more detail below.
For now, we can see that only a very small number of topics did not appear to discuss a distinct policy area. In practice, these topics (labelled ‘parliamentary debate’ or “parliamentary procedure”) simply contain sets of generic words that commonly occur across documents such as “motion”, “amendment”, and so on. Otherwise, we can see that from 1987-2015, the most popular areas of welfare policy discussed in the House of Commons were unemployment (as discussed below, the ‘new deal’ was a set of policies aiming to tackle long-term unemployment), poverty, benefits, pensions and welfare reform. Other notable policy areas include housing, disability benefits, issues affecting children and families, benefit fraud, and the minimum wage. The set of topics roams wider than just welfare and welfare reform (in the American sense of the words, as I use them here), because in the initial collection of speeches, I erred on the side of collecting an expansive set of debates about the welfare state, so as not to miss anything important. Later in this Chapter, I focus more on the topics related to welfare and welfare reform.

How were these topic labels arrived at? Figure 2.2 displays the most characteristic words used in 12 of the most important topics. These topics refer to benefits and the problems they may be designed to solve: poverty and unemployment. I used these word lists, combined with my own knowledge of British political history, to classify the topics. In some cases, the topic’s meaning will become much clearer when their tone and content are described in detail below. For now, in each case, the top panel of Figure 2.2 contains the 15 highest-probability words for the topic (that is, the 15 words that occur most often in that topic), and the bottom panel shows the 15 words with the highest FREX (frequency and exclusivity) scores in the topic. Sometimes the highest-probability words alone may be uninformative about the true nature of the topic, simply because the most common words may be very generic. To correct for this, FREX scores average a word’s probability (as already defined) as well as its exclusivity, defined here as the rate at which the word is used in a particular topic compared to the others, with words that are more unique to the topic scoring more highly. Thus FREX scores will be highest for words that are used more frequently in a topic both in absolute terms and relative to other topics (Airoldi and Bischof 2017).

The first three topics describe welfare schemes and benefits. They use neutral or positive language, talking about societal problems and measures to address them, and focusing to a large degree
Figure 2.2: Verbal Content of Key Topics: Highest-Probability and Highest-FREX Words

**Benefit Levels**
benefit benefits year income support
time system allowance rate make
increase change higher rates pay
benefit rates higher limit benefits
lower rate package reforms allowance
capital reduction announced earning income

**Benefit Increases**
social security people pensioners cent
state income increase family million
benefit support child benefits disabled
uprating security expenditure weather elderly
pensioners inflation bonus residential sick
nursing social increased extra cold

**Welfare Schemes and Benefits**
benefit people social regulations fund
security young state income cent
scheme claimants local payments person
transitional adjudication supplementary regulations dhss
invalidity compensation hardship loans loan
handicapped officer deal opcs attendance

**Poverty and Hardship**
people tax time year work
week cuts pay cut living
families constituency country food benefits
cuts hit food worse struggling
cut desperate ends losing millionaires
degrade crisis cutting richest misery

**Poverty and Inequality**
poverty children child cent income
scotland report poor families million
scottish figures low target households
poverty scottish inequality scotland rowntree
poor relative targets target snp
households statistics bottom tackling joseph

**Social Exclusion and Mobility**
local social areas children communities
education schools school young services
community work rural years important
exclusion schools communities rural deprived
neighbourhood educational professions backgrounds drug
pupil deprivation regeneration disadvantaged teachers

**Benefit Fraud**
benefit fraud local security benefits
social system housing authorities state
billion information people million number
fraud asylum fraudulent landlord fraudsters
investigators seekers finsbury visits organised
matching landlords data prosecutions investigation

**Welfare Reform I**
state social welfare benefits security
benefit reform means lone party
proposals review change months policy
integrity contributory backdating widows welfare
dependency project state windfall reform
tribunal incompetence lone bereavement testing

**New Deal**
work people benefit deal support
parents lone ensure make child
care working benefits disabled welfare
lone pilot deal pathways parents
pilots incapacity carers opportunities advisers
ensure paper assure gateway jobcentre

**Benefit Fraud**
benefit fraud local security benefits
social system housing authorities state
billion information people million number
fraud asylum fraudulent landlord fraudsters
investigators seekers finsbury visits organised
matching landlords data prosecutions investigation

**Welfare Reform II**
work people credit universal support
welfare programme working benefits million
time system department make ensure
universal dwp roll cap online
atos enrolment pip remploy jobcentres
monthly providers contract credit capability

**Unemployment and Training**
people work unemployment employment unemployed
job training jobs long back
time term programme market labour
unemployed training job vacancies labour
employment unemployment jobseeker jobcentre skills
actively jobcentres jobseekers jobs market

**Youth Unemployment**
people young jobs unemployment work
youth sector future constituency fund
programme businesses country support year
youth apprenticeships young jobs apprenticeship
businesses sustainable unemployment sector future
bankers apprentices bonuses skills growth

Note: FREX stands for “Frequency and Exclusivity”, see text for definition. In each of these 12 charts, the top panel shows the 15 highest probability words in the topic, and the bottom panel shows the 15 highest FREX words.
on the appropriate levels of these benefits. Topics 4-6 discuss poverty, inequality and social mobility. Topic 4 uses quite emotive language to describe these issues, such as “struggling”, “desperate” and “misery” while mentioning benefits and cuts, while topic 5 focuses in particular on inequality and on Scotland (parts of which are among the poorest areas in Western Europe). Topic 6 talks about “social exclusion” (a British term that generally implies a lack of access to a middle-class lifestyle) as well as educational measures that might increase social mobility.

Topics 7-9 discuss various problems with the welfare system, and measures to tackle them. Topic 7 describes benefit fraud, using words such as “fraud”, “benefit”, “prosecution”, and “investigation.” The next topic includes words such as “reform” and “proposals” and “change” that suggest it is about making changes to the system, as well as referencing common issues with welfare, solutions to those problems, and negative language, including “dependency” and “means testing”. Topic 9 uses words that are very specific to recent reforms carried out by the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, who introduced a policy known as “universal credit” designed to make the benefits system more efficient and encourage recipients to get back to work, and also include more rigorous “capability” assessments of those on disability benefits to determine eligibility for the benefit, and a maximum “cap” on the amount of benefits that any one family can receive. The final three topics are about unemployment, and measures to tackle it: the first links unemployment to training, the second looks specifically at youth unemployment, and the third refers to “New Deal”, a package of benefit reforms and other measures designed to reduce the numbers claiming benefits, which is discussed below in more detail.

Now, I look at the prevalence of these topics over time, a task for which the structural topic model is especially well-suited. Figure 2.3 shows this for each of the twelve topics from Figure 2.2, and a further four interesting topics, over all of the years in our database. Similarly to Figure 2.1, “prevalence” means the estimated total proportion of speech at any given time accounted for by a given topic. These patterns fall into three time periods. First, from 1987 up to about 1994, parties used a more positive, pro-benefits discourse. Benefit fraud and welfare reform were barely discussed, but poverty and the level of benefits were high on the agenda. Welfare tended to be discussed using topics that emphasize recipients’ need or deservingness, and call for increased
Figure 2.3: Change over Time in Prevalence of Topics

Note: Each diagram displays the estimated proportion of total speeches at a given time accounted for by the topic.
levels of benefits. The third, more recent period from roughly 2007 onward during and after the financial crisis, shares some similarities with the first period. Topics emphasizing poverty and inequality, and (to a limited extent) the level of benefits once again became popular, and concern over unemployment and housing spiked. However, at the same time, there was also a large amount of discourse about welfare reform, represented by the ‘welfare reform II’ topic.

During the middle period from 1995 to 2007, topics that talked about welfare and benefits neutrally or positively, or topics involving poverty and inequality, were much less important. When benefits were discussed, fraud and reform were the main topics of discussion: parties were now focusing on problems with the traditional system of benefits. The ‘new deal’ was also very popular, and as we will see below, it too was about welfare reform to a large extent. In addition, topics involving tax credits, the minimum wage and training schemes were very prevalent. Indeed, all of these topics involved reform to labor markets, or interventions that solved problems without the use of traditional benefits. In addition, pensions became a very popular topic, as Tony Blair’s government made major changes to the state pension system.

We can gain more insight by looking at how prevalence changes both over time and by party. This analysis appears in Figure 2.4, showing the estimated proportion of total speech for each topic for both Labour (in red) and the Conservatives (in blue). Many topics were talked about in quite similar amounts by both parties, including some of the topics related to benefits and poverty, as well as all of the topics not directly related to benefits. Notable exceptions include ‘benefit levels’ and ‘poverty and hardship’, which are much more associated with the Conservatives and Labour, respectively. And on the reform side, the middle period saw Labour much more likely to talk about the new deal, and the Tories more likely to talk about ‘welfare reform I.’ Differences between these topics will become clearer below, where I show that the latter topic generally features a more negative and critical tone.

In summary, the computational results suggest that major shifts in discourse about benefits occurred from 1987 to 2015. Discussion of welfare reform rose over the period, and discussion of poverty and the level of benefits fell, rebounding slightly in recent years. In the middle, the period of Blair’s political ascendancy, welfare was rarely talked about in positive terms or in relation to
Figure 2.4: Change over time in Prevalence of Topics, by Party (Red=Labour, Blue=Conservative)

Note: Each diagram displays the average proportion of speeches at a given time, by a given party, accounted for by the topic. Red lines are for the Labour Party, Blue for the Conservatives.
poverty. It was much more likely to be associated with work. Next, the meaning and valence of the topics is fleshed out. I also show that the results cannot simply be explained by economic conditions, such as recessions and the financial crisis, and look at differences in tone between the parties that are not picked up by the topic model alone. The final part discusses the implications, and combines topics together to produce an overall picture of how rhetoric changed.

2.2 Qualitative Examination of Tone and Content

The computational results are informative, but leave a number of questions unanswered. Figure 2.2 gives some clues about the likely tone and valence of each topic, but for the most part, lists of key words can only tell us what the topics describe. More thorough analysis is needed to uncover whether the topics discussed welfare in positive or negative terms. For instance, what does it really mean to call for welfare reform? Do politicians describe the welfare system – and its beneficiaries – negatively or positively? Are there differences in tone or emphasis between parties that are not picked up by Figure 2.4? It is notoriously difficult for computers to pick up differences in sentiment, particularly in a setting like political debate where speakers frequently use irony or sarcasm. Because of this, for the remainder of this Chapter I employ close, focused reading of key debates in order to draw conclusions about the content and valence of each topic, concentrating on topics that talk about welfare and welfare reform.

Transcripts of each day in the House of Commons are often very long and complex. To make the analysis tractable, I describe each topic using a few debates that are highly representative of what the topic as a whole talks about. The debates selected are those that the model estimates to be most highly comprised of the relevant topic (the model produces an estimate of the topical composition of every day and party in the House of Commons over the period, as described in the Appendix to this Chapter). Below, the key topics are discussed in roughly chronological order, to give some sense of the evolution of discourse over time. The analysis begins with four topics that talk about benefits in largely positive or neutral terms. While reading what follows, it will be useful both to look back at Figures 2.3 and 2.4, and to recall that the UK was governed by the Conservative party from 1987 to 1997, after which Labour party came to power, espousing a more
centrist agenda than in the past. It governed from 1997 to 2010, when the Conservatives came
to power in coalition with the centrist Liberal Democrats, and Labour was led by a slightly more
leftwing leader.

2.2.1 Welfare Schemes and Benefits

The three most representative debates on this topic, which are described here, were held on January
13th 1988, March 26th 1990 and November 17th 1992. In general, the topic was very popular among
both major parties in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but quickly fell out of use. The first debate is
about a proposal from the Conservative government to cut benefits that provided poverty relief for
young people, while both of the latter two days featured debates on the “Social Fund”, a welfare
scheme designed to provide emergency assistance to the poor.

In the debates on the social fund, both parties argue that benefits are at the right level or should
be higher. Neither advocates cuts or reforms, and there is a concern with how people’s needs can
be met. Labour politicians, however, use emotive language to describe the poor and call for higher
benefits, while the Conservatives are broadly neutral. In the first debate, for instance, Labour’s
Robert Wareing complains “is it not the case that, because of the inadequacy of the social fund
budget in meeting the needs of all needy people, more and more needy people will be driven into
institutional care? Is that efficient?”

On the Conservative side, much of both debates are taken up with ministers boasting about
how much is being spent. In the second debate, the Conservative Minister Alistair Burt says that
his budget increases “mean that the April 1993 gross budget will be 12 per cent up on the gross
budget at April 1992 and 50 per cent up on the gross budget at April 1991. Those figures speak
eloquenty of the Government’s commitment to the social fund.” In the first, their MP David Shaw
asks the opposition to confirm that “more money is to be made available for social security? Is
it not true that, overall, since the Government came to office, about three times as much money
has been allocated to social security? Is not that far more than inflation would have added to
social security? Therefore, are not the Government a caring Government when it comes to social
security?” The discourse in these two debates suggests a broad acceptance of the welfare system on
both sides. Indeed, in the first debate, the Conservatives’ George Young says that “Conservative Members regard the social fund as an effective mechanism for giving relief to those on low incomes.” It is difficult to imagine any Conservative MP speaking like this today.

The 1988 debate about cutting benefits for the young features dramatic language from Labour members. Benefits are painted as a right of citizens, as a means of poverty relief, and even as an alternative to low-paid employment. Alice Mahon complains about “horrendous cuts”, calling it “the removal of the safety net of the welfare state”, adding that “we should be talking about a huge increase in benefits.” Young beneficiaries are painted as deserving, innocent victims. Robin Cook suggests that the measure forms part of a Conservative “general strategy of blaming the victim for his unemployment...tens of thousands of people are unemployed, not because they choose not to wander down to the factory and take the vacancies, but because they cannot find jobs. Therefore, to claw away their benefit is to victimise the victims.” The Conservatives also refrain from criticizing recipients. Simon Burns says that “no rational person will claim that there are a large number of young people who are workshy or who cannot be bothered to find a job. That is nonsense and it is not true.” Labour’s Ted Rowlands claims that the bill “removed a 40-year-old right. Anyone should be squeamish and uneasy about that principle”, while Robin Cook says that “this is merely the latest step in a number of measures taken by the Government to make it more difficult for teenagers to resist any job, however badly paid, however poor a future it may offer and however temporary its nature.”

Overall, the topic largely frames both welfare and its users positively or neutrally, with Labour members more likely to use emotional language, linking benefits to alleviating hardship, and even suggesting that they may be a legitimate alternative to paid work. Neither side uses language that stigmatizes recipients or suggests that the system is not working.

### 2.2.2 Benefit Increases

This was a very popular topic for both parties during the late 1980s and early 1990s, mostly featuring ministerial question times. It has a similar tone and content to the previous topic, with more of a direct focus on the amount of spending as a whole. Conservative members talk in
measured terms about benefits, while Labour members paint a dramatic picture of extreme poverty, advocating higher benefits as a solution. There is little or no critical language from either side.

Conservative MPs often defend large expenditures and budget increases. In a question time on February 5th 1990, Tim Boswell obsequiously asks the minister about help for the long-term disabled, saying, “will my right hon. friend ... give an assurance that he will continue working ... to ensure that improvements are achieved for those vulnerable groups and that progress is made towards an effective disablement income for those unable to earn for themselves?” 1 In response, the minister Nicholas Scott, takes an opportunity to praise himself, confirming that “there has been a real terms increase of virtually 100 per cent in expenditure on the long-term sick and disabled ... there has been a real increase in the level and extent of benefits since the Government came to office.” Today, it is much less likely that politicians would recognize that disabled people may be unable to work; nor would ministers claim credit for actually increasing the amount of spending. Continuing that trend, in a debate about benefits funding on 21st October 1991, Marion Rowe says that she wants to “congratulate my right hon. friend on the excellent package of benefit increases, especially the increases in child benefit. Will he confirm that the full inflation uprating means that there will be three increases in child benefit within the space of a year?”

Labour MPs, meanwhile, again tend to complain about the effect of cuts in benefits. In the same 1991 debate, Labour’s Michael Meacher denounces the plight of the unemployed, “whose benefits have been cut by £1.5 billion a year since 1979 and whose unemployment benefit is as a result only one third of the level paid to unemployed people in France of Germany ... after this statement, more than 10 million people will still be forced to try to cope at the new income support level of £42.50 a week, one seventh of the average wage. Does the right hon. Gentleman really believe that that is sufficient for one sixth of the population to feed, heat and clothe themselves for months and sometimes years on end?” And in a debate on disability benefits on 10th January 1990, Jack Ashley uses the language of redistribution, asserting that “the £300 million that the right hon. Gentleman has given to disabled people compares very badly with the £23 billion in tax cuts given to top earners ... that benefit has increased by less than 1 per cent during the decade

1. By convention, MPs in the House of Commons must speak to each other in the third person, and must call each other “my honorable friend” (or “my right honorable friend” for those of ministerial rank or higher.)
in which the Government have been in power, while average male earnings have risen by 37.5 per cent. Where is the justice in that?"

### 2.2.3 Benefit Levels

This is a more minor topic, almost wholly accounted for by Conservatives, consisting mainly of a series of ministerial question times about benefits, and most popular in the earliest part of our data. Once again, it involves mostly very neutral language, although in this case, debates tend to revolve around making some cuts in benefits and saving money. Conservative MPs avoid inflammatory or critical language, tending to frame the cuts as being aimed at helping the poor or better directing resources at them. Indeed, they tend to refer to “policy changes”, rather than “cuts”, and do not motivate them using problems with the way benefits operate, or the behavior of those who receive them. Welfare is still praised as an important duty of government.

On 18th May 1988, James Douglas-Hamilton says that “the changes are designed to protect the poorest and to direct resources more effectively to where they are needed most ... I believe that to direct help first and foremost to the poorest and most vulnerable of our society is a sound and entirely defensible principle of social policy”, and on 19th November 1987, James Arbuthnot states that “they [the policy changes] concentrate available resources into the hands of the poorest of our society. In that regard, the Government have two duties. The first speaks for itself - to provide support for those who cannot provide it for themselves ...” In a debate about changes to housing benefit on 19th November 1987, Nicholas Scott even evokes redistributive motives, saying “the new scheme will still deliver more help with rent to the poorer households ... I do not apologise for the fact that there is an element of redistribution towards poorer households inherent in our proposals.” Regardless of the true nature of these policy changes, the rhetoric that accompanied them was not harsh or negative.

### 2.2.4 Poverty and Hardship

This topic was popular almost exclusively among Labour politicians, both in the late 1980s and even more so from 2010 onwards. It features graphic and heart-rending accounts of poverty and
hardship during these two periods of economic difficulty (the UK experienced a recession from 1990-91, and very high unemployment in the period preceding it). Here, speeches have an angrier tone than other topics, and redistribution is explicitly invoked by almost all speakers. Importantly, the economic difficulties are also linked to cuts in benefits, with speakers once again invoking the welfare system as a key means of fighting poverty, talking in sympathetic and supportive terms about its beneficiaries.

Starting with the redistributive arguments, we hear explicit appeals to class warfare not long before Blair became Labour leader. On June 9th 1993 we hear Labour’s Roy Hattersley arguing that: “over 14 years of Conservative government, the poorest members of society have grown increasingly poor compared with the richest. This Tory Government have the best record of redistribution in the history of British politics; they have consistently taken from the poor and given to the rich. That is bad enough, but the poorest 10 per cent have actually become poorer in absolute terms during 14 years of Conservatism. They are 6 per cent poorer now than they were when the Labour party left office - 6 per cent less purchasing power is in the possession of the poorest people in Great Britain.” In a similar vein, on July 20th 1993, Labour’s Donald Dewar suggests in the second debate that: “We stand against the theory that those who are financially fortunate have no interest in helping those who are not. The truth is that two thirds of the families of this country have an income below the national average. For the great majority - I hope, for all - there is a common interest in acting together to raise standards and eliminate injustice.” Here, politicians talk explicitly about differences between classes, and advocate narrowing them.

Dewar goes on to explicitly advocate for benefit recipients as deserving, hapless victims. Ironically, given how Labour’s discourse would subsequently evolve, he worries about the stigmatization of users: “in my city of Glasgow, for example, 78.4 per cent of local authority tenants are on housing benefit. That reflects not some fecklessness on their part but Government policy that has forced up rents - and then the Conservatives have the cheek to complain about the numbers receiving help.” In what almost sounds like a statement of future New Labour dogma, he worries that benefits will be cut to “a safety net provision, with all the implications of stigma that flow from it. We will be moving towards a world where ... applicants’ applications for benefits will be a surrender and an
admission of defeat in the eyes of a large part of the community.” This forecast, of course, came true much faster than he probably anticipated.

Debates from the 1980s and early 1990s feature Labour MPs defending the unemployed and low-paid. On March 13th 1991, Thomas Graham complains that “the majority of families in my constituency struggle to make ends meet. Their struggle is made worse by cuts in benefit in real terms and the inadequate income support on which they are expected to live.” Michael Meacher, meanwhile, reels off a laundry list of cuts: “earnings-related unemployment benefit has been abolished; housing benefit no longer covers the full market rent …18 to 25-year-olds now receive a lower rate of benefit than adult benefit …the result of all that for tens of thousands of low-paid and average-paid workers is a spiral from unemployment to poverty and destitution.” A debate on housing benefit from May 16th 1988 features very angry rhetoric from Labour. Brian Wilson talks of “human misery inflicted on decent people trying to make ends meet as a result of the changes in housing benefit …we are talking about savage cuts”, adding that “I know the suffering and heartbreak that has been caused …what kind of Government impose that kind of shock on people already struggling to make ends meet?” Henry Mcleish, a Scottish MP, says that “there are few constituents who can appreciate that a Government can be so mean, so vicious, so malicious and …so ignorant of the plight of hundreds of thousands of Scottish people. These people are on the breadline.”

When the topic returned to popularity during the recent economic crisis there were more complaints about cuts. During questions to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on March 3rd 2014, Ian Davidson asks “does the Minister accept that the cuts to the welfare budget will lead to an increase in poverty, particularly child poverty? Does she believe that that is a price worth paying?”, while in a question time on Work and Pensions on March 5th 2012, Anne McGuire states “there will be a sharp increase in the number of disabled children living in poverty …as a result of the £1,400 a year reduction [in disability benefits]. Does the Secretary of State think that the current levels of support are too generous? If not, why do the Government continue with this very harsh proposal?”

There were also explicit appeals to redistribution in recent years. A key example comes from a debate on benefit levels from January 8th 2013. Labour’s Liam Byrne says that “millionaires are
being given a tax cut. I simply do not understand how he [the Minister for welfare] can justify that ... we should be raising more from Britain’s richest citizens, not giving them a £3.4 billion tax cut to heat their swimming pools while Britain’s working families are being punished”, while Alex Cunningham talks of a voter in his constituency who “said that he had £130 a week for himself, his wife and three children. He cannot get a job and all he has to look forward to is an increase [in benefits] of £1.30 - enough to buy a loaf of bread. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to show compassion to such families, rather than giving millionaire earners a tax break of £2,000 a week?” Once again, welfare recipients are framed as the innocent victims of cuts.

Having looked at the four topics that describe poverty and benefits, I now move on to describing topics that talk about problems with welfare and its recipients, and proposals to improve the system.²

2.2.5 Welfare Reform I

I begin with the first welfare reform topic, which illustrates all of the themes that run through the various topics that are critical of welfare. This topic was most popular in the mid to late 1990s. It shows a very dramatic turnaround in rhetoric from both parties, but especially from Labour MPs.

Instead of calling for higher spending and praising the benefits system for its role in poverty alleviation, MPs frequently call for spending to be curtailed, and highlight problems with the system. In a question time on social security on December 10th 1996, Labour’s Frank Field tries to provoke the Conservatives, saying, “will the Secretary of State tell the House the percentage increase in real terms in social security expenditure since 1979? When he meets the electorate, will he consider that record a matter for congratulation or for concern?” The system is also condemned as inefficient. In a debate on welfare reform on July 22nd 1997, Labour’s Des Browne claims that “almost no one who is involved in the system expresses any confidence in it or public support for it - despite the fact that we are spending such a vast part of the nation’s wealth on it”, while Labour’s Paul Goggins says that “the experience of those who claim benefit is frequently appalling ... it is a

². Note that two other topics in Figure 2.2, “poverty and inequality”, and “social exclusion and mobility” were also examined carefully. In contrast to the topics discussed in detail above, these topics talked about the relevant social problems without any discussion of benefits as part of the solution. Because of that, they are not as relevant to the discussion of welfare and welfare reform.
bureaucratic nightmare.” It is notable that Labour members continued to denounce benefits even after coming to power (in May 1997). They were not using harsh rhetoric merely as a means to criticize the Conservative government while in opposition.

The welfare system is lambasted for trapping people on benefit. MPs call for reforms to encourage people on benefits to move into work. Talking of a change to the way in which the spouses of benefit recipients are treated, Labour’s Frank Field asks in a question time on November 6th 1995, “does the Secretary of State accept that he is now the main recruiting sergeant to the dependency culture … he is providing an incentive for the wives of the unemployed to join the dole queue … they find it profitable to give up work and join their husbands on the dole.” Labour’s Harriet Harman nicely summarizes her party’s new position in the July 22nd 1997 debate: “we are redefining welfare as an active hand-up, not just a passive hand-out of benefit. We are creating a modern welfare system, which will encourage financial independence … which actively supports work, saving and honesty.” This carries the not-so-subtle implication that in the past, welfare discouraged work and independence, and encouraged dishonesty and fraud. The Conservatives use strikingly similar language, with Piers Merchant on July 22nd 1997 talking of “a new consensus emerging on welfare policy - a consensus that recognises that fraud exists and needs to be stopped; that inefficiencies in the system need to be rooted out … and that welfare should exist as a hand-up rather than a hand-out.” Both sides frame benefits not as a long-term form of income, but as temporary assistance before recipients find work.

MPs on both sides begin to say that the receipt of benefits entails responsibilities (including actively seeking employment) on the part of recipients in return. Welfare begins to be framed as something that has to be actively earned, with the implication that some beneficiaries may not be doing enough to deserve them. In addition, users of the benefits system are often singled out as different to “taxpayers”, who pay for the system. For instance, Labour’s Colin Burgon claims on July 22nd 1997 that “the people whom I am especially proud to represent share my view - a simple view - that it is better to have a nation at work than on benefit. They also believe that in society one has rights, but also responsibilities”, while Labour’s Harriet Harman claims that “the way in which social security is delivered at the moment is resented by the public who pay for it.” Again,
the two parties' discourse starts to resemble each other. For example, Conservative MP Howard Flight sides himself with taxpayers, saying in an opposition day debate on July 13th 1998 that “I cite the perspective of the majority of the country, the majority of middle-of-the-road, average, husband-and-wife families bringing up two children. They expected reforms that did not leave them paying more and more for other people and subsidising the bringing up of other people’s children. They expected a fairer deal for themselves.”

Overall, this topic uses much more negative framing than the previous ones. MPs call for lower spending, and talk frequently about problems with the benefits system. Benefits are no longer framed as an important way to tackle poverty, or as an unconditional right. Instead, they are spoken of as temporary, as a means to getting back to work - provided the recipient fulfils their side of the bargain.

2.2.6 Benefit Fraud

The three most important debates on benefit fraud were on June 18th 1996, November 25th 1996, and October 13th, 2005. The topic was most popular in the mid to late 1990s among both parties. Speeches tend to imply that fraud is widespread. In the first, Labour’s Chris Smith alleges that: “there is a good deal of organised big-time fraud at present: people with portfolios of national insurance numbers are using them to claim benefits to which they are not entitled because their identities are entirely fictitious”, and in the second, Labour’s Harriet Harman notes that: “the Social Security Committee estimated that as much as £1 of every £5 spent on housing benefit is wasted on fraud.”

Again, distinctions are often drawn here - sometimes only implicitly - between the deserving and undeserving, or those legitimately claiming benefits and those cheating. Peter Lilley of the Conservatives asserts in the second debate that: “if we are to meet our obligations to those in genuine need, which the Government are determined to do, we have to curb fraud and abuse”, while Labour’s Chris Smith states in the first that: “there should be a determination to identify where a fraudulent claim is being made or paid, but there should also be a determination to ensure that people are receiving that to which they are properly and legitimately entitled.” In the third,
Labour's James Plaskitt draws these distinctions more dramatically, saying "the vast majority of our constituents are rightly angered by the activities of benefit fraudsters. Benefit fraud is theft - theft from the public purse, from neighbours, and from hard-working, law-abiding taxpayers."

The Conservatives' rhetoric is harsher than Labour's. Peter Lilley in the second debate uses melodramatic language, and links fraud to immigration, talking of "freeloaders", "benefit tourists ... milking our benefits", "new age travellers [who] ... refused even to apply for jobs", and "bogus asylum seekers." And in the first debate he says "although Labour said that asylum seekers were mostly genuine and came to the United Kingdom to escape persecution, not to acquire our benefits, the figures tell a different story." He singles out outsiders who are cheating, or do not deserve benefits. Fraud is also often linked to wider reforms that encourage work and responsibility on the part of recipients. In the first debate, Peter Lilley suggests that: "a further reform will ensure that housing benefit does not pay higher rents for unemployed young people than they would normally be able to afford out of work. Labour opposed that reform too, just as it opposed other measures to prevent abuse - such as the objective medical test for incapacity benefit, to stop fit people abusing the system." In the third, Labour's James Plaskitt claims that "like us, the vast majority of our constituents also believe in the rights and responsibilities agenda and want the benefits system ... to be free from abuse." Taken as a whole, the topic suggests that there are a lot of practical problems with the welfare system.

2.2.7 New Deal

The "New Deal" was a specific package of reforms enacted by the New Labour government from 1997 onward. They were designed to tackle what it saw as a number of problems: high long-term and youth unemployment, poor opportunities for training, and a benefits system that appeared to discourage recipients from seeking work, particularly disabled people and lone parents. A lot of this topic is taken up with discussing how to tackle unemployment and provide training, with quite positive language. The discussion of benefits occupies only about half of the time. The topic was almost entirely accounted for by Labour, so all quotes here are from Labour MPs, in debates about the new deal.
Harriet Harman, Labour’s then Secretary of State for Social Security, made Labour’s new approach to benefits very clear on July 28th 1997. She states that “the best way to deal with inequality in income is through education and work opportunities.” She heavily criticizes benefits for the disabled and calls for reform, saying that “many sick and disabled people are trapped in a benefits system that encourages sickness and encourages people to stay out of work...there should be a proper assessment of an individual’s capacity for work ... rather than having a benefit system that simply says to so many people, ‘all the incentives are to make yourself unavailable for work’.” Overall, she is “concerned that those who are not entitled to benefits should not receive them.” As before, existing policies are criticized, some recipients are framed as undeserving, and the emphasis is on “welfare-to-work’, a term that many MPs specifically employ. Caroline Flint puts it even more starkly in an opposition day debate on December 1st 1997, referring to the past, when “taxpayers picked up the bill for mass dependency on benefit, persistent unemployment, huge subsidies for low pay and widespread fraud. It was truly a nation on benefit ... overall benefit expenditure rose by £40 billion in real terms ... the best form of welfare, and the one preferred by the great majority of people, is work ... I am proud that new Labour is beginning to prioritise work over welfare and opportunity over waste.”

The existing welfare system is often said to trap people, preventing them from working. For instance, on 28th January 1999, Labour’s Alistair Darling states that his aim is: “to ensure work for those who can and to provide security for those who cannot. Our objective is to build an affordable social security system that meets the needs of the next 50 years, not those of post-war Britain, and that provides active help to get people into work and off benefit”, and Gisela Stuart (Labour) says that “we must return to creating incentives for work instead of dependency”, adding that she wants to “restore the faith of those who pay for the system - the taxpayers. People are prepared to pay taxes only if they feel that they get value for money.” Distinctions are drawn not only between users and taxpayers, but also between those claimants who are entitled to benefits, and those who are not. On 18th November 1998, Darling talks about “modernising the system to ensure that benefits go to those for whom they were intended”, claiming that “there are many problems with the current benefits system ... not least among them is the problem that we are
paying benefits to people who do not need them.” These speeches implicitly criticize some of those who receive benefits: they are framed as different to those who pay taxes, and therefore have jobs, and sometimes, as simply undeserving of help.

Politicians now compete over who can spend the least on welfare. In the second debate, Darling states that: “we are controlling social security spending because we are determined to get people back into work. Our manifesto promised that we would cut the bills of economic and social failure … social security spending will grow by less than 2 per cent during this Parliament, compared to 4 per cent during the previous Parliament” and states that by “examining social security spending that we think should be cut - for example, that spent on people on benefit who should be in work … we will cut those bills.” Finally, there is also more talk of responsibilities faced by those on benefits. In a question time on July 9th 1999, Stephen Ladyman asks the minister “what steps his Department is taking to ensure that people receiving jobseeker’s allowance meet their responsibilities of looking for work and improving their employability.” The response, from Andrew Smith, is very clear: “everyone receiving the jobseeker’s allowance signs an agreement on the steps that they will take to find a job … if people do not meet their responsibilities to be available for work and look for jobs, they can lose their benefits.”

2.2.8 Welfare Reform II

The final topic considered is the second welfare reform topic, popular among both parties from the late 2000s onward. These debates again refer to a specific set of reforms, this time known as “universal credit.” They were brought in by the new coalition government between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats that was elected in 2010. It will replace a raft of existing benefits with one single payment, with the aim of reducing disincentives to returning to work that may exist in the current system, where benefits may be withdrawn too quickly when a person finds work.

These debates are most notable for their total consensus on policy aims. Labour MPs either say that they support the idea, or refrain entirely from criticizing the principles behind the policy. For example, Labour’s Liam Byrne states in a debate on September 11th 2012 that “at the heart of the debate is a very simple principle, which is that anyone in this country should be better off
in work than they are on benefits. That is a principle in which we in the Opposition passionately believe.” Instead, Labour MPs stick to listing problems with its implementation. They gripe that it is being brought in too slowly, that the relevant IT systems are not functioning, that it is too expensive, or that it may not work as intended. There is a singular lack of condemnation of the policy’s aims. If anything, they want the policy to arrive sooner, and are concerned to make sure it is effective.

