

Seminar 6 — Classifying a Welfare State

IR227 Politics of Change

July 2026

What you'll do in 90 minutes

[Bridge to seminar] *Take your assigned country's welfare-state arrangements. Apply Esping-Andersen's typology, power-resources theory, and policy-feedback dynamics. Then a brief reflection: how do the frameworks apply, and where do they require adaptation?*

- Six countries, three pairs.
- Each group: 3–4 students, one country.
- One analytical phase, then drafting, then exchange, then plenary.

Three methodological points up front

1. The typology is a 1990 framework. Use the analytical move (decommodification + coalitional explanation), not just the labels.
2. Power resources is broader than labour-union strength. Cross-class alliances, programmatic parties, constitutional courts.
3. Policy feedback can entrench *or* erode arrangements. Drift, retrenchment-via-inflation, conversion.

Six countries, three pairs

Pair archetype	Country A	Country B
Original Esping-Andersen archetypes	Sweden (social-democratic)	Germany (conservative-co
Liberal-archetype divergent paths	United States (limited expansion)	United Kingdom (NHS)
Middle-income welfare expansion	Brazil (Bolsa Família)	India (NREGA + RTI +

Within each pair: same archetype, divergent regime / empirical content / political-economic structure. (Esping-Andersen 1990; International Labour Organization 2024)

Recap: the three worlds

Framework: Esping-Andersen's typology

Liberal Market-residual; means-tested; modest decommodification. (US, Canada, Australia at ch. 1 p. 26; UK added by later literature.)

Conservative-corporatist Status-preserving; tied to labour-market participation; strong family role. (Austria, France, Germany, Italy.)

Social-democratic Universalist; state provision; high decommodification; defamilialised. (Scandinavian; Sweden and Norway named for Red-Green alliance.)

Decommodification is the welfare state's distinctive function. (Esping-Andersen 1990)

Recap: power-resources theory

- Huber and Stephens: where labour was strong and allied with middle-class farmers (Nordic) or white-collar workers (Germany, Austria), comprehensive welfare states emerged.
- Where labour was weaker or divided (US, UK pre-1945), residual or segmented systems developed.
- In middle-income contexts: Tillin and Duckett on programmatic parties competing for poor electorates; constitutional courts; transnational policy networks; middle-class buy-in via universalism. (Tillin and Duckett 2017)

Power resources is a family of coalitional explanations, not a single labour-strength variable. (Huber and Stephens 2001)

Recap: the paradox of redistribution

Universal welfare states reduce inequality more than means-tested ones, even though means-tested welfare states are more “targeted” at the poor.

- Universalism produces middle-class buy-in; means-testing produces narrow constituencies.
- Programmes the middle class uses are politically robust. (Korpi and Palme 1998)

Phase 1 — classify and analyse (20 min, no laptops)

1. Which Esping-Andersen world does your country most resemble? Where does it fit awkwardly?
2. Which dimensions of decommodification are strong / weak? Where does the gender dimension matter?
3. Which political coalitions, in power-resources terms, produced this configuration?
4. Which Pierson feedback mechanisms are active — and are any *undermining* the arrangement (drift, conversion, retrenchment-via-inflation)?
5. How durable does the arrangement appear today?

Output: a short summary — two or three sentences you can defend and will report to the class — naming the classification, the coalition, and the feedback verdict.

Phase 2 — draft your briefing (15 min, Claude allowed)

Case: Diagnostic memo

- Classification: which world your country most resembles, and where it fits awkwardly.
- Evidence: the coalition history + the feedback dynamics.
- Portability: does Esping-Andersen's typology travel to your case? Which element carries over — analytical move, specific labels, power-resources logic — and which doesn't?

No “mush.” Commit to a classification. The memo needs a verdict.

Phase 3 — exchange briefings (5 min)

- Swap your written briefing with your comparative-case group (same pair, paired country).
- Read their classification, evidence, and portability judgment.
- Note one point of contrast to raise in the plenary: same archetype-set — why does the verdict differ?

Phase 4 — present (5 min per group)

Each group presents its own classification, then names the contrast with its comparative case.

- Original Esping-Andersen archetypes: Sweden vs. Germany — same archetype-set, divergent regimes. Why?
- Liberal-archetype divergent paths: US vs. UK — same classification, substantially different empirical content. What does the typology compress?
- Middle-income welfare expansion: Brazil vs. India — same archetype, different political-economic structure. Does the typology apply?

Three things to take away

1. Same archetype, divergent outcomes. The typology's classifications compress important variation; the explanatory work is in within-archetype analysis.
2. Power resources is a family of coalitional explanations, not a single labour-strength variable. (Huber and Stephens 2001)
3. The typology's analytical move applies broadly; its empirical content is more locally bounded.

Tomorrow: environmental governance — a transition that has been only partially achieved.

- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). **“The Three Political Economies of the Welfare State”**. In: *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Chap. 1, pp. 9–34.
- Huber, E. and J. D. Stephens (2001). **“Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach”**. In: *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State: Parties and Policies in Global Markets*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chap. 2, pp. 14–38.
- International Labour Organization (2024). **World Social Protection Report 2024–26: Universal Social Protection for Climate Action and a Just Transition**. Tech. rep. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

- Korpi, W. and J. Palme (1998). **“The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality: Welfare State Institutions, Inequality, and Poverty in the Western Countries”**. In: *American Sociological Review* 63.5, pp. 661–687.
- Tillin, L. and J. Duckett (2017). **“The politics of social policy: welfare expansion in Brazil, China, India and South Africa in comparative perspective”**. In: *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 55.3, pp. 253–277.