At the same time, Conservative MPs use negative language to describe the welfare system, echoing language in earlier topics about reform, emphasizing welfare’s alleged expense and inefficiency. In a debate on September 5th 2013, the aims of the policy are made clear. David Nuttall says that “universal credit will mean that work always pays”, and Iain Duncan Smith forecasts that “we will be saving £80 billion as a result of our welfare reforms”. “Taxpayers” and “working people” are compared to those who receive benefits, with the implication that the latter neither work nor pay taxes: on July 7th 2014, Angela Watkinson talks of “bringing the welfare budget under control for the benefit of the working people who pay for it through their taxes.” The message that benefits trap people in poverty instead of relieving it is repeated. On September 11th 2012, Charlie Elphicke says that “too often in the past there has been a tone of pessimism which accepts that it is okay for people just to sit at home all day on benefits and do no work ... the best cure for deprivation is a job. Many people in my constituency live in deprivation. It is important to get people back into work, to incentivise and encourage people to be in work and to make work pay; that is an important message to send.”

Finally, a debate from 12th December 2012 illustrates just how much language use changed with relation to benefits. The Conservatives’ speeches that day consisted of a single proposal from the MP Alec Shelbrooke, who argued that benefits should be paid in the form of a cash card that could only be spent on certain classes of essential goods such as food, and not on other items such as cigarettes and alcohol. His aim, he says, is to “to encourage responsible spending by welfare claimants, ensuring that taxpayers’ money is spent wisely and for the purpose it is intended”, implying that some existing welfare money is poorly spent. He implicitly frames recipients as irresponsible and often undeserving, since his proposal would “alter the spending habits of a minority who for far
too long have taken advantage of the system, getting something for nothing”, and he believes that “the previous Labour Government created a two-tier benefits system in which the strivers and low paid-workers were penalised for the idleness of the shirkers.” Referencing Beveridge, the creator of the original British welfare state in the 1940s, he says that “the welfare state can no longer be seen as getting something for nothing; it must deliver on Beveridge’s vision of a temporary security net by using benefits to create a striving society.”

2.3 Discussion

The content analysis of key debates uncovers an extraordinary transformation in political discourse toward the welfare state. The discussion above corroborates the broad patterns seen in the computational analysis, and the connection between the two is explored further below. First, I draw together the findings, painting a picture of just how much discourse has changed.

At the beginning of the period, and to a lesser extent toward the end, politicians depicted welfare as a necessary activity of government, and an important means of poverty relief. Receiving benefits was framed as perfectly legitimate, as a source of income for the poor, and even as a viable alternative to low-paid employment. As a result, its users were described as needy, and deserving of help. There were no suggestions that welfare worked poorly, or that beneficiaries were ‘dependent’ on it in a negative sense; they were seen as needing it, and needing more. MPs called for budget increases, or at the least, for the maintenance of current spending and a concentration on the requirements of the poor. The rhetoric was redistributive too, and the tone of speech about benefits was positive or neutral, even when Conservative MPs discussed cuts, although Labour MPs tended to use more dramatic and emotive language to describe poverty. Overall, politicians framed welfare as an *unconditional right* of citizens, echoing the writings of T.H. Marshall, who first argued that welfare states were a social right, part and parcel of being a citizen of a country Marshall 1950. This sort of rhetoric – especially from Conservatives and centrist Labour politicians – seems almost quaint today. It is difficult to imagine it being repeated.

Instead, beginning in the mid 1990s, and continuing throughout the rest of the period, politicians began to use a second set of frames. They claimed that welfare was working poorly and inefficiently,
and was in need of major reform. They called for budget cuts, portrayed welfare as too expensive, and alleged that fraud was endemic in the system. Rather than trying to get more money to those on welfare, there was an emphasis on removing benefits from people who did not “deserve” to receive them. Welfare began to be framed as a temporary program to support people through short-term difficulty. Politicians no longer talked about it as a way to fight poverty, as a viable source of income in its own right, or as a vehicle for redistribution. Indeed, the opposite idea was talked about: that far from alleviating poverty, benefits trap people into poverty as they become dependent on them. As a result, they emphasized the idea that any type of work is superior to being on benefits.

Far from being an unconditional right of citizens, benefits were framed as something that had to be earned. Their receipt carried obligations on the part of recipients, such as seeking work, with the implication that some people on benefits may not be trying hard enough, or that living on benefits was a form of social failure. Users of the system were often portrayed as different to “taxpayers” or people who “work hard.” In contrast to the first set of frames, there were also remarkably few differences in tone between the two parties. They echoed each other’s complaints about the system, making the same assumptions, advocating the same policy solutions, and using strikingly similar language. And although politicians, particularly from Labour, began to use some more redistributive language in recent years after the crisis, they invoked benefits as a solution to poverty much more rarely, and tended to indicate an acceptance of the new ‘welfare-to-work’ consensus represented by Universal Credit.

I now combine the computational and qualitative analyses to give a picture of how these two competing sets of frames have been used over time. Figure 2.5 uses the topical prevalence estimates from Figures 2.3 and 2.4, aggregating prevalence measures for the four topics using the first set of frames (in the left -hand diagrams) and the four from the second set of frames (in the right-hand diagrams), which are labelled “poverty/need” and “welfare reform/fraud”, respectively. In the latter, prevalence estimates for the ‘new deal’ are multiplied by a half, to account for the fact that only about one-half of speech in the topic discussed benefits. The top two panels display overall prevalence (and were also displayed earlier in Chapter 1), while the bottom two split it out by
There was a very big decline in pro-welfare rhetoric, from occupying almost half of total speech in the late 1980s and early 1990s to around 5% in the late 1990s, followed by a slight resurgence during and after the recent financial crisis, although never reaching anything like its former importance. Prior to the crisis, both parties used these sets of frames about equally, but since 2007, only the
Labour party has started using them again. Meanwhile, the right-hand panels show an equally sharp and dramatic rise in rhetoric about fraud and reform, from virtually zero in the late 1980s. There was also an early peak in this type of rhetoric around the accession of Tony Blair’s new Labour government in 1997, that began after his accession to th leadership in 1994. Since then, the anti-welfare frames have consistently been used more than the pro-welfare frames, and they picked up again in importance after the Cameron government came to power in 2010. There has been a general drift toward more conservative framing. In general, both parties have followed quite a similar trajectory for this new discourse, although the Labour party shows a less marked pick-up since the late 2000s. The timing of these changes in rhetoric are of course consistent with changes in policies, too. Labour began to adopt welfare reform policies before the general election of 1997 and implemented them steadily after the election (Clasen 2005), and the remarkable bipartisan consensus between ostensibly left-wing and right-wing parties on welfare reforms has been noted by experts on social policy not only in the UK, but across Europe (Clasen and Clegg 2013).

Overall, these diagrams illustrate very starkly the extent of change in elite rhetoric toward welfare issues in the UK. The Labour party’s shift is particularly unexpected and dramatic, given its history as a socialist party that founded most of the institutions of the British welfare state. It appears that British politicians’ rhetorical strategies toward the welfare state can meaningfully be dichotomized into two opposing sets of frames whose use varies over time. The next Chapter will outline some of the high-level reasons for Labour’s shifting rhetoric, including party competition and changes in Labour’s internal makeup. Here, we can rule out a couple of other explanations that may, at first sight, seem likely candidates.

First, there were also quite different reactions to the two economic crises covered by the data: the recession and mass unemployment of the late 1980s to early 1980s, and the financial crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s. While the former was accompanied by discourse emphasizing that benefits should be used to help the victims, these frames were much less prevalent in the more recent crisis, with a lot more rhetoric calling for cuts and reform instead. Therefore the decline in rhetoric favoring the welfare state in the middle of my data is not just attributable to greater economic stability. Even in the more recent period of unprecedented economic turmoil, rhetoric
was much less favorable to the system of benefits than it was in the last economic crisis of the late 1980s to early 1990s. And second, the transformation in discourse also does not simply reflect the opposition party being critical of the government’s policies. Labour MPs were certainly critical of the welfare system when in opposition before 1997, but their anti-welfare discourse continued when in office. And both parties were supportive of each other’s reform programs when in opposition, both in the late 1990s and in the early 2010s. There appears to have been a genuine shared conversion toward using more critical rhetoric, reflecting a collective loss of faith in the post-war British welfare system. In the next Chapter, I ask why this occurred.
2.4 Methodological Appendix to Chapter 2

Here, I outline in detail how the speech data was collected and analyzed to produce the results shown in the chapter.

2.4.1 Data Collection: Speeches

Data collection was carried out by first scraping the entire online transcript of parliamentary speeches (known as Hansard) from 1987 to 2015 from the internet. I primarily used annotated transcripts from the Dutch PoliticalMashup project until 2014. After 2014, when the Mashup data end, I used transcripts from the They Work for You project. Both projects make use of a Parser built by They Work for You.3 Python scripts were then used to separate out the transcript into three different types of debates. The first are monthly question times, where government ministers are questioned on their policies. These occasions are highly political and typically involve a series of short questions and answers that are essentially short statements of policy positions. All relevant question times were used, including questions to ministers responsible for welfare policies, as well as to those responsible for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (who often talk about welfare), and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.4 Each ministerial department is questioned monthly. The second are debates on bills, typically initiated by the government, with a small number of topical debates initiated by back-benchers. The third are debates on topical policy issues initiated by opposition parties, known as “opposition day” debates. This means that the dataset combines speeches whose agenda is determined in different ways: by statute (question times), by the government (most debates), by individual legislators (a small number of debates) and by opposition parties (opposition day debates).

It is easy to identify which question-answers or debates are relevant, because they are labelled within Hansard with prosaic titles such as “welfare reform bill”. Therefore, the second stage of data


4. The most famous question time, Prime Ministers’ Question Time, is not included, because it is not possible from the Hansard transcript to tell which questions are relevant to welfare. While it would probably be possible to train a classifier to collect these, they would be unlikely to add very much to our collection of speeches, as this question time is short and focuses on all policy areas, not just welfare.
collection involved using a simple dictionary of terms related to welfare to identify and retain only the relevant debates. The dictionary was determined through careful reading, and prior knowledge of the British policy agenda. When selecting debates for inclusion, the net was cast deliberately wide, in order to not miss any relevant speeches. Thus the collection effort included keywords related to benefits, but also to a wide range of problems that they alleviate including disability, poverty, and unemployment, as well as other areas of the welfare state that alleviate poverty, such as public pensions. Finally, the debates were separated into individual speeches and cleared of extraneous html code, and then each speech was tagged with the party label of the speaker.

To prepare the text for subsequent analysis, I followed standard practices in computational text analysis: numbers and punctuation were removed, as well as stopwords such as ‘the’, which carry no political meaning. Names of MPs and their constituencies were also removed, as well as common procedural words such as ‘debate’. A further list of words were removed which carry no ideological meaning, but distinguish between the parties, between the government and opposition, or between ministers and back-benchers. These include “Labour”, “Minister”, “Government” and so on. This avoids creating differences between parties merely because different parties must use different sets of words when they refer to each other, or between ministers and back-benchers due to their differing formal responsibilities for enacting legislation. Many authors also use stemming, meaning that words such as ‘taxation’, ‘taxable’, and ‘taxes’ are reduced to a common stem such as ‘tax’, since all involve the same underlying concept. In my case, stemming made no difference to the results, but does make the eventual topics harder to understand for the reader, so the results here are shown without stemming.

2.4.2 Topic Modelling: Computational Methods for Analyzing Aggregate Speech

All speeches made by a party on a particular day were first consolidated to form one party document. For analyzing the discourse of parties as a whole, the unit of analysis is the party-day: what did parties say about welfare on a particular day? Change over time can then be assessed by comparing these party documents. Any party-days containing fewer than 350 words were discarded, since these often contain only a few sentences before a debate is adjourned (most party-days are thousands of
words in length). The eventual corpus from 1987 to 2015 consists of 1,788 party-days, of which 759 are from the Labour party, 681 are Conservative, and 348 are Liberal Democrat.

As with almost all applications of text analysis, documents are analyzed in the topic model as ‘bags of words.’ That is, they are reduced to a vector, each entry of which counts the number of times a word is used in the document. While this clearly removes a lot of detail, it performs surprisingly well in practice, particularly for the type of exploratory analysis carried out here (Quinn et al. 2010, Grimmer and Stewart 2013).^5

A topic model is a machine-learning algorithm that divides each of a set of documents into a fixed number of “topics”. Mathematically, a topic is a probability mass function over words. Each one is defined by a vector whose length is equal to the number of words in the corpus, each entry of which is the probability of that word being used in the topic (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003, Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Conceptually, a topic is a group of words that tend to occur together across a number of documents (in this case, party-days); the algorithm searches for and identifies these word clusters. In practice, if the method is successful, each topic will consist of a group of words covering a distinct concept, such that the highest probability words (that is, the words used most frequently within the topic) are characteristic of that concept (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). It might be the case, for example, that a group of words referring to state pensions are used in a particular set of party-days. This should be interpreted as meaning that on each of these days, the party talked about pensions policy.

Importantly, the model assumes that documents are comprised of multiple topics, and estimates the proportion of each document accounted for by each topic. This is the key object of interest, because it allows an assessment of topic prevalence over time and by party, since we know when, and by which party, each document was ‘written’. Topic prevalence shows how much of a party’s total rhetoric at a given time was comprised of a particular topic, such as welfare reform. To facilitate these over-time comparisons directly within the model, I used a newer version of the original topic model – the structural topic model (STM) – which allows the distribution of topic proportions across documents to differ according to one or more covariates, in this case by year.

^5. First, rarely-used words were removed from the texts (words appearing in fewer than 0.5% of documents), which greatly speeds up estimation without affecting the results.
(Roberts et al. 2013, Roberts 2014, Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2015). In the next Chapter, results are shown over time by party (calculated within the model) as well as for individual parties over time. Over-time estimates for individual parties are calculated using model estimates of the proportion of each document accounted for by each topic, together with information about when, and by which party, each document was “authored”. Time was included in the model as a spline function, allowing prevalence to vary very flexibly over the 28 years of data.\(^6\)

Finally, it is important to note that the procedure is also unsupervised: the topics are not specified in advance. Instead, the algorithm selects topics without any prior knowledge of what they should be. This has the advantage of making very few assumptions, but it puts a burden on the analyst to interpret the output using their own knowledge, by looking at the sets of high-probability words associated with a particular topic, and at documents that are highly representative of it. Hence the computational analysis of text is not a substitute for close reading of them; it merely complements, extends and quantifies tasks that can be achieved by human readers.

The user’s only role, prior to running the model, is to specify the number of topics. This choice was made in an objective, quantitative manner, which is now briefly explained. Although the STM algorithm defines the topics by itself, it does not automatically select the number of topics to be defined. In addition, the topic model’s posterior distribution usually features many local maxima, meaning that the model’s results can be quite different, depending on how it is initialized. Both of these problems necessitate a comparison of models with different numbers of topics and different starting values, and a subsequent choice of the “best” one. However, there is no simple way to evaluate what constitutes the optimal model. Comparing simple measures of model fit across models with different numbers of topics and/or initializations can often yield models with excellent fit whose output is nonetheless uninterpretable, or useless for the particular task at hand (Grimmer and King 2011, Roberts 2014). Because of this, the typical approach to model selection is instead

\(^6\) A natural extension would be to also allow prevalence to differ within the model by party as well, rather than calculating prevalence by party after estimation. However, the STM software in R, as currently written, is not flexible enough to allow this. The issue is that we would require an interaction between time and party, but the model only allows interactions with variables entered linearly. But it makes little sense here to enter time as simply a linear trend, because there is no reason to think that prevalence should vary only in the form of a linear trend. For example, topics may fall and rise in popularity several times over the years, which is accounted for by the more flexible spline specification.
to compare the substantive performance of models in terms of the linguistic quality of their outputs (the topics). Two measures, emphasizing quite different desirable properties, are usually evaluated.

First, I examined *semantic coherence*, akin to the topics’ internal consistency. If a topic is semantically coherent, it should describe the same thing in each document where that topic appears. A “bad” topic, for example, might include two quite unrelated sets of words that the computer has lumped together into one topic. Such a topic would be incoherent, because it will look quite different in different documents. Its incoherence could be picked up by the fact that words in the first group almost never co-occur with those from the second group. The standard quantitative measure of semantic coherence generalizes this intuition, measuring to what extent all of the high-probability words in a topic occur together across documents Mimno et al. 2011.

Second, I examined *exclusivity*, which looks at how different topics are to each other. We do not want to have multiple topics that simply discuss the same thing. A desirable model will feature a set of topics that are exclusive in the sense that they describe distinct phenomena. The standard quantitative measure of a topic’s exclusivity therefore rates a topic highly whenever its high-probability words do not feature as high-probability words in any other topics (Roberts 2014, Airoldi and Bischof 2017). Unsurprisingly, there is often a trade-off between exclusivity and coherence.

The STM software in R has a built-in procedure to compare these two diagnostic measures for different initializations of the model, as well as different numbers of topics. I opted to compare models with 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45 and 50 topics. For each of these topic numbers, the procedure first initializes ten different models, runs each for two iterations, and discards the eight with the lowest likelihoods. The remaining two models are each run to convergence. The software then compares the average (across-topic) semantic coherence and exclusivity for these two models, and selects the model that is pareto-dominant (that is, the model with a better combination of the two measures). The procedure was run on a super-computer cluster with 250GB of RAM, taking two days to complete.

This resulted in one final model for each number of topics, which are compared in Figure 2.6. The left-hand panel compares average coherence and exclusivity across the models, and the right
panel looks at the variance (we might also be interested in the variance in case high average scores
mask a lot of heterogeneity across topics, such as a bimodal distribution where some topics perform
extremely poorly). The left-hand panel shows that the 30-topic model clearly out-performs all of
the other models, since less negative scores on the coherence measure imply greater coherence,
and more positive scores for exclusivity imply greater exclusivity. The 30-topic model has the
second-best score for coherence, only beaten by the 20-topic model, which scores much lower on
exclusivity. Likewise, it has one of the highest scores for exclusivity, but is much more coherent
than the comparable models for exclusivity (those with 40, 45 and 50 topics). The right-hand panel
shows that its across-topic variance is also the lowest of all models for coherence, and close to the
lowest for exclusivity.

Figure 2.6: Comparison of Coherence and Exclusivity across Different Numbers of Topics

The left-hand panel displays a clear negative relationship between coherence and exclusivity;
models that are highly coherent perform poorly on exclusivity. These results are intuitive. With too
few topics, the topics contain a lot of generic words that occur frequently across the documents, but
this means that the topics are more similar to each other in content. On the other hand, with too many topics, the topics contain quite unique sets of words, that do not necessarily occur together very often. Based on the results here, then, the 30-topic model was the final model selected. As emphasized in the past literature, however, it is also important to verify that the topics make sense from a substantive perspective. Some studies have compared the judgements of expert human coders to results similar to mine, and found that the experts do not recognize the topics as useful in practice (Chang et al. 2009). For that reason, I spend a lot of time in the next Chapter examining the topics in detail, and find that they do in fact make substantive sense.
Chapter 3

An Elite-Led Theory of Change

In Chapters 1 and 2, I outlined how welfare policy has changed in the UK, and how the rhetoric accompanying those reforms has also been dramatically altered. I also argued that the New Labour period was the most crucial in explaining the long-term trajectory of welfare policy in the UK, and that it featured the most important turnaround in discourse. With that in mind, I turn my attention in this chapter to discussing why Labour came to enact welfare reforms and use increasingly harsh rhetoric, focusing eventually on the role of changes in the background of its MPs. I begin with two sets of explanations – long-term economic and social changes – that influenced New Labour’s leaders but cannot, on their own, explain the adoption of reforms. I go on to discuss the mindset and psychology of Labour’s leaders, and how this led them to adopt welfare reforms as a form of electoral signalling to middle-class voters. This top-down change in policy, though, required the active support of Labour’s MPs in order to pass. And there was also remarkably little countervailing, pro-welfare discourse coming from the Labour back-benches. This is where changes in their background matter, because Blair was fortunate to face a historically unique set of MPs who were willing to back his proposed reforms. I end the chapter by outlining a theory of why the backgrounds of MPs matter, focusing on the different socialization process that they go through, and the incentives they face to adopt particular patterns of legislative behavior.
3.1 Economic Changes as Incentives to Enact Reforms

When Tony Blair became Labour leader in 1994, economic changes that had been going on since the 1970s were posing difficult questions for welfare provision. There is contested evidence that globalization placed pressure on governments to retrench welfare states, with investors seen as wielding increasing power over governments, forcing them to rein in spending (Garrett and Mitchell 2001; Myles and Quadagno 2002; Hays 2009). More importantly (and less controversially), demographic change, government budget crises and deindustrialization were making generous welfare states less economically sustainable and more vulnerable to cutbacks. Technological change and increased international competition from low-cost countries led to large reductions in manufacturing employment. By the early 1990s, there was something of an unemployment crisis in many of the advanced economies. Older workers were being laid off and found it almost impossible to move into new sectors of work. There were fewer opportunities for young and low-skilled people wanting to work in manual trades. The resulting structural unemployment, as well as an ageing population, placed strains on systems of social support that were designed for a different era of short-term unemployment and lower life expectancy (Pierson 2001; Huber and Stephens 2001; Surender 2004; Hicks and Zorn 2005).

Nonetheless, these changes also potentially raised the demand for welfare, as new sectors of the economy became exposed to unemployment risk (Iversen and Cusack 2000; Iversen 2001). Rather than there being a single likely response to it across countries, deindustrialization tended to heighten the trade-offs that governments faced in designing social policy. In the UK, politicians had become increasingly unwilling to expand the size of government in order to substitute public sector employment for manufacturing jobs. Instead, changes to employment and trade union laws brought in by Conservative governments in the 1980s had made the economy more dependent on the deregulated service sector for job creation. The incentive for New Labour, as in other liberal market economies, was to cope with structural unemployment by cutting welfare and subsidizing wages in order to encourage an expansion of low-paid service-sector jobs (Myles and Pierson 1997; Iversen and Wren 1998; Esping-Andersen 1999; Rhodes 2000).

A new consensus was also emerging in the academic and policy-making communities that se-
rious problems existed with traditional systems of welfare provision, with European welfare states perceived as trapping people on benefits, failing to incentivize work, and causing rather than curing long-term unemployment (Ljungqvist and Sargent 1998; Layard 2000). In the UK, unemployment and inactivity came to be seen as major and pressing policy issues that required bold changes in welfare policies. There was particular concern about high and persistent youth unemployment, and increasing unemployment among single mothers. Policy-makers also worried about the middle-aged long-term unemployed being shunted onto incapacity (sickness) benefits as a form of subsidized early retirement (Walker 1999; Stafford 2003; Clasen 2005). New Labour’s leaders were strongly influenced by welfare reforms adopted by Bill Clinton’s ‘New Democrats’, which aimed to tackle very similar problems. These initiatives, which were widely seen as successful in Labour policy-making circles, bore striking similarities to Labour’s eventual policy changes (King and Wickham-Jones 1999; Walker 1999; Theodore and Peck 2000).

These economic, institutional and functionalist explanations for the adoption of ‘welfare to work’ reforms are important but incomplete. Structural unemployment was clearly an important problem among certain groups of people. Yet by the time that Labour came to power in 1997 it inherited a booming economy: aggregate unemployment was rapidly falling. By 1999, at the height of Blair’s welfare reform efforts, unemployment was at its lowest rate since the early 1970s, and the previous Conservative government had already introduced some welfare reforms (Wood 2001; Clasen 2005). It is by no means clear that further reforms were functionally necessary. Moreover, New Labour’s reforms were much more ambitious and far-reaching than those in other liberal market economies, such as Australia and New Zealand, who faced similar economic problems and institutional constraints (Surender 2004). At the same time, Scandinavian countries such as Denmark embarked on a quite different path of welfare reform, with the same emphasis on employment, activation and flexible labour markets, but a much stronger commitment to higher wages, training and income equality, together with a greater willingness to expand public sector employment. They emphasized investment in human capital over forcing people to re-enter the labor market into any form of employment (Hemerijck 2013; Thelen 2014). While path dependence and institutions constrained choices, and economic changes provided important incentives to enact
reforms, whether and how those incentives are acted upon is ultimately a political decision, and needs to be analyzed as one.

3.2 Political Incentives to Enact Reforms

Traditional welfare states have been widely seen as vulnerable to attack for political as well as economic reasons. By the mid-1990s, structural changes were potentially eroding the political basis of traditional social democracy. The declining relative strength of the working class in the population may have made policy appeals to them less of a vote-winning strategy. At the same time, organizations and institutions that increased Labour’s political strength – and voters’ incentives to side with it – such as trade unions, public housing and public-sector employment, were declining. Labour needed to woo middle-class voters who are seen as increasingly “aspirational”, individualistic and libertarian, and more suspicious of large-scale government intervention in the economy (Heath and McDonald 1987; Kitschelt 1994; Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 2001; Evans and Tilley 2012). While often supportive of government intervention and redistribution in general, the new middle-class base of social democratic parties tend to be much more skeptical of the benefits system and income support for the unemployed in particular (Gingirch 2015). Additionally, in labor markets privileged ‘insiders’ with secure jobs and marginalized ‘outsiders’ in insecure employment have increasingly divergent needs. The former may fight for employment protections that preserve their privileged status, and against welfare provisions that only benefit the latter (Rueda 2005, 2007). Because insiders tend to vote more and have greater political clout, social democratic parties have good reasons to side with them over outsiders.

On the other hand, the changes of the 1980s had also led to increases in unemployment, poverty and economic insecurity, and the early 1990s were marked by a severe recession. These changes might have been expected to increase support for redistribution and welfare provision (Hutton 1995). In net terms, if welfare reforms were a clear vote-winner, they should have been popular with the median voter. In that case, Labour’s adoption of welfare reform and the new rhetoric that accompanied it would be consistent with standard models of party behavior, which assume that parties are rational actors pursuing single objectives. In the simplest theoretical approach, parties
care only about winning elections, and therefore converge on the center ground toward the median voter’s position, in order to maximize the probability that they come out on top (Downs 1957).\textsuperscript{1}

Such a theory of pure electoral responsiveness suggests that Labour reacted to some clear shift in public opinion, changing its position on welfare reform in direct response to voters. In this case, the median voter may have shifted against welfare before 1997, leading Labour to follow suit.

And yet this was not the case. Underlying the median-voter account is an assumption that Labour’s changes in stance on welfare were compellingly \textit{necessary} in order to win elections. But that argument is very hard to sustain here. Most of Labour’s welfare policy changes were drawn up in the mid-1990s, after Blair became leader but before his 1997 election victory (King and Wickham-Jones 1999; Clasen 2005). At that time, public opinion was not seriously turning against the welfare system; the polling evidence demonstrates that public opinion changed a lot less under Thatcherism than many people assume (Crewe 1988). As Anthony King put it after Labour’s 1997 victory, “one of the most striking features of the politics of the Thatcher-Major years was the Conservative party’s failure to win public opinion around to the major tenets of its public philosophy” (King 1997, p. 184).

Public hostility to the welfare system began to seriously rise only \textit{after} Labour’s policy changes were adopted and its discourse about fraud and the need for reform had already reached a peak. This is shown in detail later in Chapter 5, but is also clear from academic discussions of the evidence. When Blair came to power, a majority of the population clearly favored the principle of redistribution, and support for it was actually growing rather than falling before 1997 (Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 2001). It is true that benefits for the poor and unemployed were less popular than other parts of the welfare state. Nonetheless, attitudes had not notably hardened compared to the mid 1980s, when Labour’s policy choices and discourse were very different, and only in the late 1990s did opinion begin to turn more negative than it had been in the mid-1980s. In the mid-1990s, clear majorities of the British public favored spending the same rather than less on

\textsuperscript{1} Under certain conditions, including two-party competition, and single-peaked preferences on the part of voters. A more realistic variant assumes that parties pursue particular policies, but are not wholly aware of voters’ preferences, perhaps due to uncertainty about how voters would respond to hypothetical changes in position (Stokes 1999). Here, whenever uncertainty about the median voter decreases, parties are predicted to converge more towards it, because the more uncertain the position of the median voter, the less the probability of winning an election changes with any given shift in position (Calvert 1985).
unemployment benefits, agreed that “benefits for the unemployed are too low and cause hardship”, and disagreed that “benefits are too high and discourage work” (Hills 2002, 2004). Longer-term polling from Gallup indicates that support for a strong government role in providing jobs and supporting living standards was higher at the end of the Thatcher period than in the post-war Attlee government, when Britain’s welfare state was first established (King 1997). As a result, the adoption of radical welfare-to-work policies in the mid-1990s was potentially politically risky, rather than expedient, and the Conservatives rather than Labour were seen as being constrained by public opinion, preventing them from enacting large-scale cuts and reforms (Ross 2000; Clasen 2005). Chapter 5 is dedicated to understanding the later, and very dramatic, alterations in public opinion, and will argue that voters were strongly influenced by politicians’ discourse. For now, it is clear that a simple Downsian story of responsiveness to public opinion is not consistent with the data.\(^2\)

The Downsian model also presupposes that voting takes place primarily on policy issues, rather than issues such as performance in office. Yet by the time Labour began adopting welfare reforms as part of its platform, the Conservatives were very unpopular and were widely perceived as incompetent managers of the economy, following the ‘Black Wednesday’ debacle of 1992 when the UK was forced to exit the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. Throughout the Thatcher years and early Major years, their poll ratings for economic competence were net positive, but after that, ratings turned sharply negative and never recovered before 1997. The party was also seen as sleazy, and its leaders as mendacious and weak: John Major had by far the lowest approval rating of any post-war Prime Minister (King 1997). No party that lags far behind the opposing party’s rating for both economic competence and strong leadership has ever won a British general election. Blair’s landslide victory of 1997 was “as much an anti-Tory vote as it was pro-Labour one” (Driver and Martell 2006, p. 1), and “it is hard to resist the conclusion that Labour would almost have certainly won anyway even without New Labour” (Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 2001, p. 4). The party had much more room to manoeuvre on welfare policy than theories of social change in the electorate might suggest (Hay 1999). There was no compelling electoral need for Labour to adopt

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2. In other policy areas, such as unilateral nuclear disarmament, the Labour party of the 1980s was almost certainly further away from the median voter than the Conservatives. But these policies had been altered by 1997, too.
such far-reaching welfare reforms.

Moreover, painting Labour’s changes to its welfare policies and rhetoric as politically necessary or inevitable risks masking the ways in which they were also politically costly to implement. Welfare-to-work policies tend to provoke strong emotions and internal strife in social democratic parties, since they are seen as contradicting the parties’ traditional aims and hurting its core supporters (Marx and Schumacher 2013). In the UK, the reforms not only lacked widespread public support, but their adoption also led to intense conflict within the parliamentary Labour party and the wider Labour movement (Cowley 2002). Blair had to expend a lot of political capital to push them through. Indeed, rather than seeing welfare reforms involving retrenchment and liberalization as inevitable, political scientists have tended to adopt the opposite perspective, viewing their very existence as a puzzle that needs explaining. Herbert Kitschelt’s contribution to the topic is entitled “welfare state retrenchment: when do politicians choose unpopular policies?” (Kitschelt 2001), while Barbara Vis asks in the first sentence of her abstract from an article on the same topic: “when do governments pursue unpopular reforms, such as cutting benefits?” (Vis 2009, p. 395). The issue, as Paul Pierson has famously pointed out in his ‘new politics of the welfare state’ thesis, is that welfare states create constituencies of users who benefit from particular policies and are likely to fight hard against their reform or removal. Reforms are politically challenging because the costs are immediate, visible and concentrated on these vocal and mobilized constituencies of users. Their upsides, on the other hand – in the form of lower taxes or government deficits, for instance – are spread much more widely to less well-defined groups, and tend to accrue over longer periods (Pierson 1994, 1996; Ross 2000).

3.3 Welfare Reform as a Politically Expedient Over-Correction

A full account of why Labour’s leaders felt the need to reform welfare and change the way the party spoke consists of two parts: the mindset and psychology of the New Labour leadership in the 1990s, and the nature of the welfare programs themselves. Starting with the first of these, we must understand the experiences its leaders had lived through, and the associated mental models that they had come to use when considering their political choices. When Blair assumed the
Labour leadership in 1994, the party had lost the previous four elections, and had not been in power since 1979. Blair and his allies in the party leadership believed that the problem was that the party had failed to appeal to middle-class, centrist voters. They saw it as too old-fashioned and too socialist to win elections and command the support of newspapers and business groups, whose endorsements they craved. They thought that it was still struggling to change its image – based on the inflationary crises of the 1970s – as fiscally irresponsible, hostile to businesses and the middle-class, and beholden to extremist trade unions (Hay 1999; Rhodes 2000; Ross 2000; Kitschelt 2001; Driver and Martell 2006). These perceptions were reinforced by the fact that Labour had undertaken some reforms before the 1987 and 1992 elections; its leaders concluded that it must have lost because the changes didn’t go far enough (Heffernan 2000).

First- and second-hand accounts of Blair’s early years as leader show just how scarred he and his allies were by the experiences of the 1980s and early 1990s. John Rentoul, Tony Blair’s biographer, talks of a “group psychosis that gripped the whole party” and a “pessimistic mindset gripping the inner court” that made it impossible for its leaders to believe they were going to win the 1997 election, even when the polling evidence was incontrovertible. There was a:

“collective state of denial which gripped the Labour Party from its leader downwards, perversely reinforced by each successive evidence that they were heading for a landslide... Blair’s pessimism was so ingrained that Labour officials learnt that the best way of gaining his attention was to give him bad news from the opinion polls, focus groups, or canvassing returns. Once satisfied that the world was about to end, he would then be able to concentrate on what else was being said to him.”

Rentoul (2001), p.299

Blair and his allies believed that Labour’s position was so bad because it had the wrong policies. They had internalized the idea that long-term social changes in the electorate had left Labour with no choice but to change radically. Phillip Gould, a close adviser and Blair’s chief pollster, later said of the pre-Blair party: “Labour had failed to understand that the old working class was becoming a new middle class: aspiring, consuming, choosing what was best for themselves and their families.

3. Rentoul 2001, pp 296, 313
They had outgrown crude collectivism” (Gould 2010 p.4). Or as Blair puts it more bluntly in his autobiography, “the Labour problem was self-made and self-induced. We were not in touch with the modern world”; “we had lost because we were out of touch with the modern voter” (Blair 2010, p. 42).

This combination of deep pessimism about Labour’s prospects and the diagnosis that the problem was Labour’s policies had two quite different effects. On the one hand, it hugely emboldened Blair to reform his own party and move it to the right, explaining that:

“By 1992 I was almost forty. I had been in opposition for a decade. The thought of another five years of merely incremental steps towards change in the party that was obviously needed filled me with dismay. If the steps were too incremental, we might fail again and I would be fifty before even getting sight of government; and what was the point of politics if not to win power, govern and put into practice the policies you believe in? … The party had lost because we had failed to modernize sufficiently, and now we had to do so, not by shades but by bursts of color. This time it had to be fundamental, clear and unmistakably geared to reuniting us with the people we sought to serve.”

Blair (2010), pp. 53-4

On the other hand, it made Blair exceptionally cautious in developing policy and fearful of anything that might appear too socialist: “the experience of long years in opposition drove some assumptions deep into Blair’s psyche… he learned reflexes of self-control and pathological risk-aversion… this time, no matter how far ahead Labour was in the opinion polls, it would take no chances” (Rentoul 2001, p. 296). Even the day after after winning a landslide victory in 1997, Blair himself confesses that “I was already obsessed with the notion that the country might take fright at the mandate it had given us, and believe that we may revert to the Labour party of old” (Blair 2010, p. 14). In practice this led to a big effort to differentiate the party from “Old Labour” in policy terms and in the language its leaders used. Hence “in 1996 he declared that Labour would fail if ‘it sees its task as dismantling Thatcherism. We can’t just switch the clock back to where we were’ ” (Heffernan 2000, p. 19). Blair’s rhetoric reveals defensiveness about the public’s view of his
party and a determination to draw deliberate contrasts with the past: "Old Labour thought the role of government was to interfere with the market. New Labour believes the task of government is to make the market more dynamic, to provide people and business with the means of success." 4

Thus much of New Labour’s policy-making and choice of discourse was a psychological response to repeated electoral defeats. Its leaders had convinced themselves that there was no other option than to present a radically different image. At the same time, they had diagnosed the party’s problem in a Downsian manner as having the wrong policies, including on welfare, even though (as we saw earlier) the public itself had not turned against welfare. There was a difference, in other words, between the objective reality of the opinion polls and the subjective perceptions of leaders who bore the emotional scars of many years in the electoral wilderness. And even if they had been correct to fear public opinion on welfare, Blair and his allies saw the world in a very different way to Thatcher, who viewed public opinion as highly malleable and saw part of her task as being to re-shape it to her own ends (Hay 1999; Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 2001). They did not believe that they could risk trying to convince the public of a more traditionally left-wing set of policies. Instead, policies had to be shaped to fit their perceptions of voters.

They came to believe that changing labour’s image required an over-correction of policy to a position that was to the right of the median voter, in a process of “conspicuous convergence” towards the Conservative party (Hay 1999). They wanted to demonstrate through their policy offerings and the language that accompanied them that they were on the side of middle-class voters. Central to this effort was the enactment of welfare reforms that reduced the generosity of benefits and increased the use of means-testing. They were framed by Labour as demonstrating a commitment to lower taxes, fiscal responsibility and rewarding hard work, and as a clean break from its past. At the same time, Blair and his allies perceived that in the US, similar welfare reforms had been successful in ‘detoxifying’ the Democratic Party in the eyes of the electorate, providing a further incentive to introduce them in the UK (King and Wickham-Jones 1999; Walker 1999; Theodore and Peck 2000). Perceived political expediency and electoral coalition-building were therefore the main drivers of the proposed welfare policy changes (Wood 2001, Surender 2004).

4. Quoted in Heffernan 2000, p. vii
This is also consistent with new work in political science that has challenged Paul Pierson's 'new politics' thesis in the case of support for the poor and unemployed. Pierson's theory surely offers a compelling explanation for the resilience of programs like public pensions, whose users (the elderly) are politically powerful as well as popular, and are widely seen as highly legitimate beneficiaries of their entitlements (Campbell 2002; Busemeyer, Goerres, and Wescle 2009; Goerres 2009). The unemployed and low-skilled are not nearly as popular, tending to be seen as much less deserving of assistance than the elderly. In part, this is because their plight can easily be viewed as due to personal failings or lack of effort, meaning that politicians can win support for retrenchment by framing users as undeserving (Korpi and Palme 2003; Van Oorschot 2006; Slothuus 2007). Unlike the elderly, the unemployed and low-skilled also have relatively low political participation, and there are few organized interest groups that fight on their behalf (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Welfare programs for these groups are therefore more politically vulnerable than other areas of welfare spending, and as a result, have seen more retrenchment across the world than areas like healthcare or pensions (Korpi 2003).

Welfare reform was a particular target of changes for New Labour because it provided a near perfect opportunity to demonstrate their new-found love for the middle-classes. Blair and his allies were particularly concerned that Labour be seen as trustworthy stewards of the economy. By taking 'difficult but necessary' decisions on welfare and curbing expenditure, they could bolster Labour's image as fiscally responsible, and demonstrate a clean break from tax-and-spend Labour governments of the past. Attacking the recipients of benefits and contrasting them with voters who do not directly use welfare programs became a way to win support from centrist voters, because the reforms could be depicted as achieving 'fairness' for taxpayers. Welfare payments had lost their link to income in the 1980s, meaning that fewer voters strongly benefited from such programs personally. increasingly, middle-class people tended to pay more into the welfare system than they take out. This made the poor, unemployed and long-term disabled especially vulnerable to political attack (Clasen and Clegg 2013). It is comparatively easy for British politicians to draw dividing lines between welfare recipients and others who work and pay taxes, unlike in insurance-based
systems such as Germany (Clasen 2005). At the same time, with no viable left-wing alternative to Labour and a first-past-the-post voting system, it was assumed that Labour would have little to fear from its traditional supporters switching to other parties, making the change a net vote-winner. In contrast to Pierson’s view that governments engage in ‘blame avoidance’, enacting reforms quietly and slowly, radical reforms that benefit taxpayers and negatively affect only a minority of the population may be widely trumpeted in acts of ‘affordable credit claiming’ (Bonoli 2012). And indeed, of course, the changes in rhetoric that were explored in Chapter 2 provide firm evidence of such credit-claiming, with the reforms trumpeted as a virtuous set of actions designed to benefit the majority of taxpayers and reform the bad behavior of some of those using benefits. In addition, and consistent with the view that this strategy is used in policy areas with fewer users, other parts of the British welfare state with a more universal client base, such as health and education, received rising funding under New Labour rather than cuts. Only the welfare system was singled out for cuts and reforms.

Indeed, Tony Blair’s own rhetoric leaves little room for doubt about his stance on welfare reform, or his attempts to side with middle-class taxpayers. Two quotes from the early period of his leadership exemplify the sort of rhetoric that the party as a whole came to use throughout his time in office:

“The basis of modern civic society is an ethic of mutual responsibility or duty. It is something for something. A society where we play by the rules. You only take out if you put in. That’s the bargain... work is the best form of welfare - the best way of funding people’s needs, the best way of giving them a stake in society. The task of reshaping welfare to reward hard work is daunting.”

“If you want to make sure you are not spending billions upon billions upon billions of pounds for people to do nothing, then you have got to reform the benefits system. We

5. Although as noted in Chapter 1, Germany and other countries have begun to shift away from a fully insurance-based logic.
6. Blair’s government did introduce some marketization of education and health, but this was tied to highly increased funding relative to the Thatcher and Major governments.
must make some impact on the huge and rising social security bill."

3.4 Internal Disputes in the Labour Party: the Importance of Individual MPs

Welfare reform was largely a pet project of the Labour party leadership, adopted in response to over a decade of conservative dominance of British politics. Yet the fact that Labour’s leaders supported it does not, in itself, explain why it was eventually enacted. The reforms were extremely controversial within the party. They seemed to contradict Labour’s core values, since Labour had founded many of the major institutions of the British welfare state. Much of the party’s existence had been dedicated to fighting for more generous and encompassing welfare provision. The reforms had the potential to hurt its core voters, even if they were perceived to be shrinking in number, and there were big differences within the party in the extent to which people wanted to change policies for electoral reasons (Ross 2000).

As with the discussion of economic incentives to change welfare policy, the mere existence of incentives to change, whether real or perceived, does not guarantee a response to them. Labour did not simply decide one day to change direction, and then do it. The modern literature on median voter theories and party platforms shows that shifts toward the center do sometimes occur in response to perceived electoral necessity, but they are often halting and incomplete. Parties never fully converge with each other, and different parties seem to use different decision rules at different times, with a variety of behaviors existing in practice. In many cases – not least in the Labour party – it is also easy to find examples of parties making strategic decisions that clearly make little electoral sense at all. For instance, Labour responded to its 1979 defeat at the hands of Margaret Thatcher by moving sharply to the left under Michael Foot’s leadership. His manifesto for the subsequent 1983 election was so far to the left that it was famously dubbed ‘the longest suicide note in history”, and was criticized by many of his MPs. More recently, after losing the 2015 election, Labour elected another hard-left leader, Jeremy Corbyn. He is widely considered to be the

8. Interview in The Observer newspaper, December 14th 1997
most leftwing leader in a generation, advocating a traditional socialist agenda that appears to be out of step with the public. His opponents in the leadership contest instead favored sticking to the center ground, with the aim of defeating the Conservatives at the next election; he won a landslide victory. Thus although theories of parties as strategic unitary actors may provide a reasonable high-level picture of how parties behave some of the time, they cannot explain variations in party behavior, or why some party reform efforts succeed while others fail.

Far from being unitary actors pursuing single goals, parties are now viewed in the modern literature as coalitions that vigorously compete over policies (Budge, Ezrow, and McDonald 2010, Adams 2012, Schumacher, Vries, and Vis 2013). Party change is seen as the result of a particular faction within a party coming to believe that change is needed, and asserting internal dominance. “Party change does not ‘just happen’. In fact, decisions to change a party’s organization, issue positions, or strategy face a wall of resistance common to large organizations” (Harmel and Janda 1994, p. 261). Such resistance is difficult to overcome, although in practice it does occur from time to time. Empirically, models of alternating factional dominance fit the data better than older models of parties as unitary actors (Harmel and Tan 2003, Ceron 2012). The key question, therefore, is what allowed Blair’s reform efforts to succeed when Labour has so often taken very different decisions in quite similar political circumstances.

One important explanation relates to the wider Labour movement. Parties are of course made up of both leaders and activists, both of whom have some power, whether formal or informal, over policy-making. The former are more likely to emphasize winning elections, while the latter prioritize implementing their favored policies, which are usually non-centrist, since political activists tend to be ideologically extreme. This has generally been the case in the Labour party, for both its party members and unions; a favorite slogan among some Labour activists of the 1980s was “no compromise with the electorate.” This means that if the balance of power within a party shifts away from activists, parties are likely to move to the center, toward the median voter (May 1973).9 Consistent with this, across Europe more activist-dominated parties have been less likely to adopt welfare reforms (Marx and Schumacher 2013, Schumacher, Vries, and Vis 2013, Schumacher 2015).

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9. Although see Norris 1995 for a more skeptical view. She presents evidence casting doubt on the idea that Labour’s members were systematically more leftwing than its MPs, at least by the 1990s
In particular, under Blair’s leadership, the ability of activists to determine policy was curtailed, and power was centralized under the party leadership, making it easier for the leadership to enact its preferred changes. This was part of a wider set of changes in Social Democratic parties across the world. Their leaders have come to enjoy greater autonomy from activists, and left-wing trade unions now enjoy less influence in internal decision-making, allowing more centrist and reformist leaders to prosper (Kitschelt 1994, Kitschelt 2001, Samuels 2004).

This is certainly part of the reason for Blair’s success in pushing through welfare reforms. However, adopting policies in the wider party is one thing; enacting them in parliament and persuading MPs to speak in their favor is another matter. Despite enjoying greater autonomy from trade unions and radical party members, Blair could still have faced strong opposition to welfare reforms within the parliamentary party, where the turnover of MPs is often slow, and many may have preferred to stick to the policies of the 1980s. The Labour leadership were certainly worried about the potential for serious dissent in the parliamentary party and for its MPs to act a road-block in enacting reforms (Cowley 2002). As one journalist, writing in 1996, put it, “it is the Parliamentary party, of all the branches of Labour, that has been most resistant to the Blairite transformation.” 10 Within the House of Commons, the first and most obvious way in which the balance of power between MPs matters is in voting. No welfare reforms can be enacted in a parliamentary democracy without a majority of legislators supporting them. Despite enjoying healthy parliamentary majorities, Blair lost a number of votes while Prime Minister, most notably in 2005 over the detention of terrorism suspects, and came close to losing on a number of other occasions.

However, voting is only one of many ways in which MPs wield influence over policies. The balance of power within parliamentary parties also determines which policies are voted on in the first place, because the leaders of governing legislative parties wield ‘negative agenda power.’ They use their control of the legislative agenda to enhance the party’s reputation and electoral prospects by preventing legislation from reaching the floor that would fail to command a majority within the party (Cox and McCubbins 2005, Cox, Heller, and McCubbins 2008). They seek above all to prevent being ‘rolled’: losing a vote thanks to some of their legislators voting against the government

with the opposition, who in a Westminster system like the UK, vote against the government on virtually every measure by convention. In addition to amending policies to prevent rebellions, a lot of discussion and in-fighting also occurs within parties to determine the actual content of policies. As a result, the balance of opinion within the party is crucial in determining which measures come onto the agenda, and a lack of actual votes lost in parliament is not necessarily indicative of low backbencher influence.

Qualitative evidence from Blair’s premiership confirms that the Labour leadership went to great lengths to prevent rebellions, that leaders and backbench MPs engaged in regular bargaining behind closed doors over key welfare reform measures, and that some welfare reform proposals were materially altered to placate concerned backbenchers. Quoting from anonymous interviews with MPs, Philip Cowley describes how the then Secretary of State for Social Security, Alistair Darling, approached negotiations over key welfare reforms in 1999 that extended the use of means testing:

> “Although he was keen to appear stern and unbending in public, in private Darling was more consultative and was willing to meet with potential rebels... MPs were seen individually by at least one Minister if they requested a meeting. Even some of those who did not request a meeting often found themselves having meetings with senior ministers in an effort to make them back the Government’s position. One concerned MP went to see Darling, who, in effect, asked him ‘what’s your price?’ Another organised a group of MPs (‘normally loyal people, disturbed at what the government was doing, and willing to negotiate’) who went to see Darling en masse. The negotiations were ‘tough, serious, prolonged and 11th hour, but I got everything I wanted.’”

Cowley (2002), pp. 53-4

Clearly, the balance of power within the parliamentary party mattered for welfare reforms both in determining the outcome of votes, and the content of the parliamentary agenda. But more broadly, it also affects the direction and tone of the party as a whole. For a start, Labour’s MPs have always played a key role in selecting the party’s leader, and usually enjoy at least some power to remove party leaders who they see as under-performing.\(^{11}\) This means that any leader would

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\(^{11}\) The rules have changed on a number of occasions. At present, the parliamentary Labour party chooses a
have great difficulty in pursuing policies that are strongly opposed by a majority of MPs. MPs also wield a lot of power in other parts of the party machinery, including on the party’s National Executive Committee which oversees the party’s governance, and in a wider sense, carry a great deal of authority in policy debates and enjoy widespread media coverage. This means that even if a new leader succeeds in changing official party policies, he or she still has to persuade MPs to endorse those policies in public, speaking out in favor of the leadership’s stance. Dissent from the backbenches is regularly featured in the media and can play a key role in turning the mood against particular policies. At its most extreme, such dissent can lead to MPs leaving the party altogether. Labour was seriously damaged in 1981 when 28 centrists from its 269 MPs left en masse to form a new party, the Social Democratic Party, in protest at the adoption of unilateral nuclear disarmament and leaving the EU in the party’s official platform.

The tribulations of Labour’s current leader, Jeremy Corbyn, neatly illustrate what can happen to a Labour leader who lacks the backing of its MPs. Despite enjoying overwhelming support from party members in his leadership election, the parliamentary party has been staunchly opposed to much of his agenda. The vast majority of Labour’s MPs are so opposed to him that they have refused to even serve in his shadow cabinet, preferring to sit on the back-benches. Many of them regularly criticize him in the media, calling for him to be replaced, and gain a lot of publicity for doing so. He is currently trying to change the party’s rules to make it easier for a left-wing leader to be elected in future, but cannot bring in the rule change because he does not command a majority at the party conference, where his back-bench MPs and their allies wield a lot of influence. Likewise, he has been unable to enact several of his pet policies, such as unilateral nuclear disarmament, due to lack of support from MPs. Perhaps his biggest debacle came in December 2015, when he tried to persuade his party to back his policy of non-intervention in foreign affairs by refusing to conduct airstrikes against ISIS in Syria. His MPs were so divided that he was forced to allow them a free vote, meaning that no instructions were issued by whips, a policy that is usually reserved only for shortlist of candidates, which is presented to the wider members for a vote. All candidates nominated by 15% of MPs make it to the ballot (this is what enabled Jeremy Corbyn’s victory in 2015, since party members overwhelmingly voted for him once he made it onto the ballot). Blair was elected in an ‘electoral college’ system where MPs, party members and affiliated trade unions had one third of the votes each). In addition, a leader can be challenged by another MP for the leadership if 20% of MPs vote for a contest.
issues of conscience’ such as gay rights, rather than matters of national defense. His own shadow Foreign Secretary, Hilary Benn, then made an impassioned speech against Corbyn’s position in the House of Commons, and was applauded for doing so by Conservative MPs.

The end result has been that Corbyn has some of the lowest public approval ratings ever seen for an opposition leader, and has been unable to make many meaningful changes to his own party or its platforms. Most commentators expect him to be replaced in the near future. Of course, there are unique circumstances that might make his situation less than perfectly comparable to Blair’s. For instance, the magnitude of his unpopularity with the public has surely made rebellious behavior from his MPs more likely, whereas Blair was extremely popular when first elected. Nonetheless, Corbyn does offer a glimpse of how difficult it is for a leader who is unable to command the support of his or her own parliamentary party to introduce controversial policies.

Internal dissent, or a lack of it, are also important because it determines what sort of rhetoric the public hears. In Corbyn’s case, the public clearly hears a very mixed set of messages about Labour and its leadership because even senior figures in the party are regularly willing to criticize party policies in the media and in parliament. In Blair’s case, though, there was remarkably little countervailing messaging from the rest of his party. Most spoke in favor of welfare reforms, and stopped using the sort of pro-welfare framing that was so prevalent in the 1980s. As I will explain in Chapter 5, this was particularly important for the long-term evolution of public opinion in the UK, because opinion change in response to elite rhetoric is much more likely to occur when the public hears only one side of the argument. Of course, under Blair, a minority of his MPs were highly critical and made their concerns known in the media. I am merely pointing out that in a counterfactual world like that under Corbyn, where a majority of MPs oppose the leadership and are not afraid to say so, the conditions for public opinion change would have been much less favorable.

Overall, I have argued here that there was nothing inevitable about Blair’s success in introducing welfare reforms. As Heffernan also concludes in his account of the Blair years, “the re-fashioning of Labour required the support of the parliamentary party” (Heffernan 2000, p. 20). Without its support, Blair could have been voted out of office, or been openly opposed by his own MPs in
public much more than he actually was. And he and his allies could never have pushed through reforms that were so controversial and divisive within the wider party. Compared to the experience of Corbyn, Blair actually faced a relatively compliant set of MPs who broadly endorsed his reforms. The media was so surprised by their cooperation that Labour’s MPs were often accused of being ‘spineless’ or overly eager to please the party leadership, a development that was quite remarkable given Labour’s history of inter-party strife (and its re-emergence in recent years). One of the key arguments of this thesis is that in fact, the parliamentary Labour Party was cooperative because Blair was fortunate to take charge at a time when the composition of its MPs was changing rapidly, and continued to change while he was in office: working-class MPs were replaced by careerists. He faced a particular set of MPs who were uniquely amenable to his changes, compared to the past. I now move on to discussing them.

3.5 Theory of Individual Legislators: Example

Having shown that the balance of power in the parliamentary party was crucial in Blair’s success, the key question is why so many MPs were willing to change in the direction favored by Blair and his allies. The answer, I will argue, is that the changes in the composition of Labour’s MPs discussed in the first chapter had a large impact on the stance of the average MP toward reforms, and the rhetoric they used. Working-class MPs, who opposed the policy changes for ideological reasons, were under-represented, and had declined as a proportion of the party. They were replaced by careerist MPs, who supported the reforms, and whose numbers grew very rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s.

I now begin developing a theory about why working-class and careerist MPs took very different positions on welfare reform. Precise coding rules that define the two groups are outlined in detail in the next chapter. For now, the important point is that these are two distinct types of politician. Working-class MPs come from manual or unskilled (blue-collar) professions, or trade unions rep-

12. While Blair and his allies certainly helped to push careerists into parliament by influencing selection contests, the trend towards careerists and away from working-class MPs clearly pre-dates his time in office, reflecting several broader trends discussed in the first chapter (see Figures 1.7 and ??). The trends have also continued since Blair left office, and help explain some of the difficulties faced by Jeremy Corbyn.
resenting those professions, while careerists have a white-collar background in politics and closely related fields, lacking any other meaningful professional experience. Because they are defined using the occupation they held before entering elected politics, 'working-class' and 'careerist' are mutually exclusive categories. To begin understanding why these groups are important, I will discuss two Labour MPs who are archetypal examples of each, Dennis Skinner and Caroline Flint.

Dennis Skinner is one of Britain's most famous far-left politicians, known for his fiery rhetoric and scornful derision of Conservative MPs. The Almanac of British politics describes him as "seemingly permanently angry ... the most defiant of Labour's hard left-wingers ... after 1997 he did not miss any major occasion for resistance to the Blair government, whether on lone parent benefits, threatened force against Iraq, or student grants" (Waller and Criddle 1999, p.101). Or as the Guardian newspaper puts it, he is "unique, part parliamentary court jester, and part leftwing crusader. Familiar throughout the nation and loathed and liked with equal passion within Westminster ... [he is] the unyielding, incorruptible, puritanical, abrasively proletarian conscience of the hard left." 13 What explains his opinions and rhetoric? One obvious explanation is his background. He was born in 1932 in a coal-mining area of Derbyshire, one of nine children of a coal-miner father who was made redundant during the 1926 General Strike. He left school himself at seventeen to work as a miner, spending twenty-one years working underground. His involvement in politics began through the National Union of Mineworkers, eventually rising to become President of the Derbyshire area union while still working as a miner. In 1964 he became a local Councillor for the Labour Party (a part-time elected position in local politics), and in 1970 successfully stood as MP for his home town of Bolsover. He remains an MP today, but has never held any ministerial office, nor appeared to have any interest in pursuing one.

Caroline Flint could not be more different. The Guardian has described her in the following terms: "ambition is the word that crops up most often in talking to those who have watched her at work ... only Blair himself has purer Blairite credentials. Flint not only supported the Iraq war but was so enthusiastic she went out to visit the troops. Years later, when other ministers would privately admit they had blundered into a quagmire, she would doggedly defend the adventure." 14

For the Almanac of British Politics, she is “emblematic of New Labour, a self-confessed super-loyalist who could not be more antithetical to the MP whose death created the vacancy in her seat, Martin Redmond, a bald, bearded ... locally born lorry driver. A vivacious combative Londoner, ... she was wheeled out with other hyper-loyalist women to defend the lone parent benefit cuts of December 1997” (Waller and Criddle 1999, pp. 262-3).

While Skinner’s biography reveals many life experiences that probably helped shape his hard-left views, Flint is a middle-class politician for whom politics has been a career since university. Her long and intense commitment to politics as a profession is likely to help explain her ambitiousness and loyalty to the party line, as she tried to move up the ladder, just like any other middle-class, white-collar profession. She grew up in London and attended the University of East Anglia, where she became involved in student politics, rising to a leadership position in the Labour Students organization. After university, she worked in a series of jobs that were connected to politics, giving her access to policymakers and contacts within the party, including working for the National Union of Students, and as a political officer in the Labour-affiliated GMB Trade Union, with which she had little professional connection. In 1997 she was elected as an MP for Don Valley in Northern England – which also happens to be a major coal-mining area – even though she is originally from London. She quickly rose within the Blair government, holding a number of senior ministerial roles including Minister for Employment and Minister for Europe.

The speech database underlying my analysis also reveals sharply contrasting tone and content in their rhetoric. Two speeches, made just two days apart in 1997, illustrate the difference. Both are on the topic of welfare-to-work. Defending the idea in the Commons on December 1st 1997, Flint implied that benefits are undesirable, wasteful, and discourage work, saying:

“...the best form of welfare, and the one preferred by the great majority of people, is work ... I am proud that New Labour is beginning to prioritise work over welfare and opportunity over waste.”
Notably, her language closely parallels that of Tony Blair, which was shown above. This is suggestive of loyalty to the party leadership. Meanwhile, on December 2nd 1997, Dennis Skinner attacked the rhetoric of MPs like Flint. He suggested that welfare recipients legitimately deserved to be helped, framing welfare as necessary and legitimate, or even as a viable alternative to paid work, saying:

"My honorable Friend talks about welfare to work . . . it is difficult for me to understand that kind of language. I have seven villages in my constituency where pit closures took place three or four years ago. One thousand young men, who hitherto had training schemes under British Coal, no longer have training schemes. Almost everybody is out of work in those pit villages. There is nowhere for those young men to go . . . I want Ministers to understand that there are areas of Britain, including mine, where the idea of work being available is laughable for many people."

These two biographical sketches highlight more general patterns that this work explores. Despite being from the same party, these two MPs arrived in the House of Commons with social and occupational backgrounds that could hardly have been more different. Once in parliament, they took equally divergent positions on welfare reform, and spoke in almost diametrically opposed ways. Plausibly, the distinctive life experiences, career goals and incentives of these two working-class and careerist MPs shaped their constrasting policy stances and choices of language. I now move on to explain why I conceptualize MPs using their occupational backgrounds, and then outline a theory explaining why these groups' behavior differs.

3.6 Conceptualizing MPs’ Backgrounds

The phrase ‘working-class’ is widely used and understood by most people, but its precise meaning has been debated extensively by sociologists, with an intense academic debate about how ‘class’ should be defined. It conjures up a host of associations, including differences in parental background, income, education, occupation, social status, behavior, and preferences for consumption and leisure activities. But while recognizing that class is a complex concept, following Nicholas Carnes’ and Noam Lupu’s pioneering work on the class background of legislators in the US and Latin America
(Carnes 2012, Carnes 2013, Carnes and Lupu 2012), I use ‘working-class’ to refer to a working-class occupational background. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, occupational background is often employed as a marker of class in studies of class-based voting, and appears to more accurately capture politically salient aspects of class than other potential definitions (G. Evans 1999, Goldthorpe 1999; Manza and Brooks 2008). Occupational background has also been used in almost all previous studies that have examined the changing class composition of the House of Commons (Mellors 1978, Norris and Levendusky 1995, Rush 2001, Cairney 2007).

The leading feasible alternative to using occupations would be educational background, on which data is also readily available for MPs. We might code those without a university education as working class, for instance. However, given the rapid expansion of higher education over the past few decades, there are many older people whom any reasonable person would consider middle-class, that nonetheless do not have a university education (Bartels 2008). Moreover, education has been shown to be a much less consistent predictor of political ideology and opinions than either occupation or income (Carnes 2013). A further possibility would be to look at the pre-politics incomes of MPs. However, while this could be an important marker of social class and economic position, it is impossible to collect consistent data on, or even impute, MPs’ salaries before politics. In any case, people’s occupational backgrounds are very strongly correlated with all other aspects of class, not only education, income and parental background, but also self-described class. Manual workers, for example, are overwhelmingly likely (and much more likely than those from other professions) to define themselves as working-class when asked in surveys (Hout 2008).

It is also very difficult, perhaps impossible, to collect detailed and consistent information on MPs’ parental and childhood backgrounds. Most politicians are reluctant to disclose what type of school they attended, for instance, while all politicians tend to paint themselves as coming from humble origins, because voters like working-class politicians (Carnes and Sadine 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2016). The one existing study on this, from the US, shows that parental and childhood background – unlike occupational background – has no impact on legislator behavior (Carnes

15. More technically, snapshots of income can often be an inferior marker of someone’s economic position than their occupation, which might better capture their permanent income. A trainee doctor, for example, might earn a salary similar to a senior manual worker, but the former clearly has much greater earnings potential over their lifetime.
and Sadine 2014). Nonetheless, while it could be interesting and useful to look at the impact of differences in childhood class backgrounds in the UK, this would be a different and separate question. Past work on early political socialization among voters shows that it can be conceptualized as occurring in two ways. First, there is socialization within the family, as parents influence their children’s subsequent political beliefs (Sears et al. 1980; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009), and second, there is socialization in young adulthood, as people leave the family home, and are exposed to new ideas during their “impressionable years” (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Jennings and Markus 1984; Sears and Funk 1999; Dinas 2013; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013).

This study focuses more on the second mechanism, because people’s occupations are an important site of political socialization after childhood: even a careerist from an impoverished family will have gone through profound changes after attending an elite university, moving to central London, and taking a middle-class, white-collar job in politics. Indeed, one important way in which working-class and careerist MPs differ is that, just as for working-class and middle-class voters, their prior occupations involve a distinctive set of class-based socialization processes that strongly affect ideological stances toward social policy. Importantly, the impact of occupational background also goes beyond such economic effects on MPs’ ideology. These occupations also affect the extent to which MPs are willing to behave in ways that go against their own ideologies, when such behavior may be necessary to win elections, gain promotion within parliament or curry favor with party leaders, as I explain below.

A final pertinent issue is that sociologists and political scientists have expressed skepticism that class matters as much now as it did in the past for a range of voters’ political behaviors, as class identities may have weakened, and voters have become better-educated and informed, leading them to cease making political decisions based on their class alone (Kingston 2000, Clarke et al. 2004). Most authors disagree, however, and find that when measured carefully, class continues to structure political decision-making (G. Evans 1999, Goldthorpe 1999, Manza and Brooks 2008, Evans and Tilley 2012). In any case, for the purposes of this study, most MPs went through political socialization processes at least a generation ago, when virtually all studies, including the skeptics, agree that class was a very important determinant of political behavior. I now discuss the
mechanisms of socialization in more detail.

3.7 Theory of Legislator Behavior

Here, I build a theory of relative legislator behavior emphasizing that the two groups behave differently for three reasons, which I discuss in turn:16

1. Occupational Socialization: the tendency of occupations to directly shape people’s ideologies and priorities.

2. Differential Recruitment: the tendency of people with certain traits and characteristics to enter particular professions to begin with.

3. Different Career Incentives faced by the two groups.

My conclusions, which are fleshed out below, can be summarized up front as follows. Working-class legislators have a higher ideological preference for welfare provision than careerist legislators. Careerist legislators are more concerned than working-class legislators with advancing their own political career. Because of their higher concern for their career, careerist legislators are more willing to take actions (such as voting, their choice of rhetoric, or in policy bargaining within the party) in response to external incentives like changes in the electorate, or to adopt strategies that help them advance their political career, and are more likely to be loyal to the party leadership. As a result, careerists have lower relative ideological support for welfare provision, and their ideologies are less important in determining their expressed support for welfare in the first place. This means that the eventual stance that careerist legislators take on welfare reform is dependent on context, including external incentives and the stance of the party leadership, whereas context matters less for working-class legislators.

In terms of classic models of party behavior, working-class legislators are more policy-seeking, while careerists are more office-seeking and vote-seeking (Strom 1990). Of course, working-class politicians are not immune from any tendency for electoral or career concerns to determine their actions, and careerists do not completely oppose welfare provision, or entirely ignore their ideologies. My theory makes predictions about each group’s behavior relative to the other, on average.

16. These mechanisms mirror the discussion in Adolph 2013, Ch.1
3.7.1 Occupational Socialization

Occupational socialization matters, first, because occupational background exerts an important influence on subsequent ideological beliefs. Almost all MPs in the UK enter office in their 30s and 40s, having first worked in a different setting. We know that for voters, economic and occupational experiences in early adulthood leave a lasting impression on political preferences, which are malleable when young but tend to change less as people age (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Jennings and Markus 1984; Sears and Funk 1999; Dinas 2013; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; O’Grady 2017). We would therefore expect that the occupation held by an MP will affect the way they approach political issues later in life, when in office.

In particular, being from a working-class occupation shapes legislators’ ideologies because it shapes their material interests. Blue-collar workers are more likely to have had low incomes and insecure employment, particularly in the last few decades, where many have lived through de-industrialization. They tend to rely more on the welfare state at some point, increasing their backing for it. Social class, occupation, income and unemployment risk are all very strong predictors of support for welfare provision amongst voters (Iversen and Soskice 2001, Svalfors 2006, Jaeger 2006, Finseraas 2009, Rehm 2009, Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). Working-class legislators, therefore, are just like working-class voters: they will be more ideologically opposed to reforms that reduce the generosity or coverage of benefits. Careerist legislators, on the other hand, have by definition only ever worked in middle-class, white-collar professions. Like middle-class voters, they are less likely to have needed to rely on benefits than working-class people, and will therefore have lower ideological support for welfare provision, making them less likely to support it.

This theory is consistent with public opinion data on British citizens over the past thirty years, as demonstrated in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. These show the results of multilevel models predicting support for redistribution and opposition to unemployment benefits among respondents to the British Social Attitudes Survey. The models include an array of standard individual-level predictors of support for social policy, including age, gender, employment status, education and occupational class. Occupations are divided into five categories that have been standardly used for decades by the Office of National Statistics to characterize British peoples’ occupational backgrounds: professional
Figure 3.1: Occupational Class and Support for Redistribution in the British Public, 1985-2014
Figure 3.2: Occupational Class and Opposition to Unemployment Benefits in the British Public, 1985-2014
(such as doctors, lawyers and business executives), intermediate (skilled white-collar jobs such as teachers and social workers), skilled non-manual (such as clerks and typists), skilled manual (such as electricians and toolmakers), and partly-skilled (such as coal miners and workers on factory assembly lines). Careerist MPs would be classified as intermediate, with the exception of a few who reached senior roles before office and would be classed as professional. Working-class MPs would be classified as either skilled manual or partly-skilled.

The diagrams show coefficients and associated 95% confidence intervals for the estimated impact of professional background, with ‘skilled non-manual’ as the omitted category in the regressions. In addition, the occupational coefficients were allowed to vary by year over the course of the data. For ease of interpretation, these are linear probability models: responses in both cases are on five-point scales, where higher numbers indicate support for redistribution or opposition to unemployment benefits, respectively. The results show that support for redistribution and unemployment benefits in the British public is polarized along occupational lines in the way that my theory predicts: working-class people (manual workers) have higher support for redistribution and lower opposition to unemployment benefits, while intermediate and professional workers are the opposite. Over time, as discussed in the introduction, there have been some rises in opposition to benefits and falls in support for redistribution. Nonetheless, even in recent years, there is still substantial polarization by occupational class, and as discussed above, most MPs went through their socialization experiences before the BSAS even began its regular polling in the mid-1980s. This evidence suggests the plausibility of MPs’ occupational backgrounds affecting their ideological stance on welfare.

Occupational socialization also helps determine which groups of people legislators instinctively empathize with, or want to speak on behalf of in parliament. Working class legislators’ roots in blue-collar workplaces have long-lasting effects. Class-based attitudes crystallize and strengthen through repeated interaction with people that share similar backgrounds and material interests, as well as through membership in institutions rooted in workplaces such as trade unions. The same process leads to sympathy for, and affinity with, the types of people working in blue-collar professions (Clarke et al. 2004, Weeden and Grusky 2005, Manza and Brooks 2008). This means that legislators who are former manual workers will form a long-lasting altruistic identification with
other working-class people, raising their ideological support for welfare policies that help them. Indeed, MPs themselves say exactly this in the speeches that are used in this paper to measure their policy positions. One example comes from Eric Clarke MP, a former coal miner. Here, he is talking on February 27th 1997 about a Bill that would cut ('claw back') disability payments made to former miners and their families:

“Coming from a background of industry, especially the mining industry... I spent 26 years underground - I do not consider people concerned with the Bill to be numbers. They are colleagues, friends, and even relations. Many have passed away. When such people come to my surgeries, the disgust and anger expressed - especially by friends and loved ones - about the clawback makes me very angry, too.”

As the number of working-class MPS declined, so too did these sorts of rhetorical class-based appeals on behalf of the users of welfare policies.

In addition to shaping material interests and group loyalties, occupations shape people’s preferences in more subtle ways, due to the types of task structures and power relations that workers are enmeshed in. People who have a substantial amount of autonomy in their professional life may come to develop libertarian leanings, favoring individualistic over collectivist political policies. Managers and those used to wielding power over others, as well as workers in hierarchical business settings where rewards are unequal and they are motivated by profit-sharing and incentive schemes, may come to see unequal rewards as justified, and profit-maximization as a legitimate and important goal (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). This will lead workers in manual trades and other blue-collar settings to be more favorable to redistributive policies than those who worked in a hierarchical white-collar environment.

Careerist legislators lack these socialization experiences enjoyed by working-class legislators, lowering their relative ideological support for welfare. Their relative lack of instinctive affinity with the users of welfare systems will also make them less likely to speak out for them in parliament. Instead, they go through different socialization processes in their jobs. Having begun their working careers around campaigners, pollsters, party staff and others who are invested in electoral success, they will come to view winning elections as an important goal in its own right, and an intrinsic
part of their job. Having been surrounded by people who are invested in politics as a career, they too will start to see it as a career with a structured trajectory like any other white-collar profession, and will strive to reach high office. And finally, loyalty to the party leadership in the House of Commons involves deeply-ingrained behavioral norms (Crowe 1983, Crowe 1986). MPs’ occupational backgrounds will powerfully shape relative adherence to these norms, through socialization. Having worked closely with the party leadership, loyalty will be more ingrained for careerist MPs than for other groups.

3.7.2 Other Mechanisms

The second mechanism, differential recruitment, has the same ultimate implications for legislators’ stances on welfare reform. In addition to occupations directly shaping preferences, particular types of people will be more likely to enter these professions to begin with (Weeden and Grusky 2005, Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). Intuitively, people who are more intrinsically politically ambitious, loyal to the party leadership, and invested in a political career are more likely to enter careerist occupations (Goplerud 2015). As discussed in the first Chapter, these now provide by far the most efficient route into Westminster and subsequent ministerial office.

Third, their choice of career alters the subsequent incentives faced by careerists. Narrowing down their career options at a young age compared to MPs from other professions heightens the importance of career progression for them, since they have not already achieved professional distinction in any other field: “through politics they earn their money, achieve their status in society and maintain their social security. Their career at Westminster is the professional center of their lives” (Jun 2003, p. 173). The electoral success of themselves and their party also becomes more important, because winning elections is necessary for them to advance to ministerial office. One reason why they will particularly value ministerial office is that, with fewer outside professional options, there are strong monetary payoffs to being a minister, both while in parliament (they enjoy substantially higher salaries than other MPs), as well as after leaving politics, since ministers are particularly likely to proceed to lucrative opportunities such as company directorships and tend to have higher lifetime wealth than non-ministers (Eggers and Hainmueller 2009, Gonzalez-Bailon,
Thus careerist MPs will be more likely to take actions that help their party achieve electoral success and help their own career prospects, even when this clashes with their own ideological preferences. Once career progression becomes a priority, loyalty to the party leadership becomes more important, too, in a parliamentary system like the UK, because leaders control access to ministerial jobs (Benedetto and Hix 2007). Parties that appear united rather than divided are also more popular with voters (Cox and McCubbins 2007), meaning that legislators who value re-election should be more willing to invest in the party brand through acquiescence with the leadership.

Overall, careerists’ support for welfare depends on whether such support is consistent with electoral success and career advancement, including being favored by the party leadership. The exact stance that careerists take on welfare reform and the precise language that they choose to use should therefore be more contingent, and more dependent on contextual factors, than is the case for working-class MPs. During the period studied here, such factors clearly pointed in favor of supporting welfare reform and speaking out in support of it. As explained above, Blair and his allies in the party leadership had become convinced that policies like welfare reform were necessary for Labour to be elected, due to structural changes in the electorate; the policies also represented a perfect opportunity to adopt rhetoric that sided the Labour party with middle-class taxpayers. And once these policies were adopted by the party leadership, any careerist MPs wanting to advance to high office under Blair needed to show their support for them. In other words, careerists faced a ‘perfect storm’ where all factors pointed to them supporting welfare reform. There could be other circumstances, particularly under more left-wing leadership such as Jeremy Corbyn, where electoral and short-term career incentives might point in opposite directions. Loyalty to the party leadership might help secure promotion, but the leadership’s policy position may be too extreme to win elections. This was not the case under Tony Blair, however.

Finally, my theory also makes predictions about the ‘middle’ category of legislators, who are neither careerist nor working-class, and were shown in the first Chapter divided into three categories: professionals (primarily doctors, lawyers, journalists and academics), public sector workers, and private-sector workers. Considering these MPs first as a whole, like careerists, they lack the occu-
pational socialization experiences of working-class MPs, lowering their relative ideological support for benefits provision. However, they also lack the socialization experiences, intrinsic characteristics and career incentives of careerists, lowering their relative concern for electoral success, career progression, and loyalty to the leadership. Therefore, their support for welfare reform is predicted to fall between working-class and careerist MPs.

Based on this theory, the key hypotheses for testing are that, relative to the middle category of white-collar professional MPs, working-class legislators are more likely to defend the traditional system of benefits, whereas careerists are more likely to emphasize the need for welfare reform. In addition, careerists should be more likely than working-class MPs to shift their position toward welfare reform after the accession of Tony Blair to the Labour leadership. But if my theory is correct, we should also observe some differences between the professional, public-sector and private-sector MPs. It seems very plausible that former public sector workers would be the least willing of the three ‘middle’ groups to go along with Blair’s reforms. Their earnings are likely to have been lower, raising their support for welfare provision, and they tend to benefit a lot from the welfare state, not least because they are often employed in administering it. This gives them them both ideological and self-interested motives to support welfare provision (Gingrich and Hauserman 2015). Public sector workers are heavily unionized in the UK, too, and public sector unions may also affect their members’ preferences. It would also make sense if MPs from private sector backgrounds were the most willing to endorse Blair’s reforms, since in the general population, these groups are also less supportive of welfare and more broadly economically conservative. These theoretical intuitions are also tested in Chapter 4.

3.8 Past Literature on Legislators’ Social Backgrounds

This suggests that the changing representation of different social groups mattered not only for descriptive representation, but also for substantive representation. It altered which policies and interests were represented when it came to welfare reform. These conclusions are by no means obvious, based on the previous literature, not least because there have been very few studies examining the impact of politicians’ social backgrounds. We know a relatively large amount about
the impacts of legislators’ gender, in part because it is easy to identify policy areas where women have distinctive interests, and also because we can readily identify whether a legislator is male or female, but it is more challenging to both conceptualize and measure their social backgrounds. It turns out that across the world, female legislators are much more likely to vote for and initiate legislative action on policies such as childcare and maternity leave (Swers 1998; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Dodson 2006), and they show greater support for such policies in surveys (Norris 1996; Wangnerud 2000; Poggione 2004). As a result, a greater female presence in legislatures is associated with the greater adoption of female-friendly policies (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Bratton and Ray 2002; Kittilson 2008).

When it comes to legislators’ social and occupational backgrounds, though, evidence is more scant. While Alexiadou (2015) convincingly shows that the backgrounds of government ministers responsible for welfare programs affect their behavior, she does not examine legislators in general. In addition, a handful of recent studies in the US and Latin America offer clear evidence that legislators from different occupational backgrounds vote and sponsor bills in very different ways (Carnes 2012, 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2012). But we know strikingly little about the political impact of the changing occupational and social backgrounds of ordinary legislators in European democracies, where declines in working-class representation have been particularly stark, as they were in the UK. There has been a lot of descriptive research on how the backgrounds of British MPs are changing (including Mellors 1978, Rush 2001, Jun 2003, and Cairney 2007), but studies examining their political impact have only focused on how they affect voters. The British public prefers poorer and working-class politicians to those with wealth (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2016), and the declining representation of working-class people increases voters’ alienation from political elites, lowering turnout (Heath 2016). Whether or not different types of politicians affect policy remains under-studied, though.

The only previous study examining the policy impact of British MPs’ social backgrounds is Norris and Levendusky (1995). Based on evidence from anonymous surveys of MPs, they find that occupational background had no effect on their political values, their policy priorities, or the priority they placed on different tasks as a legislator. Putting the theoretical case against my
theory, they say that:

"numerous studies counting the social background of MPs may indicate availability rather than significance of these data. Structural variables, which are commonplace explanations of mass political behavior, may provide an inadequate guide to the beliefs and actions of the elite. Politicians may acquire their values from a lifetime's experience working within parties and local community, debating issues with colleagues at Westminster, and interacting with officials and interest groups ... so that it is hard to discern the more distant imprint of their social origins."


The theoretical argument that I have built in this chapter suggests that such arguments miss important facts about the socialization of MPs. Importantly though, Norris and Levendusky's findings are also likely to be an artefact of their chosen dependent variable. Looking again at their survey evidence, it appears that the questions asked are not fine-grained enough to make strong ideological distinctions between members of the same party. Many of the questions featured include general statements of principle, on which members of the same party are likely to largely agree. Consistent with this, most of the variation in their findings is between MPs of different parties. Indeed, Cowley (2002) analyzes the same survey results for Labour MPs only, and shows that on economic questions, all of them cluster at the left-most response options. For example, one question asks MPs to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 implies that the MP exclusively prioritizes fighting unemployment over inflation, and 10 the opposite. All Labour MPs are clustered between 1 and 4 only.

Norris and Levendusky made the decision to use surveys not because they were unaware of their flaws, but because it is exceptionally difficult to measure intra-party differences in a country like the UK. Party discipline with voting is very high, and rebellious voting behavior among MPs is rare, making it impossible to measure MPs' general policy stances with their voting records, unlike in countries like the US where legislators enjoy a lot of autonomy over voting. Indeed, this explains why Norris and Levendusky's is the only previous study looking at the political impact of MPs' occupational backgrounds. Calling descriptive representation "representation as presence", 110
Hazan and Rahat succinctly explain the issue in their comparative book on intra-party conflict: “most studies tend to use representation as presence because it is the cheaper, easier, and more accessible way to operationalize the concept. It is easier to count men and women than to assess the ideological position of each representative” (Hazan and Rahat 2010, p.109)

There have been attempts in the UK to examine intra-party differences using alternative measures. For example, some studies have shown that background characteristics of MPs do have some impact on voting on the rare occasions where there are so-called ‘free votes’ (usually on issues of conscience such as the death penalty or gay rights, where party whips do not issue voting instructions) or significant rebellions by back-bench MPs against the party. But such occasions are vanishingly rare for any political issues — let alone for welfare issues — and even in free votes, party discipline remains very high (Hibbing and Marsh 1987, Cowley and Stuart 1997, Cowley 2002). That makes it impossible to draw general conclusions about intra-party differences between MPs on welfare issues from parliamentary voting. Other studies have used signatures on ‘early day motions”, a form of non-binding statement that MPs can circulate and sign, often used to express dissent without voting against party lines. They have been used to show that intra-party cohesion is weaker than is implied by voting records alone, to scale MPs from the same party in ideological space, and to show that female Labour MPs are more attentive to women’s issues than their male counterparts (Franklin and Tappin 1977, Leece and Berrington 1977, Childs and Withey 2004, Bailey and Nason 2008, Kellerman 2012). The downsides of these measures, though, are that early day motions are poorly publicized in the media, so that they have little political impact outside of the chamber, and they are rarely signed by government ministers, making it impossible to compare ministers and back-benchers.

As we will see in the next Chapter, though, British MPs enjoy comparatively high autonomy to speak as they choose (Proksch and Slapin 2012), meaning that it is reasonable to look at intra-party differences in rhetoric. That is the approach taken in this study, the methodology of which will now be outlined. The next Chapter will show that, unlike with surveys of MPs, their rhetoric reveals important, large and systematic differences by occupational background.
Chapter 4

Changes in MPs' Backgrounds and their Support for Welfare Reform

To test the theory outlined at the end of Chapter 3, I shift the focus of my analysis from aggregate rhetoric to the rhetoric of individual MPs. Much of this Chapter makes use of a scale of Labour MPs produced by a computational algorithm known as Wordscores. MPs' rhetoric is used to place them on a continuous scale, based on their rhetoric about welfare reform. One end of the scale represents MPs who most strongly used language emphasizing poverty and need, and the other features those who instead emphasized the prevalence of fraud, and the need to reform the system. This allows me to see which MPs went along with Labour's overall shift in rhetoric, and which did not. The key questions are whether working-class MPs emphasize traditional welfare provision more than careerists, and whether careerists show stronger support for reform. At the end of the Chapter, I also look at other occupational groups, such as former public-sector employees. The construction and validation of the scale are explained in detail in a methodological appendix to this Chapter. As in Chapter 2, readers who are less interested in technical details could skip this without too much loss of understanding.

The data for MPs was split into two periods (1987-1994 and 1994-2007) before and after the accession of Tony Blair to the Labour leadership.穆 MPs are represented in one or both periods by

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1. I start in 1994 when Blair became leader, rather than in 1997 when he became Prime Minister, because many of Labour's important policies, including on welfare reform, began to be adopted before the 1997 election (Clasen
a single document, consisting of all speeches they made about welfare in that time. MPs appearing in both periods feature as two separate documents, although many only feature in one period, depending on when they were in office or when they spoke on welfare issues. This allows for two different sets of tests of my theory to be carried out. First, I look at just the second period, during Tony Blair’s time in office, making cross-sectional comparisons between different types of MPs. Second, I look at change over time, examining which types of MPs switched most strongly toward the leadership’s position over time. This provides a particularly direct test of my theory, because if it is correct, careerist MPs should have been much more likely to do so than other MPs. At the end of the Chapter, I also discuss further results that extend the scales for the third period, from 2007-2015, when Labour shifted back slightly in favor of redistribution, as Chapter 2 showed. Further corroborating my empirical framework, I show that this shift back slightly to the left was driven largely by careerist MPs, who we would expect to be more willing to follow changes in their new leaders’ positions.

4.1 Speech-making in the House of Commons

The estimated scaled positions that I constructed for MPs serve a dual purpose. Clearly, they demonstrate purely rhetorical differences between MPs, showing who used different types of language. But they also provide insight into differences in MPs’ policy positions, because MPs use their speeches to express their opinions on policy. To see why speeches reveal intra-party differences, we we need to understand how and why speeches are made in the House of Commons. In contrast to some countries where parties exert strong control over speeches, MPs in the UK have almost complete freedom to decide which debates to try to speak in. Party leaders have no formal mechanisms of any kind to prevent particular MPs from speaking, or to determine the content of their speeches. Instead, an MP who wishes to speak in a debate simply has to attend that debate, and once in attendance, indicate a willingness to speak by signalling to the Speaker or one of the Deputy Speakers, who preside over debates. These offices are non-partisan, and are elected by MPs in a free vote. Party leaders are powerless to influence their decisions. As a result, British
backbenchers speak relatively often, and backbenchers who are ideologically distant from leaders are actually more likely to speak than those who are ideologically close (Proksch and Slapin 2012, 2015).

This means that the changes in rhetoric from the Labour party that I have documented cannot be explained by party leaders exercising strong control over speakers. They did not simply get to choose sycophantic MPs who emphasized the party line. Instead, MPs must have chosen to make speeches that were less supportive of the traditional welfare system than in the past. In turn, this begs the prior questions of why, in general, MPs choose to speak in the Commons, and what influences the content of their speeches. Around the world, it turns out that parliamentary speeches are rarely useful for influencing other politicians within the chamber. After all, politicians tend to hold strong political opinions, and are well-versed on the strengths of proposed policies. Instead, speeches are primarily aimed at those outside the chamber, informing and influencing voters and interest groups of the merits of different policies, often via media coverage. Within the chamber, speeches help to advance legislators’ own careers by providing them with a platform to demonstrate their skills (Austen-Smith 1990, Maltzman and Sigelman 1996, Proksch and Slapin 2012). As a result, the speeches that I am considering in this work will have been used to:

1. Advance policy positions that the MP personally supports for ideological reasons.

2. Advance policy positions that the MP believes are necessary to secure re-election, regardless of their own preferences. This may be because the MP perceives that the party as a whole will be more popular if it is associated with a particular policy, or because they believe that doing so will aid their own electoral prospects in their constituency.

3. Draw attention to themselves, signalling their political abilities to party leaders and journalists. They can use speeches to enhance their prospects of being promoted to ministerial office, or if already a minister, to a more senior role.

This means that speeches in the House of Commons provide a window into both the ideological beliefs of MPs, and their electoral and career strategies. They provide an ideal way to reveal differences in positions between careerist and working-class politicians, who by definition differ in
the priority they place on electoral and career concerns, versus their own ideology. In line with this view, past studies that use speeches to scale legislators have often found that a single ideological dimension is not sufficient to explain variation in parliamentary speech (Proksch and Slapin 2009, Beauchamp 2012, Kim, Londregan, and Ratkovic 2017). Notably, the analysis of speeches differs from the analysis of voting. As in much of Europe, party cohesion over votes is exceptionally strong, and it is extremely rare for MPs to vote against the party line. Studying speeches, therefore, helps us understand variation amongst MPs in a way that could not be achieved with voting data.

Indeed, speeches can be an important means for MPs to express their own ideological views, even for MPs who usually vote with their party. It turns out to be relatively common for MPs to vote in line with their party, but at the same use a speech in the relevant debate to express reservations about their vote (Cowley 2002). Some older survey evidence showed that senior party leaders (frontbenchers) regard making a critical speech in the House as only the fifth most serious out of a possible seven rebellious things an MP can do, less so than making a critical speech outside the house, writing a critical article in the press, abstaining in a vote, or voting against the party line (Crowe 1983). This means that speeches give some sense of the positions that MPs take behind closed doors in intra-party bargaining, which was discussed in Chapter 3.

Other features of the UK also make it a good place to look for intra-party differences and to test my theory. Its centralized, ‘responsible party government’ system means that MPs’ districts (constituencies) play a limited role in determining their actions. Voters pay more attention to the stances of national parties when voting, and distinctive individual patterns of behavior, which might be thought to appeal to voters in a legislator’s constituency, are rarely rewarded or punished (Pattie, Fieldhouse, and Johnston 1994, Vivyan and Wagner 2012). Because of this, confounding that could result from working-class MPs representing poorer constituencies is much less of a concern than it might be in other cases. Even so, I am careful to account for the possible influence of constituencies in the estimation below.
4.2 The meanings of Class and Careerism

The first step in comprehensively testing my theory involved collecting and using detailed biographical information on Labour’s MPs over the period 1987-2015. This comes primarily from a preliminary dataset developed by Jennifer Hudson and Rosie Campbell, who are in the process of creating a database of information about every British MP and election candidate since 1945. Where gaps existed in their data, it was supplemented with publicly available biographies from the Almanacs of British Politics (Waller and Criddle 1996, Waller and Criddle 1999) as well as newspaper obituaries.

The following specific coding scheme was used to classify all MPs in my sample. An MP was coded as working-class if:

1. They were a manual or manufacturing worker before entering politics, including occupations such as factory workers, technicians, electricians, railway workers or coal miners; or

2. They worked in another unskilled, non-graduate profession, such as a call-center worker, typist, clerk, care worker or waitress; or

3. They worked full-time for a trade union representing manual, blue-collar or otherwise unskilled non-graduate workers.

The definition of a working-class profession is deliberately made as wide as possible, to account for the fact that there have been major changes in the general structure of occupations in the UK. Employment in manufacturing and manual occupations has declined over time, while employment in low-end services jobs such as call-center operators has increased. The aim is to capture people who began their working lives toward the bottom of the economic ladder, regardless of which professions are most prevalent in its lowest rungs at any given time. In addition, restricting our attention to manual workers risks introducing a male bias to the coding, potentially failing to capture working-class women who are far less likely to have been employed in manual work. The occupation used is the occupation immediately before the person entered electoral politics, following other studies of the UK such as Norris and Levendusky (1995). One additional technical difference between my

2. I wish to thank them for providing early access to their data.
scheme and other previous studies of British political careers such as Cairney (2007) and Rush (2001) is that I use the occupation before entering any form of politics. Many Labour MPs serve as local Councillors before rising to be an MP. Since the aim is to capture socialization processes that occur before the start of a political career, it does not make sense to simply code Councillors as ‘politicians’ before they became MPs.

It is usually possible to re-construct MPs’ full occupational histories, and it turns out to be very rare for them to have had more than one distinct profession beforehand. The most common occupational change is from a normal job into being a full-time trade union representative, since the Labour party has very strong links with the union movement. This is captured in the scheme above, since anyone who moved from a working-class occupation into a union representing that same occupation is coded as working-class. Even so, these people spent much more of their prior working lives in their occupation than in the union representing it. MPs who previously worked for white-collar unions such as the National Union of Teachers were not coded as working-class, and nor were MPs with university degrees who went on to work for general trade unions (with which they had no occupational connection) in political roles, since these are effectively part of the beginning of a full-time political career, rather than roles in which people will be socialized into class-specific ideological beliefs.

Careerist MPs are also defined using the occupations they held before entering politics. I define careerists as MPs who have almost no meaningful professional experience outside of politics itself or what Cairney (2007) terms “instrumental” or “stepping-stone” occupations that represent the beginning of a political career in all but name. They enable prospective MPs to gain contacts in the party as well as the skills necessary for the role, such as public speaking, campaigning and lobbying.  

3 Note that I do not include what Cairney (2007) terms “politics-facilitating professions”, notably law and journalism. These are also quite prevalent amongst Labour MPs, and do help provide some skills, such as public speaking, that are useful in politics. However, they differ crucially from “stepping-stone” professions in that they provoke a viable alternative career should the MP lose their seat, and do not involve the same socialization processes as careerist occupations. They also represent a much less efficient route into elected office, because they do not allow the holder to gain nearly as many contacts within the Labour party. The second condition applies to only a small handful of cases. One example is Douglas Alexander, who worked as a researcher and speechwriter for Gordon Brown immediately after graduating, and then worked as a lawyer for three years (during which he first attempted to become an MP, contesting and losing a by-election), then becoming an MP at the age of 29 on his second attempt. While his profession immediately preceding political office was a lawyer, he was clearly pursuing high political office right from the time of graduation. By any reasonable definition, he is therefore a ‘careerist’ in my sense of the term.
They are now widely recognized as the most common and easy route into elected national office, from which becoming an MP is a natural career progression. For example, one-fifth of employees at the Labour party headquarters were willing to admit in a survey that they planned to stand for election as an MP, and almost one-third planned to stand as Local Councillors (Fisher and Webb 2003). The following exact coding scheme was adopted, classifying an MP as careerist if:

1. Immediately before entering politics they worked for the Labour party, or as a political adviser to MPs and Ministers, as a campaigner in an NGO or pressure groups where their work involved regular contact with government, as a researcher at a think tank, as a lobbyist or PR executive linked to politics, or in a political role at a Labour-affiliated trade union with which the MP had no professional connection; and

2. They had no more than five years of work experience in any other profession, in their twenties.

In practice, despite the variety of “stepping-stone” careers, a quick perusal of the biographies of MPs who were classified as careerist would lead any observer to recognize them as a distinct type of politician. They all share a number of key characteristics. In particular, they are conventionally middle-class, having attended university (almost always majoring in politics). A study conducted during the period considered here found that 71% of employees of the Labour party central office were university graduates, and that they were much more middle-class than members of the party as a whole (Fisher and Webb 2003). Almost all careerists were also involved in student politics at university, and a number held leadership positions in either the National Union of Students or the Student Labour Party. After university, they moved quickly into jobs that helped them continue their political careers. Many pursued being an MP since their twenties, standing unsuccessfully for parliament one or more times before gaining a seat, and were also elected Local Councillors before entering the Commons. They have, in other words, spent almost all of their adult lives relentlessly pursuing national elected office.
4.3 Empirical Results

My creation of files for individual MPs, which is described in more detail in the methodological appendix to this Chapter, resulted in a total of 324 documents: 123 for the period 1987-1994, and 201 for the 1994-2007. 67 MPs appear in both periods. I used an algorithm known as Wordscores to scale all of the MP-documents in a single continuous space, from least supportive of reforms to most opposed. The appendix explains its construction and carefully validates it. There, I also compare my sample to the whole population of MPs; differences are very small.

4.3.1 Changes Pre- and Post-Blair

Figure 4.1 shows initial results by splitting the estimated scale in two, showing distributions of estimated positions for MPs in 1987-1994 and 1994-2007 respectively. The left end contains MPs who were most supportive of the traditional system of benefits and its recipients, while the right side contains MPs who most favored reform. The average MP was more pro-reform in the second period compared to the first, reflecting Labour’s shift over time that was documented in Chapter 2. There are several other interesting features of this data. First, we can see that MPs in the first period were more homogenous in their language (i.e., the variance is lower). For 1994-2007, MPs’ positions show greater variance, as well as a pronounced right skew: the typical MP was more likely to be located at the pro-reform end of the spectrum. At the pro-welfare end in the second period were a number of MPs who continued to use language that was typical of the first period. They did not go along with the general trend toward more critical language. There were no MPs in the first period who sounded like the right-most MPs in the second period, but the converse is not true: some MPs in the second period continued to be very supportive of the traditional system of benefits. This variation is what we aim to explain here: what explains why some MPs used reform/fraud frames in the second period, while others did not?

Now, I investigate in detail whether MPs’ occupational backgrounds affect their positions, starting with bivariate relationships. There are, of course, a number of other characteristics likely to be correlated with MPs’ former occupations and their positions on welfare reform, including other personal characteristics, and the economic position and electoral competitiveness of their
districts. To identify the effect of MPs' backgrounds in the presence of these other influences, the ideal experiment would involve randomly assigning different social backgrounds (for example being working-class) to a set of Labour MPs at some point in time, and then observing their subsequent behavior in office. This would ensure that, in expectation, treated and untreated groups were alike, both in terms of their characteristics and the type of seat they represent. Of course this is impossible in reality, and therefore selection into treatment in my sample is likely be non-random. To account for this, I adjust for observable covariates and then use a number of additional tests to rule out the influence of other factors. At each point, I carefully lay out the assumptions being made that allow me to approximate, as much as possible, the ideal experiment.
4.3.2 Bivariate Relationships

The analysis begins by looking at cross-sectional relationships in the second period, when Labour shifted in favour of reform. Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of estimated scores in the second period for working-class MPs, careerist MPs, and others. As expected, the average working-class MP used more poverty/need rhetoric, while careerist MPs used more reform/fraud rhetoric. There is variance in both groups, but only a small number of working-class MPs used anti-welfare frames, and even fewer careerists used pro-welfare frames.

Figure 4.2: Distributions of Estimated Wordscores Positions for Groups of Labour MPs, 1994-2007

Reflecting these patterns, the top two rows of Figure 4.3 show differences in means between each group of MPs and all other MPs, with 95% confidence intervals. The estimated relationships between being working-class or careerist, and MPs’ positions, are in the expected directions (-0.42
for working-class, 0.33 for careerist). These are large: the range of estimated positions in the period is 1.89: being working-class is associated with being one-quarter more toward the pro-welfare end of the scale, while being careerist is associated with being more than one-sixth further toward the anti-welfare end.

Figure 4.3: Estimated Relationships between Occupational Background and Labour MPs' Positions on Welfare Reform, 1994-2007

Note: Charts show differences in means between the relevant group and all other MPs, with associated 95% confidence intervals

4.3.3 Other Personal Characteristics of MPs

Working-class and careerist MPs may be distinctive in other ways that also affect their position on welfare reform. It was possible to measure four important and relevant background variables for all MPs in the sample: age (measured by year of birth), sex, race, and whether or not the MP received a university education. As with MPs' occupations, most of the data come from the dataset collected by Jennifer Hudson and Rosie Campbell, supplemented with biographical
information from the Almanacs of British Politics. Past literature shows that older people, women and ethnic minorities tend to be more supportive of welfare programs, in part because they are more likely to be beneficiaries (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006, Busemeyer, Goerres, and Weschle 2009). Low education may lead to stronger preferences for welfare programs because it lowers lifetime earnings. In addition, as European politics has become increasingly aligned along two dimensions, those with higher education tend to be more socially liberal and pro-immigration, which can also affect support for social policy (Hakhverdian 2015).

These variables capture the main observable differences between Labour MPs, who are remarkably similar to each other in most other ways. For instance, although I cannot capture pre-politics earnings, almost none come from high-paying careers such as finance or business. I begin the analysis by displaying balance statistics in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 for these four variables and for both ‘treatments’. The first table looks at MPs appearing in the second period of my data, and the second at those appearing in both periods. In each case, I compare the treated group to all other MPs. Working-class and careerist MPs turn out to be distinctive in their background characteristics, particularly in the second period, when age, sex and education all show statistically significant differences. Differences are a little smaller and less significant for MPs appearing in both periods.

Working-class MPs were substantially older, and only a tiny handful were female. Less than one-third in the second period were university-educated, compared to almost 90% of all other MPs, and for those in both periods, just 16% went to university. Only two of the 201 MPs appearing in the second period were black – Diane Abbott and Paul Boateng – both of whom are neither working-class nor careerist, with only Diane Abbott appearing in both periods. All but one of the other MPs were white (one was Asian): Labour's MPs as a whole were remarkably racially homogenous during the period being studied. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there are no significant racial differences between treated and untreated groups. Careerist MPs, meanwhile, were much younger than other MPs, were more likely to be female, and were almost all university-educated.

There are two ways to interpret these findings. One is to view these other characteristics as 

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4. University-educated working-class MPs almost all attended university later in life, often part-time during their period as a manual worker or while subsequently working for a trade union representing their manual trade. An example is Kevin Barron, MP for Rother Valley, who began working as a coal miner in 1962, but later gained a diploma from Sheffield University in 1977 while working for the National Union of Mineworkers.
Table 4.1: Balance Statistics for Working-Class and Careerist MPs in Second Period

(a) Working-Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treated</th>
<th>Untreated</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of Birth (mean)</td>
<td>1940.9</td>
<td>1949.4</td>
<td>-8.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>-25.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University-Educated</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>-57.4**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) Careerist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treated</th>
<th>Untreated</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of Birth (mean)</td>
<td>1956.2</td>
<td>1946.3</td>
<td>9.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>17.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University-Educated</td>
<td>94.7%</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
<td>18.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = significant at 10% level, ** = significant at 5% level

Table 4.2: Balance Statistics for Working-Class and Careerist MPs Appearing in both Periods

(a) Working-Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treated</th>
<th>Untreated</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of Birth (mean)</td>
<td>1939.6</td>
<td>1942.7</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>-11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University-Educated</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
<td>-70.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
</tr>
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</table>

(b) Careerist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treated</th>
<th>Untreated</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of Birth (mean)</td>
<td>1948.2</td>
<td>1941.2</td>
<td>7.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University-Educated</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>29.3**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>-1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = significant at 10% level, ** = significant at 5% level

classic confounders, that may bias the estimated effects of being working-class or careerist from the previous section. Below, I show that the results survive when controlling for these factors. However, another perspective is that they are merely other aspects of what it means to be a working-class or careerist Labour MP. For instance, the types of socialization experiences available to working-class people, which were discussed in the last Chapter, may have been much less available to women
and young people. Women are much less likely to work in manual trades: there simply aren’t very many female MPs from semi-skilled or unskilled professions. Younger people are less likely to have been employed in blue-collar jobs, particularly of the sort that once supplied a lot of MPs to the Labour party via trade unions, such as mining and ship-building. As I discussed in the Introduction, this is part of the explanation for why the number of working-class MPs has fallen, and why their under-representation has actually worsened over time.

As a result, it is not surprising that working-class MPs are substantially older and more male, as well as less educated (and white, since these blue-collar professions very rarely employed ethnic minorities). All of these characteristics may be part and parcel of the working-class ‘type’. A regression or matching procedure that controls for other factors implicitly invites the following thought experiment: if, for example, we could somehow go back in time and take two MPs who were not working-class and were alike in all aspects, and turn one of them into a working-class person, what would have happened to their rhetoric? The notion of a working-class type suggests that this way of thinking may not be very realistic, because it would not be possible for someone to have ‘become’ working-class without also possessing a distinctive set of other characteristics. A female MP born in 1960 could never have worked in a coal mine. Thus if Labour’s MPs had been more working-class, they would also have been older, more male, and less educated. In the same way, being younger, university-educated and more likely to be female are arguably part and parcel of what it means to be a careerist MP. By definition, they are a relatively new phenomenon, and are middle-class graduates who embark on political careers from a young age. And the fact that they are more likely to be female than other MPs reflects changing recruitment patterns. The Labour party has put a lot of effort into recruiting and electing more women, including imposing all-female shortlists for candidate selection in some constituencies. In the same way, then, if Labour’s MPs had been more careerist, they would probably also have been younger, more female and better educated.

This all means that the estimated effects of being working-class or careerist from the controlled analyses might best be thought of as lower bounds on what would actually have occurred if the social background of Labour’s MPs had been substantially different. In turn, adopting this perspective
could mean that the results for working-class MPs are quite historically specific. If we could somehow change the social composition of Labour’s MPs today, bringing in more candidates from professions that are not typically middle-class and do not require a university education, the results may be different, because such people might lack the socialization experiences enjoyed by the typical working-class MP in my data. The nature of professions such as mining or shipbuilding may have made political socialization that led to pro-welfare views more possible than is the case today. They had very strong group identities, and were often rooted in stable communities that had worked in the same coalmine, factory or shipyard for generations. Such workers played a strong historical role in socialist politics, and were supported by strong and encompassing blue-collar unions that helped their members develop political consciousness. The same cannot be said for today’s low-skilled professions, such as call center work.

The analysis employs both linear regressions and matching procedures. The first column of Table 4.3 displays regression results for the estimated impacts of occupational background, controlling for year of birth, sex, education and race. As an additional check on the results, the first row of Figure 4.4 display estimates from matching on the four covariates, which does not make any assumptions about functional form. Near-perfect balance was achieved between treated and untreated groups. All results show that occupational background continues to be strongly correlated with rhetorical positions, providing strong evidence that working-class and careerist MPs took very different positions on welfare reform. Notably, the omitted group of MPs in these estimates - the white-collar professional MPs - clearly fall between the two groups in their support for welfare reform. This, again, is predicted by the theory. Legislators’ occupational backgrounds continue to matter here because, with the exception of age, the other characteristics are not in fact strongly correlated with MPs' positions (Table 4.3). In the results for the second period, being born 10 years later, approximately one standard deviation of the year-of-birth variable, is associated with the MP being more anti-welfare to about the same degree as the impact of being a careerist, but otherwise, the relationships are weak.
### Table 4.3: Regression Results for MPs’ Rhetorical Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working-Class</td>
<td>-0.235***</td>
<td>-0.221***</td>
<td>-0.235***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.078)</td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careerist</td>
<td>0.122*</td>
<td>0.152**</td>
<td>0.142**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td>(0.064)</td>
<td>(0.064)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Birth</td>
<td>0.016***</td>
<td>0.014***</td>
<td>0.015***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University-Educated</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.231)</td>
<td>(0.228)</td>
<td>(0.230)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency Benefit Usage (%)</td>
<td>-0.0123**</td>
<td>-0.0185***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0042)</td>
<td>(0.0056)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Majority (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-30.764***</td>
<td>-27.633***</td>
<td>-29.111***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.235)</td>
<td>(5.248)</td>
<td>(5.300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.339</td>
<td>0.366</td>
<td>0.375</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

### 4.3.4 Economic Characteristics of MPs’ Constituencies

A different threat to my results is the possibility of non-random selection into constituencies, combined with dyadic representation of constituents. Once elected, MPs may simply dedicate themselves to representing the interests of their constituents in parliament, overriding any influences from their occupational background. That would confound the results if, for instance, working-class MPs are also systematically more likely to be elected to poorer seats, and vice versa for careerists. Perhaps MPs are likely to represent seats close to where they live, and working-class MPs tend to be rooted in poorer communities. If both claims are true, being working-class is merely just a marker for representing a poor constituency, and a working-class MP in a wealthy constituency would behave very differently to a similar MP in a poor constituency.

Happily, the UK has very comprehensive and detailed information on the characteristics of its...
Figure 4.4: Matching Estimates of Impact of Occupational Background on Wordscores Positions of Labour MPs, with different Sets of Controls

(a) Impact of Being Working Class
(b) Impact of Being Careerist

Note: Charts show estimates and associated 95% confidence intervals

constituencies. To test these claims, I collected data on the proportion of working-age adults in each constituency who received working-age benefits. Data are available from 1999 onward. Each MP assigned the average proportion of their constituents receiving benefits for the period they were in office.\(^5\) This measure aims to capture the constituency’s demand for traditional welfare

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5. Data on the number of benefit recipients in each constituency come from the UK Office for National Statistics Labor Market statistics division at www.nomisweb.co.uk. ‘Working-age’ benefits refer to benefits received by people aged over 16 and younger than the official retirement age, meaning that it excludes pensions, but includes unemployment benefits, income support, disability benefits, and so on. Data on the working-age population of each constituency in England and Wales come from Pippa Norris’ dataset of UK parliamentary constituency characteristics, available at https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm. For Scotland, data come both from the Norris dataset, and from the Scottish Records Office Population Statistics, available at http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics-by-theme/population/population-estimates/special-area-population-estimates/spc-population-estimates. The rates are extremely stable for constituencies across time, reflecting stability in the UK macroeconomy. Most seats barely changed over the entire period. But just in case changes over time matter, each constituency in each parliamentary term (1997-2001, 2001-2005, 2005-2010) was represented by the average benefit use rate in the middle year (2003 or 2007), except the first term, where 2000 is the first full year available. MPs are then represented by the average across all of the terms that they were in office. For instance, an MP who served from 1997 to 2005 is assigned the average of 2000 and 2003 (a handful served stood down in 1997 and are assigned the score for 2000). The exception is Scottish MPs: there is no data on the number of benefit recipients after 2005 due to a large-scale redistricting and reduction of the number of seats for the 2005 election. Scottish MPs are assigned the nearest relevant years. Some English and Welsh constituencies saw minor boundary changes over the period, although none saw material changes to the profile of
policies. It is also likely to be strongly correlated with constituency poverty rates. If my results are explained by representation, then MPs whose constituents more heavily use benefits should be more supportive of them in their rhetoric, as a means of currying favor with their voters.

Figure 4.5: Distributions of Constituency Use of Working-Age Benefits by Type of MP, Second Period

I begin with evidence for non-random selection into constituencies. Figure 4.5 shows the distribution of benefit use rates for the constituencies of working-class MPs, careerist MPs, and all MPs together. There is a wide range of constituencies, from the leafy London suburb of Wimbledon where just over 5% of adults used benefits, to Michael Martin’s Glasgow Springburn seat - one of the most deprived areas in Western Europe - where close to 40% were reliant on welfare. Beyond this, the results may be surprising: there is essentially no difference at all in the constituencies of these three sets of MPs. Working-class MPs are slightly more likely to represent constituencies their electorates: major boundary changes occurred prior to the 1997 election and the 2010 election, and therefore do not affect my results. In the few cases where boundary changes did occur, I used an average of the seat’s predecessor constituency or constituencies.
with very high rates of benefit users, but otherwise the three distributions are virtually identical. Unsurprisingly, therefore, more formal statistical tests also suggest that the groups’ constituencies do not systematically differ. Both a t-test for equality of means, and a kolmogorov-smirnov test of equality of distributions, fail to reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the seats of working-class and careerist MPs ($p=0.34$ and $p=0.81$ respectively).

The reason for this probably lies in the manner in which MPs are typically selected to stand for office in the UK. Opportunities for prospective MPs to deliberately select into a seat that ‘fits’ their characteristics are quite limited. Many MPs represent seats close to where they grew up or lived as an adult, which may or may not happen to align with their own economic background. Certainly, working-class people are somewhat more likely to have grown up in poorer areas, and this could explain why they are slightly more likely to represent very poor seats. But there were also working-class MPs representing relatively wealthy districts, often because their trade union encouraged them to stand as a candidate in such places, or because they grew up in a poor part of an otherwise average area. Dennis Skinner, our archetypal working-class MP from the last Chapter, is a good example of the latter. His seat of Bolsover was close to the average benefit use rate in my dataset, even though he grew up in the town and worked there as a coal miner.

Meanwhile, many careerist MPs stand for selection in many, perhaps dozens, of places before succeeding as a candidate, and have often stood unsuccessfully for parliament in other places before becoming an MP. They will tend to simply apply for any available seat, no matter where it is in the country. And to the extent that they were able to exercise any choice, in the period covered by my data they were likely to prefer to stand in a relatively poor seat, because poorer voters supported Labour more, making these elections easy to win. In many cases winning a safe seat ensures that they do not have to devote too much attention to their constituency and can effectively remain in parliament for life, providing a strong basis to forge a career in government. Other careerist MPs with strong connections to the central party may simply be ‘parachuted’ by the party apparatus into an impoverished constituency when the previous MP retires or dies. This all means that the place where many MPs end up representing is something of a random process, explaining why on average, differences are quite small between working-class and careerist MPs in the seats they
Because of this, the regression results for the second period are essentially unchanged when the benefit use rate of each MP's constituency is added, as shown in the second column of Table 4.3 a few pages earlier, where the results are in the expected directions and remain significant. It also provides evidence of limited dyadic representation: a one standard-deviation fall in the use of benefits (5.5 percentage points) is associated with being 0.068 less supportive of welfare. This is less than half the impact of a one-standard-deviation change in year of birth, or the impact of being careerist. But because working-class and careerist MPs do not differ in the type of seats they represent, this has no impact on my results. Matching estimates in the second row of Figure 4.4 broadly support these conclusions. The estimate for careerists narrowly misses significance at the 10% level, but the procedure did not achieve good balance between treated and untreated units on year of birth, which is strongly correlated with MPs' positions. Because of this, two more pieces of evidence directly investigate whether constituencies' usage of benefits can explain away the impact of MPs' social backgrounds.

First, I examined quasi-experiments created in constituencies where working-class MPs died or retired during the period covered by the data, although there were only eight such instances over the period. If representation were the main influence on MPs' positions, then when an MP dies or retires, the new MP in the same constituency should use roughly the same type of rhetoric; presumably, the rhetoric that constituents support. Technically, of course this is only true under the assumption that constituencies' characteristics have not changed drastically over time, leading the constituency to be 'out of line' with the MP who retired or died. For example, a constituency could have become much richer over time, making a working-class MP less suitable as a representative. However, while I cannot rule out changes in unobservable characteristics, it is certainly not the case that any of these constituencies changed very much in the variable I measure - the use rate of benefits. One example is Neath, a very impoverished Welsh constituency which changed hands

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6. There is very little prior research on dyadic representation in the UK, but one recent study uses MRP modelling to look at the connection between MPs' voting records and signing of early day motions, and constituency-level public opinion. It finds small but significant correlations between opinion and MPs' activities, although the authors remain agnostic on whether the effect occurs due to more leftwing candidates being selected for more leftwing seats (etc.), or MPs adapting their behavior to their constituents' opinions (Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2016).
from the working-class MP Donald Coleman to the careerist Peter Hain. Even at the end of our data, Neath had an extremely high rate of benefit use compared to other places. Figure 4.6 shows the estimated positions of both old and new MPs in each of the places where working-class MPs were replaced. There is little evidence that the constituency exerts a strong effect. In two of the eight cases, the new MP took a similar position to the old MP, but in all other cases, the new MP was substantially more anti-welfare than the working-class MP they replaced. This strongly suggests that the characteristics of the MPs matter a lot more than those of the constituency.

Figure 4.6: Change in Position for Constituencies where MP Died or Retired

Second, I carried out a direct comparison of working-class and careerist MPs who represented similar types of seats. I used a matching procedure to directly compare as many careerist MPs as possible to a working-class MP who represented an almost identical seat, in terms of its use of benefits. If MPs simply do what their constituents want regardless of their own preferences, each pairing should be virtually indistinguishable. Figure 4.7 shows that this is not the case, plotting the matched pairs in order of the use of benefits in their constituencies. Working-class MPs were

7. Each working-class MP could be used as a match at most once (a procedure where working-class MPs could be a match for more than one careerist resulted in only a handful of working-class MPs being used, but yielded very similar results). Because there were more careerists than working-class MPs, the order in which matching occurred affects the outcome, so the procedure was repeated 1000 times, re-shuffling the order in each simulation, and the outcome with the highest p-value for a t-test of differences in the profiles of the two groups’ constituencies was selected.
Figure 4.7: Comparison of positions of careerist MPs and working-class MP with most similar use of working-age benefits in their Constituency, second period, ranked from highest to lowest usage.

Note: Chart shows estimates and associated 95% confidence intervals for careerist MPs in the second period, compared with the working-class MP who represented the most similar constituency, measured in terms of proportion receiving working-age benefits. The MPs are listed in order of these proportions: MPs at the top represent seats with the highest proportion of people receiving benefits, and those at the bottom have seats with the lowest proportion.
systematically more pro-welfare than their careerist counterparts, even in the wealthiest seats. This implies that if we took a working-class MP in a poor constituency and transplanted them to a rich one, they would behave in much the same way.

4.3.5 Electoral Competitiveness of MPs’ Constituencies

It is also possible that working-class and careerist MPs differ in terms of how competitive (marginal) their constituencies are. There is some evidence that parties prefer to select more ideologically moderate candidates, such as careerists, for less winnable seats (Buttice and Milazzo 2011). This is probably because they are better at appealing to middle-class swing voters, and at winning difficult elections due to their greater experience in politics. In addition, working-class MPs are often rooted in traditionally Labour-voting communities, and parties like to select candidates with local roots, making working-class people more likely to represent safe seats. One of the arguments of my theory is that careerist MPs care intrinsically more than working-class MPs about winning elections, due to the influence of their background. But what if all MPs care equally about winning elections, and in order to win, MPs in marginal seats had to sound more opposed to the traditional welfare state in order to woo centrist voters? In that case, if careerists represent more marginal constituencies, being ‘careerist’ would be merely a marker for the type of seat that those candidates are selected to represent.

As before, the analysis proceeds in two steps: examining balance, and then controlling for marginality of seat, which is measured by the percentage point difference between the election winner and nearest challenger. In this case, working-class MPs did indeed turn out to have larger majorities on average, while careerist MPs were much more likely to represent very marginal constituencies, as shown in Figure 4.8. The differences were statistically significant. However, when I add this variable to the previous analysis, the results are unaffected, as shown in the fourth column of Table 4.3, a few pages back. In this case, the reason is that the size of MPs’ majorities

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8. Data again come from Pippa Norris’ dataset of UK parliamentary constituency characteristics, available at https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm. MPs are assigned the average majority for the elections in which they participated from 1997 onward (since 1997 saw very great changes in majorities due to the Blair landslide, after which they were more stable), with the exception of the small number of MPs appearing only prior to 1997, who are assigned the value for 1992’s election, and Scottish MPs, who do not include 2005, which saw very substantial boundary changes.
simply isn't very predictive of their position on welfare reform. Although statistically significant at the 10% level, the partial effect of size of majority is estimated to be very small, and in the opposite direction to what we would expect.

Matching estimates in the bottom row of Figure 4.4, also a few pages back, show the same pattern as before: the results for working-class MPs are fully consistent with the regressions, while the estimate for careerists narrowly misses significance at the 10% level, but balance between the two groups was somewhat poor. Again, to probe further, an additional direct comparison was carried out between working-class and careerist MPs who had similar majorities, in the same way as Figure 4.7. Each careerist MP was matched to a working-class MP with a nearly identical majority. The procedure again achieved good balance between the two groups. If the marginality of seat determines how MPs behave, working-class and careerist MPs with similar majorities should speak very similarly. The results are shown in Figure 4.9, and look familiar: careerists are systematically more opposed to benefits than working-class MPs with almost identical majorities. Careerist MPs
Figure 4.9: Comparison of positions of careerist MPs and working-class MP with most similar electoral majorities, second period, ranked from highest to lowest

Note: Chart shows estimates and associated 95% confidence intervals for careerist MPs in the second period, compared with the working-class MP who had the most similar majority in their constituency. The MPs are listed in order of majority: MPs at the top represent seats where MPs had the biggest majorities, and those at the bottom have seats with the lowest majorities.
such as David Blunkett and Harriet Harman with majorities of over fifty percentage points were among the most opposed to benefits, while working-class MPs with small majorities were among the most favorable. Again, the evidence suggests that if we took a careerist from a marginal seat and put them in a safe seat, they would talk in basically the same way. The size of their majorities cannot explain why working-class and careerist MPs are so different, implying that if we took a careerist from a marginal seat and put them in a safe seat, they would take the same position on welfare reform.

Overall, the weight of evidence strongly suggests that the characteristics of MPs’ constituencies cannot explain why careerist and working-class MPs spoke so differently about welfare, and moreover, suggest that the direct effect of constituencies is at best quite limited. How can we explain this result? The explanation probably lies in the centralized ‘responsible national party’ system of British government. Traditional accounts suggest that British MPs’ electoral fortunes are rarely closely tied to what they personally do in parliament, but instead tend to rise or fall based on the public’s opinion of the national parties. As one classic study of MPs’ social backgrounds puts it, “an MP’s tenure in the House of Commons is related not to his own skills and ability, but rather the performance of party leaderships. Come election time, the electorate judge his colleagues collectively, not him individually” (Mellors 1978, p. 88).

Modern empirical work has tended to back up the view that MPs’ individual activities do not especially matter for their vote share, albeit with some caveats. A robust finding across many studies is that there are small positive effects from local campaigning and spending by candidates (Pattie, Johnston, and Fieldhouse 1995, Whiteley and Seyd 2003, Pattie and Johnston 2004, Denver, Hands, and MacAlister 2004), and others have shown smaller negative impacts of involvement in scandal or corruption (Farrell, McAllister, and Studlar 1998, Vivyan, Wagner, and Tarlov 2012, Eggers 2014). But British voters seem to pay no attention to the characteristics of their MPs, such as race, gender or ideology (Pattie, Fieldhouse, and Johnston 1994, Norris, Vallance, and Lovenduski 1992). More importantly for my purposes, what MPs do in parliament has never been shown to strongly affect their vote share. For example, distinctive or rebellious individual patterns of voting are not strongly rewarded or punished by voters (Pattie, Fieldhouse, and Johnston 1994,
Vivyan and Wagner 2012). Overall, the incumbency advantage enjoyed by British MPs is very low by international standards, implying that what individual MPs do once in office has little effect on voters’ decisions (Gaines 1998, Smith 2013).

This means that, overall, there is not much of an incentive for MPs to strongly cater what they say in parliament to their own constituents, leaving ample room for MPs’ social backgrounds to exert a strong impact on their rhetoric, and making the UK a good setting for uncovering the influence of legislators’ backgrounds. On the other hand, there is a very strong incentive for MPs to care about the image of their party nationally, which seems to have been the case for careerist MPs. Even careerists in very safe seats, for instance, went along with the party leadership’s policy of welfare reform. MPs seem to advocate policy positions for reasons that are largely unrelated to their own constituency.

4.4 Careerists as Government Ministers

Another alternative explanation for the patterns I have found could be the influence of ministerial office. Working-class MPs were much less likely than careerists to progress to ministerial office, and in Westminster, the executive and legislature are combined. Virtually all ministers are drawn from the House of Commons. The results for careerists could be explained by the fact that many of them needed to use language that was close to the leadership’s preferences. An extreme version of this concern would be to say that I am not measuring these MPs’ individual positions at all. Instead, perhaps I am simply measuring the preferences or rhetoric of the party leadership, as expressed by ministers.

There are several reasons why this is not a concern, however. First, while it is certainly true that ministers favored welfare reform more than other MPs on average, there was a lot of variation in the estimated positions of ministers. This is shown in Figure 4.10, which depicts the estimated positions of all MPs who were at some stage junior ministers, ministers and secretaries of state in areas of relevance to welfare policy, including employment, social security and the Treasury. All were bound by collective responsibility to support the government. Nonetheless, they did not all use anything like the exact same language. Some, in fact, used language that was more typical
of the pro-welfare end of the scale. This again drives home the point made at the start of this Chapter: far from the leadership forcing MPs to speak in particular ways, they actually enjoy a lot of autonomy to express their own views within the House of Commons. In addition, as my theory predicts, it suggests that MPs, even ministers, differed in the extent to which they were willing to be completely loyal to the party leadership.

Figure 4.10: Estimated Positions of MPs who were also Government Ministers for Relevant Areas, 1994-2007
More broadly, the key question is whether MPs’ stance on welfare reform was in part caused by becoming a minister, or whether causation instead ran the other way around. Perhaps those who were keener on reform to start with were more likely to be made ministers, presumably because they were already considered loyal and reliable by the party leadership. Indeed, the fact that ministers were more conservative on welfare reform faithfully reflects ideological divides within New Labour, where the party leadership and associated ministers were always on the right of the party. In turn, becoming a minister is itself, in part, an ideological decision, since MPs who want to be ministers need to demonstrate their loyalty to party leaders. Arguably, one of the reasons why a uni-dimensional scale works so well for New Labour is that ministers were on the extreme right of the party (see the Appendix for validations of the scale). Past work on legislative speech has shown that it tends to reflect both ideological and leadership-backbench divides (Kim, Londregan, and Ratkovic 2017), but under Blair, those amounted to one and the same thing.

And in fact, my evidence points strongly to causation running from MPs’ positions to ministerial office. Figure 4.11 shows the distribution of positions as box-and-whisker plots, for all MPs who later went on to become a Minister under Blair, in the period before they became a minister (middle plot). I compare them to the positions of ministers, only in the period when they were actually ministers (left plot), as well as all other MPs (right plot). This demonstrates that even before they became ministers, future ministers were taking positions that were very similar to those taken by actual ministers when they were in office. The two are much more similar to each other than they are to the third group of MPs, who were perpetually back-benchers. Future ministers seem to have been engaging in a kind of signalling to party leaders, proving that they would be loyal once in office. Ministerial office is not so much a cause of MPs’ positions on welfare reform, but rather an outcome of them.

4.5 Changes over Time

We have seen that in the Blair era, when major welfare reforms were enacted, careerists were much more supportive of reforms than working-class MPs. We have also seen that this appears to genuinely reflect the impact of their differing social backgrounds, rather than other characteristics
of the MPs or their constituencies, or the potential influence of ministerial office. Now, I add a further test of the theory by looking at changes between the first and second periods: were careerists more likely than working-class MPs to turn against welfare? This is a particularly important test, because if correct, it would show direct evidence that careerists moved toward the position of the party leadership, which also changed at the same time. My theoretical expectation is that careerists had stronger party loyalty, as well as a stronger desire to please party leaders, which should have made them more responsive to changes in the leadership’s position.

Relatively few MPs (just 67 of the 201 in my sample for the second period) appear in both periods of the data, so I show two different estimates of changes over time. The first shows all
MPs, regardless of whether they appear in both periods (Figure 4.12). This has the advantage of containing more data, but risks conflating genuine changes in position over time with changes in the composition of each group, as new MPs were elected. Thus as a cross-check, Figure 4.13 shows the same estimates for only the 67 MPs featured before and after Blair, meaning that it measures within-individual changes only. In fact, both of them paint a very similar picture. In the
pre-Blair era, differences between careerist and working-class MPs were quite modest. But during the Blair era, they polarized from each other, because careerist MPs were much more likely to shift toward Blair’s position over time. While working-class MPs did move slightly in favor of welfare reform, it was much more pronounced among careerists. And in fact, the difference between the two groups is even stronger when we only compare within-individual changes. This means that most working-class MPs were highly consistent over time, taking almost the same position, regardless of the political context. And as expected, careerist MPs were the opposite: much more likely to blow with the political winds.

4.6 Parliamentary Rebellions on Welfare Reform

Taken together, my results show that careerist and working-class legislators behaved very differently when it came to welfare reform. They took very different positions on it under Tony Blair, and careerists also shifted over time much more toward favoring it. Indeed, this is the first study to show that European legislators with different occupational backgrounds take different policy positions, despite a large number of studies that simply measure their changing social profile. The fact that their behavior was so different matters because there have also been profound changes in their representation within the parliamentary Labour party, as explained in the Introduction. Working-class MPs comprised around 40% of the Labour party in the early 1980s, but have fallen to below 10% today, while careerists have done the exact opposite, replacing them almost one-for-one. Working-class people are now under-represented in British politics to a degree that has never been seen before.

The fact that the representation of these groups changed so much, and they also took such different positions on welfare reform, means that they are likely to have had a profound effect on the policy stance and rhetoric of the Labour party as a whole. In particular, it reduced the variance, as few dissenting pro-welfare voices existed within the party. As explained in Chapter 3, the balance of power within the Labour party is also crucial in determining which policies it adopts. A lot of bargaining goes on behind closed doors, and party leaders tailor their policy proposals to prevent large-scale rebellions that might embarrass the party or hurt them at the ballot box. It is
difficult to test this part of my argument conclusively, because so much of this activity is hidden from view.

But as Philip Norton has put it, “in terms of the expression of dissent within a Parliamentary party, voting against one’s own party in the division lobby represents only the tip of an iceberg; but, like the tip of an iceberg, it is the part that is visible” (Norton 1975, p. ix). Therefore as further evidence for the political impact of these changes in representation, I look at votes in the House of Commons. Unlike intra-party bargaining, votes are observable, and despite strong party control, rebellions still occur in the House of Commons occasionally, and are sometimes large. Here, I examine key rebellions by Labour MPs against two major reforms to benefits that took place between 1997 and 1999, during Tony Blair’s first term as Prime Minister: the Social Security Bill of 1997 and the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill of 1999. In both cases, rebels objected to measures that reduced the generosity of disability and lone-parent benefits, or subjected them to greater means testing. The rebellions included the resignations of several junior ministers, a very rare occurrence which underscores the controversial nature of the reforms (Cowley 2002). The bills nonetheless passed in the end.

Figure 4.14 shows that working-class MPs were much more likely to rebel on these welfare reform measures than careerists. The left panel displays the proportion of each group who rebelled at least once on one of the measures (there were many divisions on each), while the right looks specifically at the largest rebellion in Blair’s first term, in May 1999, when Roger Berry (a backbencher) tabled an amendment to drop the introduction of means-testing for disability benefits. In the latter case, I also include abstentions to facilitate later analysis. The Figure shows that close to 40% of all working-class MPs rebelled on welfare measures at least once, and almost half of them either rebelled or abstained on the Berry Amendment. These rates are remarkably high, given the rarity of rebellions in the British system. They rebelled at about twice the rate of white-collar professional

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9. Abstentions in the House of Commons are often a lesser form of rebellion, allowing the MP to avoid voting with the opposition, while still avoiding voting for an issue she opposes. Technically, an abstention is simply a failure to vote, which could occur for a number of reasons. I excluded two senior government ministers who failed to vote from the list of abstentions from Figure 4.14, on the assumption that they were missing on official business. For the rest of the abstainers, the evidence strongly suggests that their absences were a deliberate form of protest. First, many of them are well-known ‘serial rebels’ who rebelled on other key pieces of welfare reform. And among those who did not rebel on other welfare bills, many were also signatories on an earlier Early Day Motion (Number 375) put forward by Roger Berry that expressed serious reservations about the 1999 Bill.
MPs, while only a handful of careerists rebelled at any point. These results are fully consistent with the results on MPs' policy positions: expressed policy preferences carry over into voting. In addition, they are consistent with my theory, which emphasizes that careerists are much more loyal to the party leadership than other MPs.

Figure 4.14: Rates of Rebellion by type of MP in key votes on welfare reform, 1997-99

Importantly, it is plausible that Tony Blair may have lost some of these votes, had the representation of working-class and careerist MPs been different. This is shown in Figure 4.15. It compares the results of two simulated votes to the actual vote on the Berry Amendment, which Labour won by forty votes. Both simulations assume that working-class, careerist and white-collar professional MPs would also have voted and abstained at the same rates as they did in the actual vote, and that opposition parties would also have continued to oppose them. The middle scenario estimates what might have occurred if working-class and careerist people had been represented at the same rates as they were in 1987, at the start of my data. Under these assumptions, Labour's majority would have been slashed to fifteen, a level at which the leadership would almost certainly not have
brought the measures to a vote without first making changes. The third scenario looks at what might have happened if working-class people had been represented in the party at the same rate as their share in the UK population in 1999 (39%, a level of working-class representation last seen in the 1979-83 parliament), with careerists held at their 1987 rate (still much greater than their rate in the general population). Under this scenario, Labour would have lost by five votes. Of course, much else would no doubt have been different if working-class representation had been so much higher.

These results are only intended to be illustrative. But they do demonstrate the very real possibility that the under-representation of working-class people and the over-representation of careerists that has occurred over the past thirty years not only affected the policy stance and rhetoric of the average MP, but also altered policy outcomes on welfare reform. The occupational background of MPs matters in substantive terms, not just for descriptive representation.

Figure 4.15: Simulated voting results on the Berry Amendment for different scenarios of working-class and careerist representation, compared to actual result
4.7 Extensions of the Analysis

In this final section, I discuss extensions of my analysis into the post-Blair era, as well as to further occupational groups of MPs. Although the main focus of this thesis is on the introduction of welfare reform under Blair, we saw in Chapter 2 that there was something of a change in the rhetorical stance of the party toward more support for traditional welfare provision in the post-Blair period, or at least something of a shift in favor of redistribution. While this change did not represent anything like a total reversal of the party's position to the pre-Blair era, Labour nonetheless did move somewhat back to the center. As with the Blair era, it seems likely that this represents a change in the preference of the party leaders themselves. His immediate successor, Gordon Brown, was long known as more moderate. And the leader who succeeded him after 2010, Ed Miliband, was even more to the left, and steered the party toward a more left-wing platform for the 2015 election. If my theory of MP behavior is correct, then in this third period from 2007-15, when Labour moved back to the center somewhat, the shift ought to have been driven most strongly by careerist MPs, who are more likely to respond to changes in the preferences of their leaders.

Thus as an additional test of my broad theory, I extended my estimated scale for MPs into the third period. Figure 4.16 shows the distributions of wordscores positions for Labour MPs across all three periods. Consistent with the aggregate results from Chapter 2, it demonstrates that Labour's MPs became somewhat less supportive of welfare reform in the post-Blair era, without shifting entirely back toward the position of the 1980s. Indeed, most MPs remained more supportive of reforms than the vast majority of MPs were in the 1980s and early 1990s. Even so, a discernible shift did occur. Figure 4.17 adds a third period to the results for over-time change shown previously in Figure 4.12. As anticipated, the change from the Blair to post-Blair era had very little to do with working-class MPs. They remained remarkably stable over time, expressing almost the exact same position in both periods. On the other hand, careerist MPs shifted a lot, moving back to a position that was in between the pre-Blair and Blair eras. As in the pre-Blair era, working-class and careerist MPs once again took positions that were very close to each other. Only the middle period, when the party was as a whole was at its most extreme, saw large polarization between the groups. And given that the number of careerists actually increased from the second to the third periods while
the number of working-class MPs fell (see Chapter 1), this indicates that careerists were largely responsible for shifting the party back to a less pro-reform position. Thus careerists show further
evidence of blowing with winds, following the preferences of party leaders, while working-class MPs tended to stick to their ideological guns.

This provides more confirmation of my behavioral theory of legislators from Chapter 3, which argued precisely that working-class MPs are more likely to take positions in line with their ideology, whereas careerists are more concerned with pleasing party leaders. Finally, I also consider an analysis of a wider set of occupational groups, rounding out the picture of how the parliamentary Labour party changed over the period. Figure 1.8 in Chapter 1 showed that the working-class MPs were replaced nearly one-for-one by careerists, whereas changes in the representation of other groups were much more modest. There was a slight fall in the proportion of ‘professional’ MPs (doctors, lawyers, journalists and academics), matched by something of a rise in MPs from a private sector background. But otherwise, there was little in the way of dramatic change. In particular, the proportion of MPs from the public and voluntary sectors (primarily teachers and social workers) did not change much at all. This justifies the focus on working-class and careerist MPs in this Chapter. However, the other groups provide another useful confirmation of my theoretical framework. We have already seen that as a whole, the position of the other three groups clearly falls between working-class and careerist MPs, as predicted by my theory. Now, Figure 4.18 shows that there were also interesting differences between these groups in the positions they took over the three periods. In general, former public and voluntary sector workers were more opposed to welfare reforms than professionals or private-sector workers. The latter took a position that was quite close to that of careerists in the Blair era, although careerists clearly remain the most extreme group.

This makes sense from a theoretical perspective, as I emphasized in Chapter 3. MPs with a business background may lack the socialization experiences of careerists, but we would expect them to be more economically conservative than those coming from the public sector. Conversely, public sector workers are often direct employees of the welfare state, and tend to be more economically left-wing. Thus Figure 4.18 lends credence to my overall framework. And in terms of explaining the overall change in the Labour party, the modest increase in MPs from a private-sector background will have further aided Blair in introducing welfare reforms.
Figure 4.18: Change in Mean Position over Time, all Occupational Groups, all three Periods

Having quite exhaustively confirmed that the changing backgrounds of MPs mattered for discourse and the overall position of Labour, in the next Chapter I move on to voters, showing that it also altered public opinion.
4.8 Methodological Appendix to Chapter 4

4.8.1 The Sample of Individual Labour MPs

The initial speech collection effort was kept deliberately broad in order to provide a comprehensive overview of rhetorical trends, and so there were a number of speeches in the dataset that were not directly relevant to welfare and welfare reform. To analyze the rhetorical positions of individual MPs on welfare reform, I used a subset of speeches from the total speech collection that is more focused on welfare reform, using the results of the topic modeling as a guide. Those results—discussed in more detail in the second Chapter—showed a dramatic change in rhetoric from the Labour party on welfare provision over the period, between two different sets of frames represented by distinct collections of topics. The first was a set of topics depicting welfare in positive or neutral terms. They emphasize benefits as an effective and necessary means of poverty relief, and frame recipients as highly deserving. The second set depicts welfare negatively, talking about problems of the system and the need for reform, depicting recipients as increasingly fraudulent and undeserving. There are eight topics in total in these two groups.

To focus on welfare and welfare reform for individual MPs, I only included debates that were in the top one hundred most representative days for the Labour party for each of those eight topics. The end result is that two-thirds of the total days on which at least one legislator from the Labour party spoke are examined. The one-third of days that were excluded featured discussion of other topics, such as pensions. The last stage of data assembly then involved breaking down the debates on those days by individual Labour MP, and amalgamating them into MP-specific documents. Finally, MPs whose total speeches about welfare comprised only a handful of sentences were discarded, as these documents do not contain sufficient information to estimate the MP’s position.

The speeches were divided into two periods. The first runs from the 1987 election up to the death of John Smith, Tony Blair’s predecessor as leader, in June 1994, when Labour largely remained a traditional social democratic party. The second runs from June 1994 up to June 2007, the period when Blair was party leader. This resulted in a total of 324 documents: 123 for the period 1987-
1994, and 201 for the 1994-2007. 67 MPs appear in both periods. This means that I observe a sample of all of the MPs who were in office, because not all of them spoke on welfare issues. The occupational composition of this sample closely mirrors that of Labour MPs as a whole, which was shown in Figures 1.7 and 1.8. Table 4.4 shows the raw counts of each type of MP in each period of my dataset of speakers. Both careerist and working-class MPs feature prominently in the data. Figure 4.19 shows the change in composition over time. In the first period, 24% of the sample were working-class and 13% were careerist, while in the second period, 14% were working-class and 19% were careerist. For the first period, this is essentially identical to the full population. In the second, working-class MPs are slightly over-represented, and careerists slightly under-represented. Nonetheless, the differences are minor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.4: Composition of MPs in dataset of speeches</th>
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<td>Working Class</td>
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<td>MPs speaking 1987-1994</td>
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<td>MPs speaking 1994-2007</td>
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4.8.2 Analysis by MP: the Wordscores Algorithm

The aim of the analysis of individual Labour MPs is to place them on a scale of rhetorical positions, where one end of the scale will represent MPs who most strongly used language emphasizing poverty and need, and the other MPs who instead emphasized the prevalence of fraud, and the need to reform the system. I take a supervised approach to producing the scale. In fact, there are several different existing algorithms for scaling political actors such as parties or legislators from their speeches or manifestoes, which differ primarily according to whether they are supervised or unsupervised. With a supervised approach, we supply information to the computer about what constitutes a document at particular points on the scale. Having learned what these example documents look like, the computer scores other documents according to their similarity to the examples.

An unsupervised approach, on the other hand, involves the computer both selecting documents
at either end of the scale, and scoring the other documents. In that case, the computer will choose a scale for us, generally whichever scale happens to maximize observed differences between the texts in relative word usage. Rather than there being a globally correct method, it is important to use a method appropriate to the task at hand, and carefully validate it afterwards to show that the results are sensible and useful (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). In this case, a supervised approach proved much more successful than unsupervised methods (particularly the ‘Wordfish’ approach of Slapin and Proksch 2008), and validation exercises (shown below) suggest that the resulting scale is highly valid in terms of measuring what we want.

The advantage of an unsupervised method, as with the topic model, is that we do not need to make any strong prior assumptions. The Wordfish model has proven highly successful in some contexts, particularly when analyzing party manifestos, which tend to be of similar lengths and format across parties and over time. The disadvantage is that the resulting scale may be uninterpretable, or not useful for the task in hand. Texts can differ from each other on many dimensions, such as
differences of style or grammar that have no political meaning. In addition, when documents differ in length, some shorter texts are likely to contain very unique words, specific only to a small group of them (Hjorth et al. 2015). The computer is likely to select these texts to be at the extreme of the scale simply because they are linguistically unique, regardless of their political content. That is exactly what happened when I attempted to use the unsupervised Wordfish procedure. The speeches in my database differ greatly in length, and the analysis resulted in a scale whose ends were dominated by shorter texts that used unusual words, and were not especially representative of either pro-reform or pro-welfare rhetoric.

Instead, I employed the Wordscores procedure (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003), which has been widely used to scale texts as diverse as speeches in the Irish and German parliaments (Laver and Benoit 2002, Bernauer and Bräuninger 2009), amicus briefs in American supreme court cases (Evans et al. 2007), interest groups’ official responses to European Union policies (Kluver 2009), and ‘state of the state’ speeches from US Governors (Weinberg 2010). Wordscores compares a set of texts whose positions are unknown (‘virgin texts’) to texts whose positions on a scale are assumed to be known to the analyst a priori (‘reference texts’), and can therefore be assigned a score in advance. The reference texts should uncontroversially represent a known position on the scale we want to estimate. Virgin documents are scored according to their similarity to these reference texts in terms of word usage. In our case, documents whose relative word usage is similar to the reference text representing the most extreme pro-reform position will be scored as relatively pro-reform, and vice-versa for documents that are linguistically similar to the reference document that most emphasizes poverty and need. As with the structural topic model, the algorithm uses a ‘bag of words’ approach, looking only at the number of times different words are used. Both periods were scaled together, meaning that MPs who featured in both periods appear twice.

The important issue is how to select reference texts that represent either pole of our scale. Substantively, we should be able to clearly justify why the texts are ‘extreme’, and methodologically, the algorithm performs better when the reference documents are as long and comprehensive as possible, and contain relatively few words that are unique to each reference document (Lowe 2008). The approach taken here is to use speeches from specific groups of MPs that are known to rep-
resent extreme positions, and to combine these MPs’ speeches together into reference documents, maximizing their length and minimizing the number of unique words in each. These groups of MPs were not selected by analyzing the content of their speeches, but instead by membership of groups that I expected would use extreme language. The results of the analysis, in terms of what sort of language is used at each end of the scale, are therefore not pre-determined.

To represent the extreme pro-welfare position emphasizing poverty and need, I use a reference document consisting of all speeches made by members of the leftwing ‘Socialist Campaign Group’ of Labour MPs in the first of our two periods (1987-1994), when the party as a whole used more pro-welfare rhetoric. The Campaign Group is an organized faction in the House of Commons who advocate highly leftwing positions. They have elected officers, and meet regularly while parliament sits to discuss tactics and policy positions. Referring to Tony Blair’s first term as leader, from 1997-2001, an expert on voting in the House of Commons describes the group as follows:

“A full 94 per cent of the Campaign Group rebelled at some point in the Parliament, compared to 33 per cent of other MPs ... the Group’s membership was disproportionately leftwing ... membership was a very public signal that the MP was opposed to much of the government’s programme ... as Alan Simpson, secretary of the Group at the beginning of the Parliament, said at one point: “Let’s face it, membership of the Campaign Group is hardly a career-enhancing move ... most people at Millbank [the Labour party’s headquarters] think we’re politically off the planet.”


It contains several famous figures that any expert on British politics would comfortably identify as being on the left fringe of the party. They include Tony Benn, who famously stood for the party’s deputy leadership in the 1980s on a highly leftwing platform, veteran figures of the far left who were vocal critics of the Blair government, such as Dennis Skinner, George Galloway and Ken Livingstone, as well as the current Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who is widely considered to be the most left-wing leader for a generation, together with some of his allies such as Diane Abbott and John McDonnell, who helped run his leadership campaign and now occupy key positions in his Shadow Cabinet. Speeches by these members can comfortably be assumed to represent the most
pro-welfare rhetoric, emphasizing poverty and need. In total, our database of speeches includes 23 campaign Group members in the first period, whose speeches were amalgamated into one reference document.10

Anchoring the other end of our spectrum are speeches made by the five Secretaries of State in charge of the welfare system during the Blair government of 1997-2007. Secretaries of state are responsible for running a government department (in this case the departments of Education and Employment, Social Security, or Work and Pensions). They are in charge of policy implementation, and sit as part of the Cabinet. In parliament, their job is to put forward the government’s position, advocating and explaining its policies, leading debates on government policy and and responding to questions during scheduled Question Times. In our context, then, they were clearly the most willing to use pro-reform rhetoric: that is precisely what their jobs involved. This includes five MPs - Alistair Darling, Andrew Smith, David Blunkett, Harriet Harman and John Hutton - all of whom were key figures in Tony Blair and Gordon Brown’s ‘New Labour’ project, and were heavily involved in moving the party from the left to the center. The reference document only includes speeches during their time as Secretary of State. Most of them made additional speeches at other times (for example during the period of opposition from 1994 to 1997) that also feature in their own individual speech files.

Estimation of the scale was carried out using Will Lowe’s Austin package for R. The scale needs to be arbitrarily set in advance; in this case, a score of -5 was assigned to the pro-welfare reference document, and a score of +5 to the pro-reform document.11 The first step is then to calculate the frequency of each word w in each reference document r as a proportion of the total words in r, $F_{wr}$.

10. The full list is Alan Simpson, Alice Mahon, Audrey Wise, Bill Michie, Bob Cryer, Dave Nellist, Dawn Primarolo, Dennis Skinner, Diane Abbott, Eric Heffer, Frank Cook, Jeremy Corbyn, Jimmy Wray, John Hughes, John McAllion, Malcolm Chisholm, Maria Fyfe, Mildred Gordon, Robert Litherland, Robert Wareing, Ronnie Campbell, Tony Banks and Tony Benn. Note this is not a list of all Campaign Group members in the period. Instead, it is a list of those who spoke enough about the welfare system during this period to feature in our data. Three additional group members (Austin Mitchell, Harry Barnes and Ken Livingstone) feature in our data but were not included in the reference document because they only made one or two speeches about issues that were somewhat peripheral to issues of poverty and welfare. Including them in the reference document does not change the results for other MPs, but does place these three at the most pro-welfare end of the spectrum, a positioning which is not warranted by their speeches. A glance at the later results shows that they appear toward the middle of the spectrum for 1987-1994, which is more realistic given the nature of their speeches.

11. Before running the algorithm, rare words that appear in fewer than 3% of the total documents were removed. The results are not affected by changing the cutoff, for example to 1% or 5%.
For each word, I then calculate the probability that we are reading $r$, given that we are reading word $w$, 

$$P_{wr} = \frac{F_{wr}}{\sum_r F_{wr}}$$  \hspace{1cm} (4.1)  

For instance, suppose there are 10,000 words in each of the two reference documents, and a particular word is used 10 times in the first, and 30 times in the second. Then, if we encounter this word in a virgin document, there is a 75% probability that we’re reading the second reference text, and a 25% probability that we’re reading the first. This quantity is used to produce a score for each word, which is the expected position of a text, given that we are reading that word:

$$S_w = \sum_r (P_{wr} \cdot A_r)$$  \hspace{1cm} (4.2)  

where $A_r$ is the pre-assigned score for reference document $r$ (±5 in our case). Effectively this is a weighted average of the positions of our reference texts, where the weights are given by the probabilities that we are reading $r$. If a word is used at the same frequency in both reference texts, it will be assigned a score of close to zero, meaning that it is a centrist word. On the other hand, words that are used disproportionately in one or other reference document will be scored substantially below or above zero, meaning that it is a highly partisan word. Encountering such a word would imply a high degree of certainty that we are reading one or other reference text.

These ‘wordscores’ are then used to score each virgin text, $v$. In this case, because the reference documents consist of amalgamations of individual MPs, these individual MPs’ documents are also virgin texts, and can be scored differently to the reference text in which they appear, if their language is different to the other MPs in the reference document. On encountering a virgin document, the algorithm first produces relative word frequencies $F_{wv}$, defined analogously to $F_{wr}$. The position of the document is then calculated as:

$$S_v = \sum_w (F_{wv} \cdot S_w)$$  \hspace{1cm} (4.3)  

These scores, $S_v$, are the positions reported in the text. Standard errors for each document are cal-
culated using the variance of each word’s score in the document around the score for the document as a whole, weighted by the frequency of that word:

\[ SE_v = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_w F_{wv}(S_w - S_v)}{n_v}} \]  
(4.4)

The idea is that, when all of the words in the text are tightly clustered around the document’s score (i.e., it contains few words that deviate strongly from the document’s score), our certainty is higher that we are really reading a document with that particular score. In general, standard errors tended to be lower when texts were longer.

Before showing the results, two things are worth noting. First, the reference documents need not include all of the MPs who were at either extreme of our scale. Instead, the aim is to select MPs whose positions can uncontroversially be assumed in advance. Other MPs are freely estimated and can easily end up at one or other end of the spectrum. Indeed, as we will see below, several MPs who do not feature in the reference documents turn out to be more extreme than some of the MPs that do feature in them; this occurs because the language use of such MPs is highly similar to the reference documents. Second, some individual MPs that are included in the reference documents need not end up at the very extreme of the scale, if their language use differs from the typical MP featuring in the reference document. Taken together, these two points mean that my procedure is ‘lightly supervised’; almost all MPs’ positions are freely estimated, rather than assumed in advance.

4.8.3 MPs’ Estimated Positions: Patterns and Validation

All documents, whether they appeared in the first or second period, were placed on a common scale. Before using them in any substantive analysis, it is important to carefully validate the results. There are no formal statistical tests of how well a particular implementation of text analysis has performed (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Three validation procedures were used. First, I simply examined the scales to ensure that the placement of MPs appeared sensible. Second, I examined the language associated with each end of the estimated scale, to ensure that it genuinely measures differences in positions on welfare reform. And third, I made comparisons between estimated wordscores positions for different groups of MPs who should, in theory, take opposing positions on welfare reform.
To show results by individual, Figures 4.20 and 4.21 plot the estimated wordscores positions for fifty selected MPs in each of the first and second periods, together with 95% confidence intervals. Positions further to the right end indicate greater support for reform; those further to the left end indicate greater support for traditional benefits provision. The confidence intervals are narrower for MPs who spoke the most. In the first period, unsurprisingly, the left end of the spectrum contains many members of the Socialist Campaign Group, who are contained in the reference documents used for estimation. Some well-known MPs who were not contained in the reference documents also used very pro-benefits rhetoric, including people who went on to become cabinet ministers under Tony Blair such as Frank Dobson and David Blunkett. The right end of the spectrum in the period contains MPs whose positions are entirely freely estimated. Interestingly, we can see that several people who led the ‘New Labour’ project were already using more pro-reform rhetoric, including Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

In the second period, meanwhile, at the left end (indicating MPs whose rhetoric was similar to the poverty/need frames prevalent in the first period), we again find luminaries of the Labour left, such as Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, Dennis Skinner, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone, whose positions are fully freely estimated. The right end, unsurprisingly, contains the five Secretaries of State in the ‘reform/fraud’ reference document, together with key New Labour figures from the right of the party whose positions are freely estimated, such as John Reid, Gordon Brown, Alan Johnson and Ruth Kelly, who were strongly associated with welfare reform. Tony Blair himself does not appear in the second period, because he did not speak in any debates in the House of Commons, with the exception of Prime Ministers’ Question Time, which does not feature in my dataset.
Figure 4.20: Estimated Wordscores Positions for Selected MPs, 1987-1994 with 95% Confidence Intervals
Figure 4.21: Estimated Wordscores Positions for Selected MPs, 1994-2007, with 95% Confidence Intervals


Estimated Wordscores Position

-1.0 -0.5 0.0 0.5 1.0
The same data can be used to look at how individual MPs changed their rhetoric between the two periods. Sixty-seven MPs appear in both. Figure 4.22 shows estimated positions in both periods for selected MPs, grouped into three panels. At the bottom, we find MPs who remained consistently pro-welfare in both periods. Although some of them changed their rhetoric over time, they remained at the pro-welfare end of the scale in the second period. The middle panel shows MPs who were consistently centrist in both periods, including Frank Field, known as one of Britain’s foremost experts on social policy, who has offered radical proposals for reform over the years that do not fit neatly into any ideological category. Finally, the top panel shows MPs who moved substantially against welfare over time, with estimated positions in the second period that are above the second period’s median. These include many of the government ministers mentioned above, as well as some unexpected names such as Diane Abbott, a well-known leftwing MP. Some of them moved very substantially, such as David Blunkett, who went from one of the most pro-welfare MPs in the first period to one of the most hostile in the second.

The confidence intervals are a reminder that, as with most variables in political science, MPs’ positions are estimated with some measurement error. However, this will only bias the results of statistical analysis if the measurement error is systematically different from zero, as well as correlated with the independent variables. Neither of these appears likely to be the case. In particular, there is no reason to suspect that our estimates will be less precise for careerists or working-class MPs, or for any of the control variables used in Chapter 4, like age or gender.

Finally, it is worth noting that although the placement of individual MPs on the scale is not too surprising, the extent of differences between them, and which groups of MPs are different to each other, are the real contributions of the wordscores analysis, and are where the results are more surprising. Our null hypothesis would be that intra-party differences are quite modest, based on the traditional picture of very strong party discipline in Westminster. But these estimates reveal very substantial differences in rhetorical positions, with many MPs highly statistically distinguishable from each other.

Second, we should verify that the scale does, in fact, measure what it purports to measure: differences in MPs’ positions on welfare reform. Tables 4.5 and 4.6 display the most representative
words used by MPs at each end of the estimated scale. The “anti-reform” and “pro-reform” columns include words used by the bottom 30 and top 30 documents respectively. These words were selected by down-weighting infrequently-used terms that convey little political meaning, using
a model-based approach developed by Monroe, Colaresi, and Quinn 2008. Their method aims to select politically significant words that distinguish one or more sets of documents. In this case, speeches by MPs appearing at each end of the Wordscores scale were characterized and contrasted. The idea behind their method is to avoid producing a list of highly obscure words that are used distinctively, but rarely, and therefore have high sampling variance. Such words may appear more in one set of documents than another due to chance alone, rather than reflecting real rhetorical and political differences.

It begins with a quantity that is estimated from the data, the probability of word \( w \) being used by group \( l \), calculated as:

\[
\hat{\pi}_w^l = \left( \frac{\hat{y}_w + \alpha_w}{n + \alpha_0} \right)^l
\]  

(4.5)

where \( \hat{y}_w \) is the observed word count of word \( w \) in documents written by \( l \), \( n \) is the total number of words in those documents, \( \alpha \) is an uninformative prior set to 0.01, and \( \alpha_0 = \sum_{i=0}^{W} \alpha_i \) for all \( W \) unique words in the documents. As with many “bag of words” approaches to text analysis, this can be viewed as the outcome of a Naive Bayes process, where the probability of each word being chosen is independent of the probabilities for all other words, and word frequencies can be modelled with a multinomial distribution. The use of uninformative priors prevents odds ratios (defined below) from being infinite for words that are spoken by only one of the groups.

Words are then characterized by the log odds of that word being used by group \( l \), relative to all other words:

\[
\hat{\Omega}_w^l = \log \left( \frac{\hat{\pi}_w}{1 - \hat{\pi}_w} \right)^l
\]  

(4.6)

and word usage between two groups \( l \) and \( r \) is compared using the log odds ratio:

\[
\hat{\delta}_{w}^{l-r} = \log \left( \frac{\hat{\Omega}_w^l}{\hat{\Omega}_w^r} \right)
\]  

(4.7)

which is greater than 1 whenever group \( l \) uses the word more frequently than \( r \). From the data,
this is calculated using:

\[ \hat{d}_{lw}^{l-r} = \log \left( \frac{\hat{y}_w + \alpha_w}{n + \alpha_0 - \hat{y}_w - \alpha_w} \right)^l - \log \left( \frac{\hat{y}_w + \alpha_w}{n + \alpha_0 - \hat{y}_w - \alpha_w} \right)^r \]  \hspace{1cm} (4.8)

Given the model, we can now calculate the variance of this quantity for each word, as:\textsuperscript{12}

\[ \hat{\sigma}^2(\hat{d}_{lw}^{l-r}) = \left( \frac{1}{\hat{y}_w + \alpha_w} \right)^l + \left( \frac{1}{\hat{y}_w + \alpha_w} \right)^r \] \hspace{1cm} (4.9)

and then we use this to produce a z-score for each word, scaling the observed log odds ratio by the variance:

\[ \zeta_{lw}^{l-r} = \frac{\hat{d}_{lw}^{l-r}}{\sqrt{\hat{\sigma}^2(\hat{d}_{lw}^{l-r})}} \] \hspace{1cm} (4.10)

This means that infrequently-used high-variance words will be downweighted, and the words scored as having the highest difference between the two groups will represent something of a compromise between large observed differences in frequency and low variance. The method was applied to all words used by the top 30 and bottom 30 documents in the estimated Wordscores scale. Table 4.5 displays the 50 most representative words for both groups of MPs, while Table 4.6 shows just the 25 most representative adjectives, which have been shown to be the most partisan part of vocabulary (Diermeier et al. 2012).

As would be expected, MPs at the the anti-reform end of the scale used language about poverty, need and hardship, implying that benefits were necessary and legitimate. Table 4.5 shows that they talked about vulnerable groups such as the poor, elderly, youngsters and unemployed, about issues such as cuts (to benefits), suffering, hardship and loss, used language suggesting problems of poverty and other issues dealt with by the welfare state including ill, afford and wages, as well as negative and emotive language such as worse and cannot. On the other hand, the most pro-reform MPs are associated with key topics such as fraud, and new deal, and clearly show a concern with work, working, employment and employers, in line with New Labour’s “welfare to work” rhetoric. They also heavily use language associated with welfare reform, including measures, proposals, reform,

\textsuperscript{12} See p. 385 of Monroe, Colaresi, and Quinn 2008 for the derivation
review, programme and progress. Table 4.6 shows stark differences in the emotiveness of language. MPs at the anti-reform end of the scale used adjectives like desperate, severe, disgraceful, inadequate, needy and freezing, while those at the other end used words that described their reform programme in optimistic terms such as important, significant, modern, successful, affordable and radical.

Table 4.5: Most important words for MPs at each end of the spectrum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Reform</th>
<th>Pro-Reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. old</td>
<td>1. work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. poor</td>
<td>2. new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. london</td>
<td>3. pension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. live</td>
<td>4. deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. social</td>
<td>5. pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. elderly</td>
<td>6. ensure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. young</td>
<td>7. help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. attendance</td>
<td>8. credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. housing</td>
<td>9. system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. rent</td>
<td>10. right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. many</td>
<td>11. important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. fund</td>
<td>12. lone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. tonight</td>
<td>13. pensioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. family</td>
<td>14. more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. told</td>
<td>15. fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. society</td>
<td>16. measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. night</td>
<td>17. support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. students</td>
<td>18. benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. what</td>
<td>19. tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. even</td>
<td>20. proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. worse</td>
<td>21. service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. cuts</td>
<td>22. national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. rich</td>
<td>23. reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. youngsters</td>
<td>24. minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. city</td>
<td>25. million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importantly, these words demonstrate differences in word usage related to welfare, rather than differences in language that are attributable to class background. The ends of the scale do not, for instance, simply reflect typical middle-class and working-class words. As a result, working-class
Table 4.6: Most important adjectives for MPs at each end of the spectrum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Reform</th>
<th>Pro-Reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td>new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wise</td>
<td>important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transitional</td>
<td>national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decent</td>
<td>minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industrial</td>
<td>previous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supplementary</td>
<td>clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cold</td>
<td>personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average</td>
<td>basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desperate</td>
<td>possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>severe</td>
<td>happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>massive</td>
<td>determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disgraceful</td>
<td>existing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private</td>
<td>significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single</td>
<td>occupational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ashamed</td>
<td>appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate</td>
<td>contributory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needy</td>
<td>modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>real</td>
<td>early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wealthy</td>
<td>additional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empty</td>
<td>successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enormous</td>
<td>wider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>normal</td>
<td>substantial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsible</td>
<td>affordable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retired</td>
<td>radical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freezing</td>
<td>independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MPs can easily end up at the pro-reform end of the scale (and some do in reality, like Alan Johnson), and vice versa.

Third, Figure 4.23 compares estimated wordscores positions for selected groups of MPs who should, a priori, take opposing positions on welfare reform. The aim is to verify that wordscores positions differ systematically across those groups in the ways that we would expect. In each case, box-and-whisker plots are used that illustrate the distribution of estimated scores for each subgroup. Panel (a) compares estimates for MPs in the Socialist Campaign Group in the first period to other MPs in the first period who later went on to become ministers in the Blair government. It shows that Campaign group members used much more pro-welfare rhetoric, and that future ministers were much more likely than campaign group members (and slightly more likely than everyone else)
In the second period, there are many more external benchmarks against which the results can be compared. Panel (b) compares Campaign Group members in that period to all MPs in that period who were at some point ministers or secretaries of state with responsibility for welfare issues. This shows exactly the pattern we would expect. Panel (c) makes use of ideal points produced for British MPs by Kellerman 2012 for the 1998-99 parliamentary session, using signatures on “early day motions”, which were discussed earlier. He scales these to place back-bench MPs in a left-right ideological space. The panel shows estimated scores for MPs in our analysis who are amongst the 50 most leftwing and 50 most rightwing Labour MPs in his analysis. The results are interesting: while ideology (in his definition) clearly does seem to be a predictor of placement on the scale, the difference is quite modest compared to the other panels, and there is substantial variance. This illustrates the fact that ideology is not the only thing that predicts how legislators speak.

Panel (d) uses the results from a paper that places MPs into different groups based on their voting records (Spirling and Quinn 2010). It compares MPs that they label “rebels” (who often voted against the government) to MPs that they label “loyalists” (who never, or almost never, did so). Panel (e) looks more specifically at one rebellion at the start of the Blair government, described by Cowley 2002. The government chose to bring in cuts to benefits for lone parents, a hugely controversial measure among its MPs, which prompted one of the largest-ever votes against party lines. It compares those who voted against the government to those who did not. Both (d) and (e) show that MPs using more anti-reform rhetoric were more likely to vote against the government, including on the benefits measure in 1997. It is particularly heartening to see that the estimates are in line with real voting behavior. Overall, Figure A1 clearly suggests that the results are plausible.

13. Thanks to Arthur Spirling for sharing the data
Figure 4.23: Comparisons of Estimated Wordscores Positions for Groups of MPs

(a) First Period, Campaign Group MPs vs. Future Ministers

(b) Second Period, Campaign Group MPs vs. Ministers with Responsibility for Welfare

(c) Second Period, MPs in leftmost 30% and rightmost 30% from Kellerman (2012)

(d) Second Period, 'Rebels' and 'Loyalists' from Quinn and Spirling (2010)

(e) Second Period, MPs who Voted against Key Welfare Reforms
Chapter 5

The Influence of Elite Rhetoric on Public Opinion Toward Welfare

In this chapter, I turn to voters, and argue that the changes in rhetoric that were documented and explained in the previous chapters had feedback effects, turning voters against the welfare system. I begin by showing the key patterns in support for welfare in the UK over the past thirty years: support for conventional welfare provision has fallen dramatically. I discuss obvious and existing theoretical explanations for this change, all of which fall short, and put forward my own theory of elite opinion leadership. As empirical evidence for the theory, I present initial evidence from comparisons of over-time changes in rhetoric and opinion, which show that changes in rhetoric clearly precede and predict changes in opinion. I then offer a deeper analysis of panel data, showing that individuals changed their mind over time, that the young changed more than the old, and that successive cohorts of new voters were more opposed to welfare over time. Labour supporters, it turns out, changed the most over time, consistent with theories of partisan opinion priming in response to Labour’s change of tune on benefits. Finally, I show the results from an online experiment carried out on British subjects, who were exposed to exactly the same rhetoric that was used by politicians over time in the UK. The experimental primes change people’s opinions in a pattern that is remarkably similar to the changes seen in aggregate opinion data.

Clearly, this is an investigation of historical changes in opinion, over a period when many things
in Britain were changing. No single piece of evidence can possibly provide a ‘smoking gun’ that on its own proves that elite discourse was the driving force. Instead, by presenting a clear theoretical argument, and multiple empirical findings from several different datasets using several different types of test, I show that the weight of evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that changing rhetoric caused an unprecedented decline in public support for welfare.

5.1 Patterns of Support over Time

To begin with, I focus on explaining exactly how opinion has altered. Public support for the traditional system of welfare provision to the poor and unemployed has fallen a lot in the UK over the last thirty years. Declines in support were particular marked during the New Labour era, with some evidence of a slight increase in support in recent years, after the financial crisis. Key trends are displayed in Figure 5.1, which uses over-time opinion data from the UK’s gold-standard nationally-representative survey, the British Social Attitudes Survey. The BSAS has been repeated semi-annually since 1983, although certain questions have been featured less regularly.¹

The first chart looks at support for redistribution in the abstract: should the government redistribute from the rich to the poor? It shows a large decline in support from the 1980s to the late 2000s. Support then rebounded substantially during the financial crisis, albeit not quite to the levels of the early 1990s, when almost half of respondents favored redistribution. The next two charts look at beliefs about the impact of unemployment benefits on their recipients, showing sustained increases in the proportion of people who believe that benefits make people lazy, or stop

¹ In detail, (a) shows the question “How much do you agree or disagree that the government should redistribute income from the rich to the poor?” (b) shows the percentage of respondents agreeing that “benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs” as opposed to “benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship.” (c) shows the percent agreeing with the statement that “if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet.” (d) shows the question “do you agree or disagree that large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits?” while (e) shows the percent disagreeing with the statement that “most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another.” (f) shows the percent disagreeing that “many people on benefits don’t really deserve any help”, and (g) asks “how much do you agree or disagree that the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes?” Finally, (h) asks “do you think it should be or should not be the government’s responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed?” Questions (a), (c), (e), (f) and (g) have five possible responses, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” (d) has four responses with the same end-points. (h) has four responses from “definitely should be” to “definitely should not be.” Note that all changes are extremely similar when showing patterns in mean support across time over the response categories, which is also demonstrated later in Figure 5.4. The particular responses shown here were chosen for clarity in order to highlight key patterns.
Figure 5.1: Trends in Public Opinion on Welfare Provision in the UK since 1985 (British Social Attitudes Survey)

(a) Support for Redistribution
(b) Belief that Unemployment Benefits are too High and Discourage Work
(c) Belief that Benefits Stop People 'Standing on own Two Feet'
(d) Belief that 'Large Numbers of People are Falsely Claiming Benefits'
(e) Percent Disagreeing that 'Most People on the Dole are Fiddling one Way or Another'
(f) Percent Disagreeing that 'Most Benefits Recipients Don't Deserve Help'
(g) Support for Spending More on Benefits
(h) Belief that Government Should be Responsible for the Unemployed

Note: see footnote 1 for exact question wording
them working. These changes are especially dramatic, from around one quarter of the population in the early 1990s to around three fifths today. The next two charts show increased perceptions of the incidence of welfare fraud, which reached a height in the mid 2000s, when only 25% of people were willing to disagree with the statement that ‘most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another.’ Changes here are marked, but not quite as dramatic as in other areas. It seems that the British public has always believed that fraud is somewhat common. Like with redistribution there is some evidence of a turnaround in recent years, too.

The final three charts examine normative beliefs about who the government should help, and who deserves help. In chart (f) we see that in the early 1990s, more than half of people disagreed that ‘most benefits recipients don’t deserve help’, which has fallen to around one-quarter to one-third today. Chart (g) shows a similar decline in support for higher spending on benefits, from around 60% in the early 1990s to 30-40% recently, and (h) shows a remarkable decline in endorsements of the principle of helping the unemployed. At its lowest point, in 2006, only just over 10% of Britons strongly agreed that the government should be responsible for their support.

Taken together, these changes suggest a big decline in public faith in the benefits system, particularly by the late 2000s and early 2010s, when Labour lost power and handed over to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government led by David Cameron. This is important because it was the Cameron government that carried out particularly punitive and far-reaching reforms that built on the New Labour legacy. The public opinion data shows that they did so with considerable public support. The same cannot be said for the Blair government. When Blair began as leader in 1994, support for the welfare state was unusually high. He was not responding directly to public opinion, but instead to a perception in Labour circles that the party needed to change its image, as explained in detail in Chapter 3. Since Cameron came to power, there has been a slight turnaround in opinion in some areas, but skepticism about the behavior and deservingness of welfare recipients, and the desirability of greater spending, remain elevated by historical standards. While British voters seem to be increasingly warming to the idea of redistribution in the abstract, they remain opposed to doing so through the benefits system, a finding that has also recently been emphasized by Cavaille and Trump (2015). As those authors argue, a likely explanation is that preferences
for redistribution are more strongly affected by economic self-interest, since many citizens may benefit from it in some way. They may feel more keen on the idea of redistribution during financial downturns. The operation of an increasingly means-tested and residual welfare system, though, is about what happens to other people, and so is likely to be more strongly affected by political discourse.

Altogether, these trends underscore one of the key points of this thesis: that the New Labour years were the most crucial for the long-term development of the British welfare system. Here, we have seen that the Blair and Brown eras saw by far the biggest changes in public opinion; changes which have, in many cases, persisted to the present day.

5.2 Potential Explanations for the Changes

Why have these changes in public opinion occurred? Several seemingly common-sense arguments, or arguments from the past literature, cannot explain this turnaround. The first possibility is that the welfare system genuinely functions much less effectively now than in the past, and that benefit fraud really has increased a lot. This seems unlikely as an explanation. Consider, for instance, trends in the question displayed in panel (b) of Figure 5.1, which asks whether unemployment benefits are 'too high and discourage people from finding work'. Over the period from the mid 1990s to the late 2000s, unemployment (including long-term unemployment) was generally low and falling, while the generosity of benefits was reduced, rather than rising. There was little objective evidence of a dramatic decline in the performance of welfare programs from the mid-1990s. The fact that spending was flat or declining in real terms also means that falls in support for welfare, particularly when it comes to spending levels in chart (g), cannot be explained by a thermostatic response to increased government spending, whereby the public wants spending to be cut once it rises above some preferred level (see Wlezien 1995).

Assessing whether these survey questions indicate an over-estimate of welfare fraud is complex. Actual fraud is likely to be greater than official government estimates due to under-reporting, and survey respondents may have a different definition of fraud in mind than the official meaning of the word. For instance, some people believe that fraud includes claims by immigrants or by people who
have not paid taxes before (neither of which are illegal) or even simply claims by people who have large numbers of children (Geiger 2016). Nonetheless, even if official estimates are on the low side and some respondents have different ideas about fraud, it is very likely that people over-estimate the scale of fraud. Official figures suggest that between 0.6% and 3% of spending on benefits is fraudulent (Geiger 2016), whereas 88% of respondents to the BSAS agreed in 2008 that “large numbers of people are falsely claiming” them. It is surely the case that ‘large numbers’ of people implies fraud on a much greater scale than 3%. More importantly, there is certainly no evidence that the incidence of fraud has increased over the period, but public perceptions of it have changed dramatically. This increasing gap between perceptions and reality is particularly suggestive that rhetoric has played an important role.

Somewhat ironically, much of New Labour’s reform agenda actually aimed to increase public confidence in the operation of the system. Many reforms explicitly tried to reduce fraud, and to encourage welfare recipients to return to work. Whether or not these efforts succeeded (and most assessments conclude that they were at least partially successful), they certainly did not raise the popularity or legitimacy of such policies. As I will argue below, it seems much more plausible that the rhetoric accompanying these reforms had the opposite effect, sowing doubts in the public’s mind about the benefits system. This echoes previous findings in the US, where similar efforts under Bill Clinton to make welfare more legitimate also failed to increase public support (Soss and Schram 2007).

Thus there is little evidence that the public was responding to objective conditions in the welfare system. But could the public simply have been turning more conservative overall, rebelling against government spending in a general sense? Perhaps, by the time Cameron came to power, they had become increasingly Thatcherite, desiring smaller government everywhere. But this was not the case. Figure 5.2 shows trends in support for two other areas of the welfare state in the BSAS, healthcare and assistance for the elderly (primarily, in the UK, coming from the state pension system). In both cases, support remained very high over the period. A slight decline in support is

2. They also hold strikingly inaccurate beliefs in other areas where the objective reality is much easier to assess. For example, almost half of all survey respondents in a recent poll believed that the government spends more money on unemployment benefits than on state pensions. In reality, state pensions account for ten times as much spending as benefits (Geiger 2016).
Figure 5.2: **Support for Government Spending on Healthcare and the Elderly over Time**

![Graph showing support over time](image)

**Note:** Figures show mean responses to the questions “do you think it should be or should not be the government’s responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for old?” and “do you think it should be or should not be the government’s responsibility to provide healthcare for the sick?” In each case, possible responses are on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” (=5) to “strongly disagree” (=1)

visible over the Blair era, but not to anything like the same degree as support for the government helping the unemployed, which fell to around 10% at the end of the Blair era (chart (h) in Figure 5.1, compared to around 70% for health and the elderly. Whatever explains the decline in support for benefits is specific to that area of the welfare state, rather than being the result of a generalized turn against government intervention in the economy.

Similarly, the patterns do not simply reflect busts and booms in the economy. Britain suffered a recession in the early 1990s, when sympathy for welfare recipients and support for the system was relatively high, whereas the economy was in good shape from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, when support fell. But the more recent financial crisis suggests that opinion does not simply track economic growth, because support did not rebound to anything like its former levels during the prolonged downturn after the crisis. Support for redistribution rebounded quite substantially, but otherwise, the public remained skeptical of benefits.
In addition, existing theories of public opinion toward the welfare state from the comparative political economy literature, which primarily discuss cross-sectional variation between countries, struggle to explain these changes. Most existing theories begin by assuming that increases in poverty or economic insecurity, such as a rising risk of unemployment, should raise support amongst the poor and insecure for welfare measures, since those voters stand to gain more from such policies (Meltzer and Richard 1981, Iversen and Soskice 2001, Rehm 2011, Rehm, Hacker, and Schlesinger 2012). The major feature of increasing inequality in recent decades has been a rise in the income and wealth of richer voters, with other income cohorts stagnating. Insecure employment has also increased among the lower-paid. This suggests that it may have been rational for richer voters to turn against welfare provision, while poorer voters should have become more supportive of welfare, or at least should have remained as supportive as in the past. Perhaps, therefore, the changes in Figure 5.1 are simply explained by trends amongst the rich.

To test for this possibility, Figure 5.3 looks at data on support for the unemployed from Figure 5.1, breaking down support in a given year and cohort by income quartile. In line with standard models, a clear income gradient exists within each survey-year: the richest survey respondents are less supportive than the poorest. However, it shows that hostility to supporting the unemployed has increased over time amongst all income groups by about the same amount, rather than being confined to the richest respondents. This is not what we would expect if simple class-based self-interest, combined with income and wealth polarization, were driving the headline results. Instead, something has caused all income groups, even the poorest, to change their opinions. And more broadly, benefits continued to become more unpopular on several measures even during the recent economic crisis, a period when unemployment risk, inequality and economic insecurity were all clearly higher than before (Figure 5.1).

Other authors in comparative political economy have focused on changing occupational structures as a potential driver of declining support for welfare. Over the past few generations, there has

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3. This is the only question for which income data are available. The BSAS does not typically measure its respondents' incomes. But every few years, the BSAS partners with the International Social Survey Program to contribute British data to a cross-nationally comparable database, which does measure respondents' incomes. The income data therefore comes from the ISSP Role of Government surveys, where the survey question responses are identical to the BSAS
been a decline in the number of people working in manual trades and other low-skilled occupations, with declines particularly concentrated in large-scale unionized industrial sectors that had long been centres of radical socialist politics. These workers have been replaced by middle-class professionals who hold more libertarian and individualistic political values that may be antithetical to support for some welfare policies, and who tend to prioritize spending on areas like childcare and education rather than benefits (Pontusson 1995; Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Gingrich and Hauserman 2015).

This explanation does have some validity. As I showed in Chapter 3, occupational class is indeed a good predictor of support for welfare, in precisely the directions we would expect. Thus we would expect change in the distribution of occupations to lead to some fall in support in welfare. The issue is that the declines in support for welfare were very large, and were concentrated within a very short period from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. Over that period, those changes were not matched by an equally dramatic change in occupational structure. From 1990 to 2000, for instance, the share of the population in working-class (manual) occupations fell by about four percentage points, from 43% to 39%, which is not nearly large enough to account for the turnaround in public opinion.
on welfare. Thus changes in occupational structures surely have important political consequences, but their effect is felt primarily over a span of decades. They cannot account for the fast-moving changes discussed here, which occurred in only a single decade. It is also not clear that changes in occupational structure would lead to changes in perceptions of the performance of welfare programs, even if they do change the median voter’s preferred balance of spending between different areas of the welfare state. In addition, we also saw in Chapter 1 that opinion soured on benefits in the UK much more than in other Western European countries which were experiencing similar structural changes to their economies.

Finally, another candidate explanation would be increased immigration. There is good evidence that people are reluctant to redistribute to people that they perceive as different to themselves, sometimes viewing the welfare state as a transfer from themselves to an out-group. Perhaps because of this, redistribution tends to be lower in more ethnically heterogeneous countries (Luttmer 2001, Alesina and Glaeser 2005). The implication could be that increased immigration into the UK has driven opposition to welfare. However, while it is true that migration into the UK has increased a lot over the past 30 years, the timing of this increase also does not match the change in preferences documented here. The UK’s large increase in immigration occurred primarily from the early 2000s onward, as a result of the expansion of the EU into Eastern Europe.4 But preferences toward welfare were already declining in the 1990s, well before the spike in immigration.

5.3 Elite Opinion Leadership: Theory

How, then, did these changes occur? Modern theories of public opinion emphasize that voters carry in their heads a number of considerations, and that their preferences will depend on which of these considerations are used, or brought to mind (Zaller 1992). Material interest is only one of a number of potential considerations, and the eventual preference formed will depend on which considerations are actually used. Importantly, opinion formation does not happen in a vacuum. Voters’ information environment shapes which considerations they use. Political elites play a key

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4. See for example http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-and-uk

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role in emphasizing different considerations, through their rhetoric or through the policy positions they adopt and advocate. Politicians can also frame policies as necessary for particular groups, helping groups of voters who might benefit from particular policies to form a “group consciousness.”

The implication is that how voters form opinions on welfare will depend in large part on elite rhetoric. Voters can use considerations of both self-interest (whether I personally would benefit from redistribution) and of altruism (whether others are deserving), both of which shape whether redistribution is desirable or not (Aarøe and Petersen 2014, Cavaille and Trump 2015). The eventual preference that someone forms will depend on the balance of messages that they hear. Do politicians frame certain groups, such as the poor, as lazy and undeserving? Or do they emphasize voters’ own need for welfare policies? The balance of these two rhetorical strategies is what matters. As has been shown in previous chapters, the balance between these sets of frames has very clearly changed in the UK, in a way that is likely to have undermined public support for welfare. As means-testing and conditionality were introduced into the system, and political rhetoric changed alongside, politicians pitted those who paid for the system against those who used it. They questioned the morals and behavior of benefits recipients, and framed the system as inefficient and prone to fraud. And importantly, elite rhetoric is a mechanism that can plausibly affect all groups of voters, both rich and poor, all of whom have turned against welfare according to the data.

While these changes occurred over time in the UK, they are also consistent with the literature on ‘policy feedback effects’ in explaining cross-national differences in support for welfare policies. Scholars have long speculated that public policy in countries with a minimal welfare state creates an “us versus them” mentality, making recipients appear undeserving by singling them out as a group that is systematically different to the group that pays for welfare. According to this argument, in countries such as the US, social policy is targeted only towards certain groups, which leads to these groups (such as “welfare mothers”) being stigmatised, whereas in countries with larger welfare states, whether the poor are deserving or not rarely enters political discourse (Edlund 2007; Larsen 2008; Jordan 2013). By lowering the actual or perceived distance between the lower and middle classes, more encompassing welfare states can also increase social capital, and a sense of solidarity or affinity between middle class voters and the poor (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005; Larsen 2007;
Lupu and Pontusson 2011). Likewise, welfare policies may affect support for redistribution through a framing effect on how low income, poverty and unemployment are perceived (Mettler and Soss 2004). If benefits are time-limited and small, this may encourage people to view low income as something that is the recipient’s own fault, that could be solved by working harder. On the other hand, in countries with larger and more encompassing social benefits, the government may come to be seen as more responsible for ensuring a reasonable level of income for all (Larsen 2008). In this way, views on whether low income is down to “bad luck” or “not working harder”, which have been shown to predict support for redistributive welfare policies, can be actively shaped by countries’ policies. 5 The UK’s transition from a universal to a highly targeted system is therefore akin to changing between regime types in this cross-sectional literature; this is a prime example of policy feedback in action.

Some other features of the British change in rhetoric also make a causal chain from rhetoric to public opinion highly plausible. In particular, it occurred as much in politicians from the Labour party as the Conservative party. The bipartisan nature of rhetoric is a key difference to the 1980s, when Labour staunchly opposed early reform efforts by the Conservatives. Labour in many ways ‘owns’ the issue of welfare in the UK, having set up the welfare state in the first place. This should make the party’s politicians more credible in the eyes of the public as a source of information and opinion on welfare policies. 6 Voters are likely to trust Labour’s politicians as having the best interests of the system and its users at heart, for instance, whereas Conservatives are less likely to be perceived as sincerely wanting to improve welfare provision (Ross 2000). In addition, past work shows that elite influence on rhetoric is particularly likely to occur when there is partisan consensus (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Intuitively, voters are much more likely to change their opinions when they hear one-sided messaging, with no counter arguments. Thus Labour was probably particularly influential in shaping the views of the public, because the bipartisan consensus meant an absence of countervailing discourse for the public. One strong possibility, investigated below, is that Labour supporters were more affected by the changes in rhetoric than those of other

5. A relationship between beliefs about hard work vs. luck and preferences is discussed by Alesina and Glaeser (2005)
parties. Past work has shown that voters engage in highly partisan motivated reasoning (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). When they share a strong party identification with an elite cue-giver, they are more receptive to the message. Shifts in elite messaging often lead voters of the same party as the cue-giver to change their views to fit with their party, rather than shifting to vote for another party (Lenz 2009, 2012).

The possibility of elites influencing social policy preferences has occasionally been mentioned in the comparative political economy literature, but has rarely been tested, particularly in the British context (Rodger 2003; Horton 2010; Cavaille and Trump 2015). The one exception is a small set of purely experimental work showing that elite cues about deservingness or need can have large effects on preferences, but do not use their findings to explore historical patterns (Slothuus 2007; Petersen et al. 2011; Aarøe and Petersen 2014; Marx and Schumacher 2016). With regard to the political behavior literature, studies on elite communications have tended to look at areas such as foreign policy Berinsky (2007) or European integration (Ray 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2005) that are inherently complex, in which voters may struggle to form any judgement without the aid of elites. Welfare provides a harder test; an area of policy that voters are much more familiar with, and where they are likely to have a greater sense of where their own interests lie.

5.4 Elite Opinion Leadership: Observational Evidence

My data on elite discourse, first introduced in the first section of this thesis, are ideal for testing the theory that these changes resulted from a reaction to changed political rhetoric. The data both allow me to compare the timing of changes in both rhetoric and opinion, and provide measures that can be included in regression analyses. Here, I do both.

Figure 5.4 plots changes in elite discourse against changes in opinion over the same time period, using most of the same measures of opinion shown in Figure 5.1. Each measure of opinion is compared to the measure of discourse that most plausibly affects it. Support for redistribution and higher welfare spending are compared to the prevalence of frames emphasizing poverty, need and the desirability of redistribution, on the basis that when elites more strongly emphasize these frames, public support for redistribution is likely to rise. On the same basis, trends in the beliefs
that unemployment benefits are too high and encourage laziness, or that fraud is rampant, or that recipients are undeserving are compared to the prevalence of elite frames emphasizing the need for welfare reform and the extent of fraud. In each case, dashed vertical lines indicate the point at which public opinion began to definitively trend upward or downward.

Figure 5.4: Comparisons of Political Rhetoric and Public Opinion on Welfare Provision

Note: All measures are standardized to allow plotting on the same scale.

In all cases, the pattern is clear: changes in rhetoric appear to precede changes in opinion. Most importantly, the sustained declines in support for redistribution and the benefits system occurred
only after elite discourse had substantially begun to change. In most cases, elite rhetoric had already shifted by around one and a half to two standard deviations before public opinion even began to change decisively. In particular, the massive spike in reform/fraud rhetoric from the mid-1990s clearly predates changes in public opinion. This provides prima facie evidence in favor of the idea that sustained changes in the climate of elite discourse began to gradually alter public opinion. At the very least, there is certainly no strong evidence for the opposite view: that opinion changed first and then began to alter the rhetoric that politicians chose to use. Interestingly, and in line with the idea that rhetoric caused shifts in opinion, support for redistribution and pro-redistribution rhetoric both also rebounded somewhat during and after the recent financial crisis. The changes in rhetoric documented in Chapter 2 match up closely. Politicians began after the crisis to talk about redistribution more often, and more positively, but they did not advocate doing so through the benefits system as they had in the 1980s and early 1990s. The evolution of public opinion on the same issues was remarkably similar.

A more rigorous analysis can be conducted by looking at the relationship between these variables using multivariate, multilevel regression models with the individual-level data from the BSAS. The results from this analysis are shown in Table 5.1, which includes analyses of five variables from Figure 5.4, with the measures of rhetoric lagged by one year, and included in intercepts that vary randomly by year.7 A number of individual-level controls are also included, such as age, sex, education and occupational class. The results for the rhetoric measures show strong and statistically significant effects in all cases, in the expected directions. For example, an eighteen percentage-point rise in reform/fraud rhetoric - the actual full range of that variable over the period - is predicted to raise the average respondent's belief that benefits are too generous and prevent people standing on their own two feet (column 2) by 0.6, which is very close to the actual mean rise in this variable over the period of 0.82. In other words, there is suggestive evidence that changes in rhetoric could account for much of the changes in public opinion that occurred.

In the rest of this chapter I dig deeper to provide more comprehensive evidence for the theory, focusing on mechanisms of change, subgroups whom we would expect to change more than others,

7. The variable from chart (b) was not included because it is binary and extremely similar to chart (c), with five response levels.
Table 5.1: Multilevel Regression Results (BSAS Data) with Personal Characteristics and Rhetoric Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Redistribution Beneficiaries too Generous (1)</th>
<th>Benefit Fraud (2)</th>
<th>Benefit Deservingness of Recipients (3)</th>
<th>Spend more on Benefits (4)</th>
<th>Spend more on Benefits (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.0021*</td>
<td>0.003*</td>
<td>0.004*</td>
<td>0.008*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.0004)</td>
<td>(0.0004)</td>
<td>(0.0003)</td>
<td>(0.0003)</td>
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<td>0.037*</td>
<td>0.065*</td>
<td>0.023*</td>
<td>-0.042*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
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<td>0.045*</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.069*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.010**</td>
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<td>Non-/Semi-Skilled</td>
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<td>0.066*</td>
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<td>(0.013)</td>
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<td>1.400*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform/Fraud Rhetoric (percentage points)</td>
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<td>1.393*</td>
<td>1.494**</td>
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<td>1.494**</td>
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<td>(0.404)</td>
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<td>(0.675)</td>
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<td>2.739*</td>
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<td>72,262</td>
<td>60,414</td>
<td>56,756</td>
<td>56,812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
(i) *p < 0.05
(ii) Models also include varying year-specific intercept terms
5.5 Mechanisms: Individual Changes, Cohort Replacement and Patterns by Age

In theory, there are two ways in which rhetoric could have altered public opinion. Individuals may have changed their opinions over time in response to changed rhetoric, becoming more opposed to welfare. Or, individuals from older generations who were more favorable to welfare might have died, and been replaced by younger cohorts who are more opposed, having gone through their political socialization in an era where rhetoric was very different to the environment experienced by their elders. In fact, there is evidence that both occurred over the period studied here, and I provide evidence on each in turn. I also show that younger people altered their opinions more than older people over the same time periods. This, as I will explain, is further evidence in favor of rhetoric being the driving force behind the changes.

5.5.1 Individual Changes of Mind

It is certainly very plausible that individuals changed their opinions over the period. The shifts observed in Figure 5.1 are so large that it seems unlikely that cohort replacement alone could account for them. Some variables, like redistribution, also feature some re-bounding of opinion in recent years, suggesting that generations do not simply arrive in the data with fixed opinions that never subsequently change. Nonetheless, with repeated cross-sectional data like the BSAS, we cannot be certain that this is the case. To fully investigate individual-level change, it is necessary to switch the analysis to panel data, which follows the same individuals over time. The use of panel data also helps surmount a different potential concern about relying on the BSAS data over time for inferences. That is that the response rates to surveys like the BSAS have changed a lot over the past thirty years, and some segments of the population who might favor the welfare state, like the young, poor and ethnic minorities, have become notably harder to reach, and more uncooperative once contacted. Thus it might be that the changes observed in the BSAS data are partly explained by changes in the types of people who are willing to respond to the survey. However, this fear would be allayed if we observe that individual people who were willing to be tracked over the whole
period changed their opinions in a way that is consistent with the aggregate changes in the BSAS.

Luckily, over the period that I study the UK was covered by a major panel study that re-interviewed the same individuals repeatedly over a period of almost twenty years from 1991-2009: the British Household Panel Study. Many thousands of individuals were tracked, with interviews carried out annually, although survey items about political beliefs were not repeated in every wave of the data. It did not question individuals on their opinions about welfare provision directly, but did include two items that are strongly related to preferences for government help for the unemployed and for redistribution. First, it asked whether the respondent agreed that ‘it should be the government’s responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one.’ Responses to this question are likely to be related to individuals’ opinions on assisting the unemployed. Second, it asked whether the respondent believed that ‘the government should place an upper limit on the amount of money that any one person can make.’ Here, responses are likely to be strongly influenced by preferences for government redistribution, which involves limiting the amount of money that the richest citizens earn. Of course, these questions are not completely ideal for my purposes, since they do not ask directly about welfare provision. But given the rarity of long-run panel studies on political beliefs, it is still at least worth examining the responses, if we assume that other linked beliefs about welfare provision are likely to have moved in a similar fashion. We saw earlier that redistribution was the issue area where aggregate opinion changed the least over time. Because of this, individual-level changes in opinion on this area may be a lower bound on changes that occurred in other areas, like the operation of the welfare system, where responses to changed rhetoric seem to have been greater.

Figure 5.5 shows changes among individuals who entered the panel at particular waves and remained in the panel until the second-last or final wave in which the question was asked. This means that these patterns can only be accounted for by individuals shifting their own positions over time. No new entrants came into these waves over the period, and attrition cannot explain the patterns either. They include individuals who began in wave 1 or 1-2 (the question on maximum income began in wave 2) as well as in three subsequent sets of waves, and focus on changes in the
percent agreeing with the statements, to give a clear sense of the scale of change. The general patterns of change – from this completely separate source of data – are reassuringly similar to those in the BSAS data, shown in Figure 5.1. Changes were fairly muted from the early 1990s to the mid-late 1990s, and then people steadily became more opposed into the mid-late 2000s, when the data end. The changes are also on a fairly similar scale to the scale of change seen in preferences for redistribution in the first chart of Figure 5.1, declining by around fifteen percentage points. The fact that individual citizens changed their opinions is very suggestive of rhetoric having an impact. Given that the patterns in Figure 5.5 are consistent with the BSAS data, this means politicians' rhetoric clearly changed before individuals changed their minds, not just before aggregate opinion.

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8. Throughout the rest of this section, I focus on changes in the percent agreeing with statements as they are more intuitive. However, all results were virtually identical when looking instead at changes in the mean across all response categories.
as a whole began to shift, as I showed earlier.

5.5.2 Differences by Age

Further evidence corroborating the idea that rhetoric changed individuals' opinions comes from comparisons of change among respondents with different ages. This is because we know from the political behavior literature that young voters are more "impressionable" and open to change, and also because early adulthood coincides with major life changes, such as leaving the parental home or starting a family, which expose young people to new viewpoints and cause them to re-assess their own interests. Older people, on the other hand, tend to be more stuck in their ways. Therefore young people's political views are in general more malleable than those of the old, and more responsive to things like shifts in rhetoric (Sears 1981, Jennings and Markus 1984, Alwin and Krosnick 1991, Sears and Funk 1999, Dinas 2013, Neudorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013). Hence if experiencing changing elite discourse is what altered aggregate opinion, then younger people should have turned against welfare more than older people who experienced the new rhetoric at the same time.

It turns out that for the most part, younger people did indeed shift more rapidly than older voters. The first piece of evidence for this comes again from the BSAS data. To test whether younger voters responded to rhetoric more than older ones, I created a dummy variable for younger voters, equalling 1 for all respondents born in 1960 or later. Because the data begin in 1986, this means that these respondents were in their teens, twenties or early thirties when rapid changes in elite rhetoric were occurring, coinciding with the age-range when the political behavior literature shows that opinions are at their most changeable. I then re-estimated Table 5.1's models with interactions between the rhetoric measures and this 'young' dummy variable, which also enters the regressions on its own. The regressions are otherwise identical to Table 5.1. The results are presented in Figure 5.6, which shows total effects and associated 95% confidence intervals for the younger and older respondents, respectively. Figure 5.6 shows that in all cases, younger respondents are estimated to have responded more strongly to rhetoric than their older counterparts.

As discussed above though, such evidence from repeated cross-sectional data can only provide
Figure 5.6: Comparison of Estimated Effect of Rhetoric on Younger and Older Respondents

Note: Depicts estimated effects and 95% confidence intervals. For younger respondents, it shows the total effect including interaction term between the 'young' variable and rhetoric.

tentative evidence about patterns of individual change. Some other evidence for age-based differences comes from the panel data, where I broke down the individual-level changes from the BHPS by the age of respondents who entered the panel during the first few waves, and remained until the
end. Young respondents are defined as those aged 25 or below when they began, which means that, just as in Figure 5.6, they would have been in their teens, twenties or early thirties when rapid changes in elite rhetoric were occurring. Old respondents are defined as those aged 40 or over. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 5.7.

Figure 5.7: Individual-Level Changes in the BHPS for Younger and Older Respondents

![Graph showing changes in providing jobs and maximum income for young and old respondents over time.]

Note: Bars depict 95% confidence intervals

For government-provided jobs, the results are unambiguous. Younger respondents became much

9. These cutoffs are illustrative only: the results are not at all sensitive to changing the cutoff points.
less supportive over time, particularly from the late 1990s on, when rhetoric was changing rapidly. Older respondents, on the other hand, held virtually the same opinion in the mid-late 2000s as in the early 1990s; they scarcely changed at all. For maximum limits on incomes, on the other hand, both groups changed by virtually the same amount, in part because young people began the panel much more opposed to the idea than older people, and so had less scope to change (whereas for government-provided jobs, they were initially more supportive than the old). Taken together though, the evidence across the BSAS and BHPS does suggest that the young probably changed more than the old, in line with what we would expect if rhetoric was the driving force.

5.5.3 Cohort Replacement

Such individual-level changes are not the only way that aggregate opinion turned against redistribution and welfare provision. As I will now show, cohort replacement also mattered. An examination of different cohorts provides a particularly good test for the influence of elite discourse. People’s adolescence and young adulthood are the most important times for the development of stable, long-run political beliefs. As I discussed above, young people’s political views are much more changeable than those of the old. Opinions on core political issues that are highly ideological and part of people’s ideological identities, such as redistributive issues, tend to be formed early in life and are subsequently quite impervious to change, and are strongly affected by events that occur during youth (Sears 1981, Jennings and Markus 1984, Alwin and Krosnick 1991, Sears and Funk 1999, Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2014). The implication is that young people’s beliefs are likely to have been powerfully shaped over the long term by the particular type of rhetoric that was prevalent when they were young. Younger cohorts in my data came of age in an era when politicians used more negative language about redistribution and welfare, whereas older cohorts grew up experiencing more positive rhetoric. Thus we should expect to find that younger cohorts are more opposed to welfare provision than older cohorts were at equivalent ages. Note that this is a different test to the age-based differences shown above. There, I found that differently-aged people exhibited different patterns over the same periods. Here, I am asking whether equivalently-aged young people – and only young people – exhibited different patterns at different times, consistent
with different socialization experiences.

Figure 5.8: Comparison of Support for the Welfare State Amongst 18-27 Year-Old Respondents at Ten-Year Intervals (Source: BSAS)

(a) Support for Redistribution
(b) Benefits too High and Discourage Work
(c) Benefits Prevent 'Standing on Own two Feet'
(d) Most Recipients are Fiddling
(e) Most Recipients Don't Deserve Help
(f) Should Spend More on Benefits

Note: Depicts Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Each Statement. Bars display 95% confidence intervals

Here, I present evidence from the BSAS that cohort replacement, caused by socialization under different rhetorical circumstances, does appear to have altered aggregate opinion on welfare pro-
vision. Figure 5.8 looks at the opinions of young voters, aged 18-27, at three different years in ten-year intervals spanning most of the data as well as the major shifts in aggregate opinion: 1989, 1999 and 2009. In the late 1980s, young people were relatively supportive of welfare provision and redistribution. But the new generations who entered the data in the 1990s and 2000s clearly began their political lives much more opposed to welfare than people of the same age in the 1980s. Around half of the youngest voters in 1989, for instance, supported spending more on benefits, whereas less than 20% did by 2009. The most dramatic difference occurred over precisely the period when my findings suggest rhetoric changed the most, from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. And they are larger for the survey items where aggregate change was also larger – charts (b), (c), (e) and (f). This provides strong evidence that growing up in a different political climate permanently altered the beliefs of younger generations, relative to older cohorts.

In the language of age-period-cohort analysis, Figure 5.8 rules out the possibility that these cohort differences are due to differences in age at some given time, because we observe different cohorts at exactly equivalent ages. But it does not rule out the possibility that the patterns are explained by something that is unique to the later periods of the data compared to the 1980s, and that later in life, these cohorts will revert to the same pattern as their elders. I have argued that these cohort-based differences will be permanent, reflecting completely different circumstances of political socialization. The patterns should endure for the rest of these cohorts’ lives. But a different – and potentially observationally equivalent – possibility is that the patterns are due to the younger two cohorts growing up during a booming economy, whereas the oldest grew up in the period of economic upheaval experienced in the 1980s. We know that economic experiences in people’s youth can have long-lasting impacts on their subsequent political behavior and preferences (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2014; Finseraas 2017; O’Grady 2017). Perhaps, therefore, the younger generations would have held much the same beliefs as the older generation if economic circumstances had been different. This would be contrary to the theory that it was discourse, not the economy, that changed.

10. I am by no means the first to look at cohort-based changes in the UK. In particular, Grasso et al. (2017) show, using an age-period-cohort analysis of the BSAS, that younger cohorts of voters who came of age in the Thatcher and Blair era were more conservative than previous generations.

11. 27 is chosen as the highest age so that none of the cohort observed in one year, whose minimum age is 18, can be included in the data one decade later, when the previous eighteen year-olds will be aged 28.

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people’s views.

Figure 5.9: Comparison of Support for the Welfare State Amongst 18-22 Year-Old Respondents in 1993 and 2013 (Source: BSAS)

Note: Depicts Percent Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Each Statement. Bars display 95% confidence intervals

Figure 5.9 provides strong evidence against such a theory, by comparing two successive generations whose early political socialization occurred during recessions that were of near-equivalent severity: that of the early 1990s, culminating in the ‘Black Wednesday’ debacle of September 1992,
when the pound was forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, and that of the late 2000s and early 2010s, the financial crisis and its aftermath. Both periods saw falling economic growth and high unemployment, especially for young people. If my results are explained by the economic cycle, citizens who spent their adolescence and young adulthoods – when political views are at their most malleable – in these periods of upheaval should have been similarly supportive of welfare provision. Figure 5.9 compares data for 1993 and 2013, surveys that were both taken just after the relevant crises. I only include people aged 18-22, so that the data for the latter period does not contain any of the same people as the youngest cohort who were featured in Figure 5.8, whose youngest members were aged 18 in 2009 (and therefore were 23 in 2013).

Here, the uncertainty around the results is somewhat greater than before, because there are not very many respondents in each survey who are that young. Even so, the patterns across all of the survey items are clear: the latter cohort is more opposed to redistribution and welfare provision than the previous cohort, even though both came of age during recessions. The pattern holds across all items, but is particularly prevalent for the items most related to the performance of the welfare state, and less so for the question that asks directly about redistribution, where, as stated earlier, there is the most evidence for an impact of the economic cycle on opinion.

Overall, the discussion of cohorts demonstrates that something was very different about the socialization environment for young people from the late 1990s compared to the late 1980s and early 1990s. More broadly, in this section I have shown that the ways in which opinion changed on welfare provision were very consistent with the theory that political rhetoric was the main cause. Individuals changed their minds over the period, particularly younger people who should be more susceptible to a changed rhetorical environment. At the same time, successive cohorts of voters began their political lives more opposed to welfare than other generations did at the same age. They grew up in very different political circumstances under New Labour. Next, I present another set of tests that are suggestive of an effect of rhetoric, looking at changes amongst supporters of the Labour party.
5.6 Effects for Labour Supporters

Earlier in this Chapter, I discussed the idea that Labour changing its tune on welfare was likely to be especially important. It led to bipartisan convergence between the two main parties, with voters no longer hearing much countervailing pro-welfare messaging. Labour enjoyed high credibility and trust on the welfare state, making voters particularly likely to listen to what it had to say. The change was also more surprising and politically significant than that of the Conservatives, given Labour's history as a once-socialist party that founded the British welfare state. Even before both parties began changing their rhetoric on welfare, the Conservatives were widely perceived as opposing the welfare state. Labour, on the other hand, was perceived in the 1980s as highly socialist and in favor of redistribution; a perception that Blair and his allies saw as hugely damaging, and set out to alter. One impact of these changes is that we should expect to find that Labour supporters in the general public were more likely than others to change their opinions on welfare over the New Labour period. Like their party, they began the period much more in favor of redistributive policies than other voters, so they had more room to change their minds. And voters will often adopt the favored policies of parties that they already favor, engaging in a form of partisan motivated reasoning as they listen to elite cue-givers who they trust, and have high credibility for them. Labour voters are likely to have engaged in a form of 'follow-my-leader' (Lenz 2009, 2012).

Looking at differences between Labour and non-Labour sympathizers therefore provides a further test of the idea that rhetoric is what ultimately altered aggregate opinions. If that theory is true, Labour sympathizers should have changed by more. This is a test that cannot be carried out using the repeated cross-sectional data of the BSAS, due to changes in the popularity of each party over time. Labour gained huge numbers of voters from the Tories over the 1990s, making any comparison of Labour sympathizers over time very difficult. If we found that Labour supporters were more anti-welfare in the latter part of my data, we could not be sure that this is because Labour voters changed their individual opinions – which is what my theory implies – or simply because people who were more anti-welfare to start with shifted toward the Labour party. As a result, I focus exclusively on panel data in the section, following individual respondents over time, and comparing those with different partisan identities. I begin with more data from the BHPS,
before introducing some new short-term panel data over the 1992-97 period from the British Election Panel Study series, which followed individuals over the period when Tony Blair became Labour leader and won the 1997 General Election.

Figure 5.10: Individual-Level Changes in the BHPS for Labour and Non-Labour Identifiers

Figure 5.10 repeats the previous analysis of the BHPS by age for supporters and non-supporters of Labour. To prevent the results being influenced by changes in the composition of Labour’s support base, it only includes panel members who were declared Labour supporters, or supporters of a different party, at the beginning of the panel. In fact, given the rising popularity of Labour over
the panel, 90% of the initial Labour supporters reported continuing to identify with the Labour party at the time of the 1997 General Election, 80% still did so in the early 2000s, and 70% did so at the end of the panel in the late 2000s. Most of them therefore remained as Labour supporters throughout the period when the greatest changes in rhetoric occurred. The results show strong evidence of partisan differences in opinion trends. For both variables, especially the question asking about the government providing jobs, Labour supporters became much more opposed than non-Labour supporters. For the question on jobs, two-thirds of Labour supporters agreed with it at the start of the panel, falling to one-half at the end, while there was no aggregate change at all among non-Labour supporters. For the question on maximum incomes, both groups exhibited some decline in support, but Labour supporters changed by nearly three times as much as non-Labour supporters.

The end result of this was that voters followed the parties by converging together from the left. Labour supporters began the panel much more favorable to redistributive measures than non-Labour supporters. The gap between the two groups almost halved on both measures by the mid-2000s, and all of this was accounted for by Labour voters moving toward Conservatives. Of course, Labour and non-Labour supporters are very different to each other in other ways besides their partisanship. Particularly in the early 1990s, when the two groups are defined here, the parties attracted support from very different areas of the country and from distinct social groups. Nonetheless, any baseline differences between the two groups cannot account for the different trends that we observe.

Time-varying confounders could be an issue, though: perhaps the groups went through very different experiences over the period. An obvious possibility is that Labour supporters experienced more rapidly rising incomes than Conservative voters. For instance, many Labour supporters work in the public sector, and public sector wages grew a lot over the period. Income is a well-known predictor of social and economic policy attitudes: in certain circumstances, people who experience

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12. Perhaps not surprisingly, the biggest defections were to the left: the majority of those who switched allegiance over time went to the Liberal Democrats or Greens.

13. Note that the y axes are not identical in Figure 5.10. Because the groups began at such different starting points, I chose to plot them with the y axes having the same vertical distance but different starting points, to allow for a direct comparison of the magnitudes of change.
rising incomes may become more opposed to redistribution (O'Grady 2017). To investigate this possibility, I used a variable from the BHPS that asks for respondents' monthly household income in the month before the survey. Figure 5.11 shows trends in this income measure for Labour and non-Labour supporters of working age who featured in the calculations for the 'government provide jobs' charts in Figure 5.10, where partisan differences were greatest.\footnote{Results are extremely similar for the groups that feature in the 'maximum income' charts. I focused only on working-age households because Conservative voters tend to be older, and income tends to drop after retirement, avoiding exaggerating differences in permanent income between the two groups.} It turns out that Labour supporters had lower incomes than others at any given time, just as we would anticipate. But over time, the two groups experienced remarkably similar, and rising, \textit{trends} in incomes. Divergent economic experiences, at least as measured by income, cannot account for partisan differences in the evolution of opinions. Indeed, classic political economy models would predict that both groups should therefore have turned against redistribution by very similar amounts (Meltzer and Richard 1981), but the patterns we see here are not consistent with simple notions of self-interest. Something caused Labour supporters to turn against redistribution much more than others, even though both groups saw their incomes rise by the same amount. The reason, I argue, is that Labour supporters were particularly sensitive to the rhetorical changes of their own 'team', the Labour leadership.

\textbf{Figure 5.11: Changes in Nominal Monthly Household Income for Working-Age Labour and Non-Labour Identifiers}
Finally, the British Election Panel Study (BEPS) over the period of Tony Blair’s accession to the Labour leadership provides even clearer evidence that voters engaged in such a form of partisan ‘follow-my-leader.’ So far, although the evidence strongly points in favor of rhetoric – and of partisan responses to it – we have lacked evidence of how or when voters perceived parties’ shifts in tone. Citizens often turn out to be surprisingly ignorant about the stances of parties on political issues, even in highly salient policy areas (Lenz 2012; Fowler and Margolis 2014). This potentially calls into question whether Labour’s voters really knew about its change in tone. To address this concern, I use the 1992-97 BEPS, which followed a panel of voters over the five-year period between the 1992 and 1997 elections. It has the advantage of asking how voters perceived the stance of different parties on a range of policy issues, and also asking the same issue questions to respondents themselves. This allows me to assess whether voters learned about Labour’s changing stance, and how they responded to that information.

As with the BHPS data, the BEPS unfortunately did not ask about people’s perceptions of the parties on the operation of the welfare system itself. It did, however, ask about parties’ stances on redistribution, asking voters to place each party on a scale from 1 to 11, where 11 represents the strongest belief that a party wants to redistribute income, and 1 the opposite. The question was asked in 1992 and again in 1995, 1996 and 1997, so that we have observations before and after Blair’s accession to the leadership in 1994. This was a period when Labour’s rhetoric was changing rapidly (see Figure 5.4), and those changes are likely to have been especially salient in the media due to the attention paid to Blair. Thus if voters ever perceive shifts in parties’ positions, they should certainly have perceived a shift here, and it should be visible in the data. Of course, learning about parties’ positions, and responding in a partisan fashion, is only one of several ways in which political discourse can alter people’s opinions. People could hear political discourse, and it could affect their views, without them updating their opinions of the stance of parties. But if rhetoric did change opinions, it should at least be the case that it caused some voters to update what they thought of the parties. After all, as we saw in Chapter 2, Labour’s change in tone was dramatic, particularly in light of its past, and did reflect a genuine change of heart on how welfare should be provided.
And indeed, the public clearly did perceive Labour's shift, as shown in Figure 5.12. It shows the percentage of respondents who placed Labour in the highest, most supportive, category (as with the previous diagrams in this section, the results are identical for the mean change). Again, this is a balanced panel, including only respondents who remained in the study from 1992 to 1997. The results cannot be explained by changes in the composition of respondents over time. There was a statistically significant shift in the perception of Labour on both measures, with the percentage of respondents placing Labour in the top category halving from just under 30% to about 15%.

Not all respondents, though, learned Labour's new position. This suggests a particularly neat test for the impact of rhetoric on Labour supporters. If rhetoric caused some Labour supporters to update their belief about the party's stance and then update their own preference accordingly, we should observe clear differences in opinion trends between those who perceived Labour's change and those who did not. I call these two groups 'learners' and 'non-learners', coding the former as all respondents who, over the panel, shifted their score for the Labour party downward by at least
one point.\textsuperscript{15} Non-learners are those who thought that Labour did not change at all, or thought that Labour had become more supportive of redistribution. In Figure 5.13, I plot changes in Labour supporters' own views on redistribution (measured on the same scale as perceptions of the parties), splitting them into learners and non-learners. As in the BHPS, Labour supporters are those who professed support for Labour in the 1992 wave, so the results are not affected by the changing composition of Labour's support base over the period.

The two groups clearly diverged from one another over the course of the panel. Although the uncertainty around the results is high, since the number of respondents involved is relatively low at just under 300, those Labour supporters who learned about Labour's change became substantially less supportive of redistribution. Meanwhile, those who did not learn about it remained unchanged over the period. Because this involves a treatment – learning about Labour's shift – that some

\textsuperscript{15} These terms are also used by Lenz (2009, 2012)). The results are even stronger if the cutoff is moved to two points down or more.
received and some did not, formally this suggests a difference-in-differences estimate of the impact of learning. Unsurprisingly, that estimate turns out to be large and highly statistically significant, as shown in the top row of Figure 5.14, where the estimated shift is of around two-thirds of a standard deviation of the 11-point scale.

Although non-learners and learners may be very different, this result cannot be explained by any differences in immutable characteristics between the two groups, because we are examining changes over time. Nor can the large shift in position for learners be explained by general trends occurring in the country at that time, since the non-learners provide a counterfactual change. As before, we must worry about whether the learners experienced some change that the non-learners did not go through. Ideally, I would observe both groups before the change in Labour’s position, assessing parallel trends, but the panel only began in 1992. Instead, I can try to rule out the possibility that they went through very different economic experiences. While we lack income data, the BEPS did ask people to assess whether or not they felt that their standard of living had improved since the 1992 election in each wave. Figure 5.15 shows that both groups reported virtually identical trends in their economic positions over time, reporting the percent who agreed that it had
5.7 Elite Opinion Leadership: Experimental Evidence

Finally, to gain more confidence in the results for public opinion, I test an observable implication of my theory in an experimental setting. If rhetoric is really what caused people to change their opinions over time in the real world, it should be the case that being exposed to the very same rhetoric changes people’s opinions in an experimental setting. If, on the other hand, hearing pro- or anti-welfare discourse has no effect on experimental subjects, it is unlikely that such effects could

Note: Responses were on a five-point scale from “much improved” to “much worse” (Source: British Election Panel Study, 1992-97)
have occurred in the real world, where these messages were repeated often in communications from politicians over a prolonged period. To be clear, no experiment carried out on contemporary subjects can in any way perfectly replicate the true experience of being exposed to particular forms of discourse over many years. The aim here is more modest: to simply look for an effect that, if rhetoric has any effect at all, should at least be minimally detectable when people are exposed to it in a controlled fashion. As I explain below, I also carried out a further test for the transmission of rhetoric by text-mining an open-ended survey question on the deservingness of benefits recipients.

One advantage of my quantitative analysis of the speeches is that it tells me exactly what the different types of political rhetoric sounded like. It allows me to expose experimental subjects to the exact rhetoric that characterizes the two opposing sets of frames that British voters heard over time. I did so using a large sample of British survey respondents, administered by the company Survey Sampling International. While not a fully representative sample, it is demographically diverse, and balanced on age and gender against the British population. 819 subjects in an online survey were randomly assigned to read either a pro-welfare speech or a pro-reform speech, based on language typical of the poverty/need and reform/fraud rhetorical frames. The experiment is therefore a between-subjects design, where I compare responses from the two groups exposed to different frames.

The speeches were constructed as an amalgamation of quotes from MPs who used language that was most typical of each set of frames (the more ideologically extreme MPs, as identified in Chapter 4), and from the most typical debates for each type of rhetoric (as identified in Chapter 2).¹⁷ In other words, the speeches are intended to be highly representative of the two opposing sets of frames. Subjects were told that they were reading a speech by either a Labour or a Conservative MP (the partisan labels were randomly assigned to half of the treatment and control groups each). The full text of both speeches is contained in the Appendix at the end of this chapter. First, to make sure that the valence of the speeches was understood by the respondents, and to encourage them to reflect on what they had just read, I asked them what they thought the opinions of the MP who made the speech would be. This used two of the opinion questions from the BSAS that

¹⁷. A very small amount of editing was needed to make the speeches flow naturally, but almost 100% of the speeches were made up of real quotes.
Figure 5.16: Experimental Manipulation Checks

(a) To what extent does the legislator believe that welfare payments for unemployed people are too high and discourage job-seeking?

Pro-welfare speech

Pro-reform speech

(b) To what extent does the legislator believe that it should be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed?

Pro-welfare speech

Pro-reform speech
Figure 5.17: Experimental Results: Estimated Average Treatment Effects

- Benefit recipients don't deserve help
- Benefits stop people standing on own two feet
- Government should spend more on benefits
- Government's responsibility to provide for unemployed
- Many people falsely claim benefits
- Benefits too high and discourage job-seeking
- Government should redistribute from rich to poor
- Government's responsibility for the Old
- Government's responsibility to provide healthcare

Note: Depicts estimated effects and 95% confidence intervals
have been featured in this chapter. First, they were asked whether the MP believes that welfare payments are too high and discourage job-seeking, and second, they were asked whether the MP believes that it should be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed. As shown in Figure 5.16, the speeches were largely successful in priming the survey respondents. At the lowest, two thirds of respondents believed that the pro-welfare speech indicated support for the belief that welfare payments are too high and discourage job-seeking. Otherwise, close to 90% of respondents correctly interpreted the speeches. Those who read the pro-reform speech, for instance, almost all agreed that the MP thought benefits are too high, and that the government should not be responsible for the unemployed.

After reading the speeches and answering the manipulation checks, the respondents were then asked the same set of opinion questions from the British Social Attitudes Survey that have been featured in the previous parts of this paper (see earlier in this chapter for question wordings and response options). The results are shown in Figure 5.17, which plots average treatment effects for the difference in mean responses between the group exposed to pro-reform rhetoric, and the group exposed to pro-welfare rhetoric. The results are displayed in order of their absolute magnitude. In all cases, they are in the expected directions. In addition, the patterns make substantive sense based on the previous results and on the form that political rhetoric took. Reading the pro-reform speech makes respondents notably less positive about the operation of the benefits system and benefits recipients themselves; the strongest effects are found for questions about whether recipients are deserving and the effects that benefits have on users. There are also large differences in support for the policy implications that flow from this: spending more on benefits and taking responsibility for the unemployed became markedly less popular in the group who read the pro-reform speech. More moderate effects were found for the question on welfare fraud, while for redistribution, the estimated effect is in the expected direction, but is relatively small and not significant. Finally, I included two placebo tests for other areas of the welfare state where we would not expect to find an impact from speeches about benefits provision: government-provided healthcare and support for the elderly. In each case, the estimated differences are essentially zero and are tightly estimated.

These results fit very closely with the patterns in aggregate opinion that we have seen in
Chapter. The largest experimental effects from rhetoric generally occurred for exactly those questions where the British public changed their views the most over the period (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Aggregate change was highest in areas about the operation of the benefits system, was somewhat more modest for benefits fraud, more modest still for redistribution, and virtually non-existent for healthcare and responsibility for the elderly. Overall, the results show that experimental exposure to the exact same framing that occurred in the UK over the period studied genuinely shifts opinions in exactly the ways that actual opinions evolved.

Finally, as further evidence that the survey-takers are being influenced by rhetoric, I asked them an open-ended survey question. This task required them to explain their answer to the question about the deservingness of welfare recipients, in their own words. As shown in Figure 5.17, this turned out to be the question where I observed the highest experimental treatment effect. The aim of the open-ended question is to see whether or not the survey-takers start to imitate the pro- or anti-welfare rhetoric of politicians in their own language. This is important for two reasons. First, because if they do imitate politicians’ discourse, it would suggest that citizens genuinely internalize the language that they hear, further bolstering the idea that rhetoric matters. In addition, there is a second way in which rhetoric could have influenced people’s opinions, beyond them simply hearing it and changing their own minds. Having been exposed to new rhetoric, people may also start to use the same language when discussing the welfare system with friends and family, amplifying the overall impact of rhetoric through network and discussion effects. The open-ended question provides an initial test of such a “language-spreading” mechanism, as well as some insight into the considerations and thought processes that lie behind the survey answers.

Most of the survey-takers provided one or two sentences in response. I analyzed their answers quantitatively, looking at the count of words used by those in the pro-reform and pro-welfare experimental treatments. It turns out that there were systematic and intuitive differences in language use between the two groups, illustrated in Figure 5.18. It plots each word used by respondents as a dot, with the x axis showing the difference in the use of the word between the two

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18. As in previous instances of text analysis in this thesis, I carried out standard adjustments to the texts beforehand, including removing numbers and punctuation to convert each response into a ‘bag of words.’ I also removed rarely-used words that only occurred in a handful of responses, and stemmed the words so that, for instance “fraud”, “fraudulent”, “fraudulently” and “fraudster” were all converted to “fraud”
Figure 5.18: Word Usage in Open-Ended Survey Question on the Deservingness of Benefits Recipients

treatment groups – negative numbers imply the word was used more often in the group exposed to pro-welfare rhetoric – and the y axis showing the total number of times the word was used overall,
on a log scale. Thus words that appear in the top left and top right corners were widely-used in
general, and were also used at very different rates by the two groups.

While unsurprisingly there is some noise, given that these are short texts, the results demon-
strate that the speeches can change people’s own language use. Those in the control condition were
more likely to use words that indicated a need for welfare and sympathy for recipients, including
“deserv”, “help”, “genuin”, “unemploy”, “cut”, “vulner” and “poverty.” Such language is of course
reminiscent of the language used in the text that the “pro-welfare” group read, and has obvious
similarities in general to the ‘poverty/need’ set of frames that I discussed at length in Chapter 2.
To give a flavor of what these sympathetic responses sound like, below are a selection of actual
responses from those in the pro-welfare treatment group, using some of the words highlighted in
Figure 5.18. The responses imply that being in receipt of benefits may not be the individual’s
own fault, and they closely echo politicians’ pro-welfare framing in their insistence that benefits
are often a necessary and legitimate form of relief. They indicate that when primed appropriately,
people are capable of expressing genuine sympathy for benefits recipients, even in today’s Britain
where the benefits system is overwhelmingly unpopular:

“Many people struggle to find work for a multitude of reason. Disability and low skill
sets are some of the reasons. It’s not always their fault they are in that position”

“Many do deserve help but are unable to get enough. Many disabled people have had
benefits cut”

“People need to be helped if they are vulnerable or in a difficult situation”

“The benefit system was introduced to help the vulnerable and should be maintained
and kept at a high level”

“People who cannot work for physical health or mental health reasons should not be
subjected to a life of poverty as it is not their fault that they are unable to work”

“They deserve the benefits to live on. The majority are decent hardworking people who
find themselves distraught through no fault of their own”

“If they have lost their job through no fault of their own, then they need to have some
assistance, after all they have already paid into the welfare system through personal
taxation”
"If I think of anyone unemployed who isn’t looking for work with enthusiasm I know them to have had their education, hopes and confidence ruined since childhood by poverty. They still deserve help”

"Some people genuinely need an income to survive and if the option wasn’t available then God knows what would happen”

On the other hand, those who were in the pro-reform rhetoric treatment group were more likely to use language that indicated a lack of sympathy for respondents, suggested problems with the system, or implied that recipients of benefits should be working. They tended to choose words and phrases like “work”, “too many”, “fraud”, “problem”, “capable” (of working), “milk” (-ing the system), “lazy” and “wrong.” Again, here is an illustration of actual quotes from those in the pro-reform treatment group, using the words displayed in Figure 5.18. their concerns closely echo the speech they were asked to read, which talks directly about fraud, raises concerns about the behavior of benefits recipients, and suggests that the system fails to reward hard work (see the Appendix to this chapter for the full wording):

“Some people take advantage of the systems and are capable of work. However, they choose not to as their disposable income on benefits is higher than mine and I work full time”

“Too much fraud in the system and people not wanting to work as they are comfortable on benefits”

“Some treat the benefit system as a way of life”

“Lots of people are milking the system and should not receive benefits such as brand new cars. We should have systems that ensure that people in need should get help, not the work shy cheaters”

“Too many immigrants seeking benefits”

“Because they capable of working, just can’t be bothered or are working and claiming benefits”

“Many are capable of work but can get more money on benefits”
“Too many claim benefits who are capable of working which is unfair on those of us who are unable to work. My husband and I worked hard for many years, but our disabilities and health prevents us now. We are honest claimants. The benefits being paid to immigrants is out of control and should be curtailed and they should pay for Drs and hospital treatment like in their own country. That is why the NHS is failing”

“A lot of people don’t even try to find a job and just spend their money on alcohol drugs and takeaway”

“Some do not want to work and will find a way to get benefits - or are fraudently claiming to get themselves a bigger income”

Taken together, the evidence from the open-ended survey question demonstrates that different rhetorical frames not only affect opinions, but that they can also change the way that people themselves talk about welfare provision.

As with the rest of the evidence in this Chapter, the overall experimental results do not on their own constitute proof that rhetoric was the primary driver of changes in public opinion toward the welfare system. But they lend credence to the theory that the change in rhetoric in the real world is what caused opinions on welfare to shift so much. Indeed, throughout this Chapter I have presented theoretical arguments, and multiple empirical tests from many different sources of data, using a range of empirical approaches, all of which individually point to the same conclusion. It is overwhelmingly likely that elite political discourse caused the British public to turn against welfare provision; it is difficult to explain the patterns any other way.
1. Pro-Welfare Speech

“There is massive unemployment in my constituency. There have been closures of steelworks, factories, and some of the finest manufacturers in the world. Major employers in the area have thrown workers on the streets with only their final redundancy money in their pockets to show for a lifetime of work. Many who are only in their fifties are possibly too old to gain full-time employment again. Their lives and hopes have been shattered by the free play of market forces.

Unemployment like this destroys the social fabric, ruins the lives of millions of people and denies the country the wealth that those people could create if they were employed. It creates terrible hardship not only for individuals, but for whole families. It leads to the breakdown of marriages and to many of the crimes that worry us.

Why are people unemployed? My opponents claim that it is because people are not trying hard enough to find jobs. But the reality is that people are unemployed through no fault of their own. In my district, there are 46 unemployed people for every job vacancy. People cannot find jobs.

The extent of poverty in this country is also a scandal. Families struggle to make ends meet. Millions of impoverished people suffer poor health, inadequate diets, and a lack of housing. The future looks grim for manufacturing areas like mine. We live in a low-wage economy where poor pay and poor conditions are on offer with low-paid jobs. People feel forgotten. They tell me that they are struggling to keep a decent life for themselves and their families.

Meanwhile, my opponents want to continue to give tax handouts to their wealthy friends, and huge tax avoidance goes on in this country each year. We should be raising more from Britain’s richest citizens, not giving them tax cuts to heat their swimming pools while families are being punished. There are only two choices. Either we serve the interests of the
wealthy and the powerful, or we serve the interests of the millions of workers of this country, as well as the interests of the unemployed and the homeless. To do so, we need to recognize that the present level of benefits is disgracefully low. Many people depend on benefits to exist, yet my opponents want to make cuts to welfare in real terms. Cuts would add to the misery, poverty and sickness that already exist. They would hurt the poorest and most vulnerable. Such a policy victimizes the victims, and attempts to make the working people of this country, especially the poorest people, pay for the crisis in the capitalist economy which is not of their making."

2. Pro-Reform Speech

"Too often in the past there has been a tone of pessimism which accepts that it is okay for people just to sit at home all day on benefits and do no work. People are trapped in a benefits system that encourages them to stay out of work. Taxpayers have picked up the bill for mass dependency, and spending on benefits has risen in real terms. We are paying benefits to people who do not need them: they have taken advantage of the system, getting something for nothing.

The welfare system is also a bureaucratic nightmare, and there is a lot of organised fraud. Fraud needs to be stopped, and inefficiencies in the system need to be rooted out. Benefits fraud is theft - theft from the government, from neighbours, and from hard-working, law-abiding taxpayers.

The way in which social security is delivered at the moment is also resented by the public who pay for it. The people whom I am especially proud to represent share my view - a simple view - that it is better to have a country at work than on benefits. They believe that in society people have rights, but also responsibilities. They do not want to pay more for welfare and subsidize the bringing up of other people’s children. They expect a fairer deal for themselves. We must bring the welfare budget under control for the benefit of these working people who pay for it through their taxes.
Above all, we need to reform the benefits system. It is important to make work pay, instead of creating dependency. Anyone in this country should be better off in work than they are on benefits. Benefits should exist as a hand-up, rather than a hand-out. We must create a modern welfare system, which encourages financial independence, and actively supports work, saving and honesty. I believe that the best form of welfare, and the one preferred by the great majority of people, is work. We should prioritize work over welfare, and opportunity over waste.”
Chapter 6

Wider Lessons from the British Experience

In this final chapter, I summarize my findings and draw out their implications for scholarship on social democratic parties and welfare states. I began in Chapters 1 and 2 with an overview of how the welfare state in the UK has evolved since the 1970s, and an extensive description of the political rhetoric that accompanied reforms. What was once a relatively generous and universal system of support has evolved quite quickly into a regime of means-testing and conditionality, offering only temporary support to a small number of citizens. Cuts that are currently under way are among the most extensive and regressive ever seen in any welfare state. The New Labour era was the most crucial for the long-term trajectory of welfare reform; more so, perhaps surprisingly, than the Thatcher years. The party built on the Conservatives’ nascent reforms instead of reversing them, as they would have done in the past and could have done quite easily in 1997, since the UK had only begun to embark on fundamental changes and the public had not yet swung behind them. Their policy reforms were accompanied by dramatic changes in political rhetoric and public opinion. This unprecedented decline in public support for welfare meant that far from being controversial, the latest round of deep cuts under the Cameron and May governments have
proven remarkably popular with the public. Even Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party did not pledge to reverse them in its 2017 election manifesto.

From there, in Chapters 3 and 4 I went on to develop and test a top-down, elite-led theory of change, emphasizing the roles of party competition and the preferences, strategies and composition of Labour’s politicians. Far from being a response to public opinion, Labour’s leaders embarked on a path of radical welfare reforms before they were popular with voters. They saw welfare reforms as part of a wider strategy to change Labour’s image from a socialist party into a centrist party capable of commanding the respect of middle-class voters. At the same time, Labour itself was becoming much more middle-class, as working-class voices were removed almost entirely from the party. This enabled Blair and his allies to enact reforms, and changed the tone of the party, too, with few voices speaking out on behalf of welfare recipients any longer. The professionalized middle-class politicians who came to dominate New Labour had much less instinctive sympathy for people on benefits, and failed to stick up for them with their discourse. Finally, in Chapter 5, multiple sources of evidence pointed very strongly to public opinion following rather than leading the actions of elites. After their rhetoric changed, voters followed suit. Britain is now in a new equilibrium, with a minimal welfare system and a discourse and voting public that reinforces those policy choices.

Beyond telling an interesting story about how and why the British welfare state has changed, this thesis holds wider lessons. Of course, as with any case study in comparative politics, there are plenty of ways in which the UK is unique. Its first-past-the-post electoral system, for instance, arguably makes it more likely that parties will chase the center ground than in other European countries. Nonetheless, as I discussed in the introduction, the UK also has a lot in common with other European countries, both in the way that its legislators are becoming more middle class, and in the introduction of policies like means-testing and conditionality into its welfare state. Since Britain represents a particularly early and dramatic example of both sets of developments, I now finish by explaining how its experiences can be informative about other countries, and what they mean for the political
6.1 The Importance of Political Elites

I have argued that it is fruitful to think of policy change as a political, top-down, and elite-led process. If elites often lead rather than follow voters, then we need to know more about how politicians themselves think, and particularly how they respond to changes in their political environment, like party competition. As a first step towards this, I showed in this thesis that elites can be studied just like voters. It is possible to trace their policy stances and rhetoric over time, both individually and collectively, in much the same way that numerous other studies on public opinion trace the preferences of individual voters and whole publics. A very large body of work in comparative political economy assesses structure and change in public opinion toward the welfare state, but we know strikingly little about how political elites have talked and thought about the same set of issues. This work begins to fill that gap, and points the way to how similar efforts could be attempted for other countries.

Of course, one particularly important finding was that the increasing lack of social diversity in political parties matters. It is not just a moral issue, one of descriptive representation, where we might have normative concerns about unfair access to elected office for working-class people. It is also not just a trend that helps explain voters’ detachment from, or disillusionment with, political elites, even though we have increasingly good evidence that voters prefer working-class politicians to careerists (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Heath 2016). It also matters substantively, altering political outcomes relative to a situation of more equal representation between social groups, since working-class and career politicians take very opposing positions on welfare reform. Economically, one key factor behind the decline in working-class politicians in the UK was the waning power of industrial trade unions in assisting their members into elected office. Many works have pointed to the political and social impact of falls in unionization occurring directly, as unions’ political clout in the policy-making process has declined, leading to increasing wage inequality (Moene and
Wallerstein 1995; Rueda and Pontusson 2000; Card 2001; Western and Rosenfeld 2011). This thesis implies an additional, indirect political impact from lower union density, through its effect on entry into political office for working-class people. Future work could delve more deeply into how declining union influence has affected the selection of candidates for office.

More generally, European social democratic parties have changed in recent years, increasingly moving to the center on some economic issues, and representing a more middle-class and urban set of voters (Kitschelt 1994; Gingrich and Hauserman 2015; Evans and Tilley 2017). Many existing explanations for these trends see it as a process driven primarily by voters, whether due to long-term changes in their occupational structures and basic values (Kitschelt 1994; Pontusson 1995; Wren 2013; Iversen and Soskice 2015), divergences in economic interests between classes (Rueda 2005, 2007), or simply because there are fewer working-class voters altogether, making them less attractive as an electoral target (Evans and Tilley 2012). My findings here complement these voter-driven perspectives with an elite-led story of change. Social democratic parties have also moved to the center simply because they are made up of more centrist legislators than was the case in the past. Thus changes in the occupational structure of political elites matter as much as similar changes amongst voters, and differences over time in the way that legislators are recruited into politics can change the overall stance of political parties.

Importantly, such changes are happening today across the developed world. Recent increases in the number of careerist, professional politicians have been widely documented in the literature not only in the UK (Jun 2003; Cairney 2007; Cowley 2012), but also in places as diverse as Canada, Finland, Germany, Norway, Portugal, much of Eastern Europe, the European Parliament and the US House of Representatives (Scarrow 1997; Ruostetsaari 2000; Shabad and Slomczynski 2002; Borchert 2003; Fiers and Secker 2007; Narud and Valen 2008; Koop and Bittner 2011; MacKenzie 2015; Ohmura et al. 2017). The emergence of careerists also tends to be an important long-term consequence of democratization (Best and Cotta 2000). Falls in the number of careerists have occurred as well, especially at times
when new parties enter a political system or old parties rapidly decline, such as in Italy after 1994 (Fiers and Secker 2007); such declines in the representation of these legislators may matter politically, too. The one thing we do already know is that careerists are more likely to reach high political office than others (Koop and Bittner 2011; Cowley 2012; Allen 2013; Goplerud 2015). But this is the first study to show that they also behave very differently to other types of legislators, and in particular, that they approach welfare reforms very differently. Other countries, such as Germany during the Hartz 4 reforms spearheaded by the SDP, have seen similar policy innovations introduced by social democratic parties that seemingly contradict their founding principles, coinciding with falls in the social diversity of their legislators and increased careerism. The framework here may, therefore, be applicable across contemporary Europe.

Ultimately, my findings suggest that when parties decide on welfare policies, they do so as collections of individuals with their own goals and preferences, particularly within legislatures. Policy outcomes are more than just responses to long-term changes in the electorate, but nor can parties simply be conceived of as unitary actors, pursuing single goals. This perspective is especially common in the comparative political economy literature on ‘power resources’, where parties of the left are viewed as uncomplicatedly supporting policies that help the working class, and their authors contend that traditional welfare states are more likely to be defended when social democratic parties are stronger, increasing the ‘power resources’ of the left (Korpi 1983, Hicks 1999, Bradley et al. 2003). If instead it really matters which faction within these parties holds the reins of power, then we will surely gain additional traction on the politics of welfare states by moving beyond unitary-actor approaches when modelling the role of parties in social policy formation.

6.2 The Politics of Welfare States

My findings in this thesis also have implications for wider scholarship on the politics of welfare states. Much of the past work on welfare in comparative political economy grew
almost entirely separately from other branches of political science. It tended to take a wholly
different view of public opinion: as an independent force to be reckoned with, determined
largely by individuals’ economic interests, rather than as a tool of elites, as the political
behavior literature has long emphasized since the pioneering work of Zaller (1992). It also
tended to treat the politics of welfare states more broadly as a partly apolitical process,
driven by long-term institutional changes in the economy and society. For instance, Anton
Hemerijck’s recent comprehensive 500-page account of changing European welfare states
makes no mention of the strategies of political parties, party competition, or the role of voters
and elections. The emphasis is very much on long-term institutional change, mediated by
existing political arrangements, and hence by path-dependent processes of change (Hemerijck
2013).

My aim here is not suggest that these broad institutionalist perspectives are incorrect.
Rather, they are incomplete: “this is politics with a small p...there is little discussion of
party politics” (Iversen and Soskice 2015, p.192). The British story shows that short-term
political factors matter, and can have wide-ranging long-term consequences in much the same
way as long-term economic changes also matter. It would be hard to argue that Labour’s
adoption of welfare reforms was the outcome of a path-dependent process of slow institutional
change. Thus party competition and the preferences and beliefs of elites are crucial parts of
the story of welfare state change. Reforms can occur quickly, from the top down, and the
normal rules of politics very much apply.

One implication of older scholarship on welfare states is that public opinion can act as
a crutch; particular configurations of public opinion sustain certain types of welfare provi-
sion, and help explain cross-national institutional differences in economic and social policies
(Manza and Brooks 2008). In turn, public opinion is often seen as being the result of
long-term economic features of individual societies, like the distributions of income and un-
employment risk. Countries where unemployment risk is higher, for instance, may be more
supportive of unemployment insurance (Rehm 2011; Rehm, Hacker, and Schlesinger 2012).
It may be that this provides a reasonable long-run explanation of persistent cross-national differences. But the applicability of these ideas to over-time changes in opinion, especially on the scale of the differences seen in the UK in this study, must be limited. As I have repeatedly emphasized, the over-time shifts in support for benefits provision occurred much too quickly and on too large a scale to be attributable to changing economic or social patterns. Elite messaging was by far the most plausible explanation. Again, in this respect public opinion on welfare states obeys laws that have long been known to apply in many other policy areas, such as European integration (Ray 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2005), foreign policy (Berinsky 2007) and immigration (McLaren 2001; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008), where the idea of elite cues as a primary determinant of public opinion has always been accepted. Nonetheless, my work does build on a small but growing body of literature that documents large impacts of elite framing on opinions toward welfare provision and reform (Slothuus 2007; Aaroe and Petersen 2014; Marx and Schumacher 2016).

The implication is that far from being a prop holding up welfare states, public opinion may well be an outcome of them, that changes as policies themselves change. If a country like the UK can change its opinions so quickly, defenders of generous welfare states should be wary of relying on public opinion to maintain the policies that they favor. Past scholarship also tends to emphasize that countries with large welfare states are in a ‘good equilibrium’ of policy and public opinion. Countries with generous provision often feature economic structures, like skill specificity, that could foster strong support for generous unemployment insurance (Iversen and Soskice 2001). And once in place, generous and universal welfare provision may generate its own support base through the sorts of policy feedback effects that I discussed in Chapter 5, as everyone has a stake in the system (Edlund 2007; Larsen 2008; Jordan 2013). Policies and public opinion are, in this view, mutually and positively reinforcing. On the other hand, more selective regimes subject to conditionality call into question the deservingness of users, who tend to be different to those who pay. In general, strong welfare states tend to be sustainable only when middle-class voters have a clear stake
in them, too (Esping-Andersen 1990).

While the previous literature has tended to frame such feedback in cross-sectional terms—countries with less universal welfare states end up with lower support for welfare—the U.K. shows how these feedback effects can also operate over time. As countries shift from universalism to targeting, and reduce the generosity of welfare, public opinion can shift at the same time. The key reason is that such a shift is likely to be accompanied by divisive rhetoric that pits the users of the system against those who pay for it. Paul Pierson has argued that welfare states are sticky over time thanks to public opinion; strong and entrenched support groups make it politically perilous to attempt welfare state reforms (Pierson 1994, 1996). But much as welfare states can be sticky, as soon as mean-testing and conditionality start to enter, a process of unravelling may begin. If the UK is any guide, it could occur quickly. Welfare regimes, perhaps, are more politically fragile than we might imagine. Welfare reforms therefore involve a type of negative feedback effect, assisting the transition from a ‘generous’ equilibrium to a more residual equilibrium, with public opinion matching and reinforcing policy.

Interestingly, New Labour’s politicians almost certainly never intended to change public opinion as much as they did. Unlike Thatcher, they did not think it was possible for them to alter what the public thought. Instead, scared by a public that they saw as irredeemably hostile to Labour, they felt that they had to use policy changes as a tool to shift the public’s view of the party (Hay 1999). It is one of the ultimate ironies of New Labour that a party that set out to, at best, accommodate public opinion ended up fundamentally changing it. Indeed, there was a time when, around the world, politicians believed that ‘welfare-to-work’ reforms would increase rather than undermine the public’s confidence in welfare (Soss and Schram 2007). Welfare conditionality has often been seen as a good thing even by defenders of welfare states, since it encourages responsible and prudent behavior on the part of recipients, and therefore might make it more palatable to everyone (Van Oorschot 2002). And by taking the credit for some limited cost-saving reforms, a popular view twenty years ago was that
politicians could rescue generous welfare states by ‘turning vice into virtue’ in the eyes of the public (Levy 1999). Such accounts, however, fail to reckon with the widespread impact of the discourse that tends to accompany these policy shifts.

What does this suggest for the future of the welfare states in the UK and the rest of Europe? For Britain, the experiences with assistance for the unemployed and disabled documented in this thesis suggest that political peril may lie in store for other, relatively popular and also unreformed parts of the welfare state like pensions, national healthcare and state education if they too become subject to greater means testing and conditionality. More broadly, Thelen (2014) places many authors into ‘glass half-full’ and ‘glass half-empty’ camps when it comes to the future of European political economies. Placing herself more in the former group, she suggests that some European countries are successfully re-configuring their welfare states by re-configuring the coalition of voters that underpin them, drawing in new groups from the middle classes. This thesis, on the other hand, is more in the ‘half-empty’ camp. As I outlined in the first Chapter, many European countries are now embarking on the sorts of welfare-to-work policy innovations that were pioneered in Britain. Writing in 2005, Jochen Clasen wrote of the UK and Germany that:

“In the UK, the image of taxpayers versus (fraudulent) benefit claimants is routinely evoked. By contrast, social policy debates in Germany conventionally refer to a ‘community of contributors’ whose interests are not identical with those of general taxpayers...the fact that eligibility for transfers is confined to those who have contributed to the system has been regarded as one of the features instilling trust, and hence as a source of support for the institutional resilience of German social insurance.”

Clasen (2005), p. 32

It is exactly this sort of resilience that may be threatened by the adoption of British-style liberalizing reforms.

On a more positive note though, the account that I have offered here also implies that
politicians can shape public opinion more than they probably realize. It may be that, if framed in the right way, cost-cutting measures that make welfare more conditional and means-tested could actually enhance the public’s confidence in the system. Even in the UK, the shifts we have seen in public opinion may not be wholly irreversible, given the right political strategy and a consistently effective set of messages from trusted political elites. Ultimately, politicians themselves have a lot of power to shape not only how we provide welfare, but also how the public thinks about it. In the right circumstances, rhetoric and reforms might, in theory, generate positive rather than negative feedback effects. Whether or not that occurs is, in the end, down to politicians themselves, and how they choose to behave.
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