

Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System **by Joe Soss**

Reviewed by Marianne LeGreco

Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System by Joe Soss, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002, 247 pp., \$20.95.

When individuals in need of basic services turn to federal welfare programs, they enter into a politically charged relationship with the government and its attendant agencies. In *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System*, Joe Soss explores these relationships between agency and client as a site of political action. By adopting an interpretive framework, Soss offers a compelling analysis of clients' experiences as they participate in federal welfare programs. His central thesis is that through participation in both social insurance and social assistance programs, individuals have the opportunity to express their needs, learn about effective citizenship, and reshape the institutions that influence their daily practices. At the same time, because of policy designs and social stigmas within our current system of benefits, the potential for such political action is limited severely. Soss's contribution provides a key resource for individuals interested in a variety of fields including public policy, poverty and welfare policy, participatory democracy, and gender relations.

Soss focuses his qualitative analysis on clients in two federal welfare programs, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). He draws a significant difference between these two programs. More specifically, SSDI is labeled a social insurance program, while AFDC is labeled a social assistance program. In the former, clients are assumed to have paid into the welfare system through payroll taxes, and are often treated as empowered consumers of welfare services. They become eligible primarily through an injury, disability, or disorder that prevents them from participating in paid employment. In the latter, clients become eligible for services through means tested measures of poverty. They are often framed as disempowered recipients of welfare services. Soss draws this key distinction as part of his overall purpose. In the space of political action, he argues that there is a two-tiered system of welfare benefits. Those clients drawing from social insurance programs are often more satisfied, more empowered, and more politically active in their position than their counterparts on social assistance programs. By focusing primarily on interview and ethnographic data, Soss takes an in-depth look at the lived experiences of 25 SSDI recipients and 25 AFDC clients.

To frame his analysis, Soss incorporates two key theoretical constructs from theorizing on participatory democracy. From a social citizenship perspective, he argues that extreme poverty prevents the full enactment of citizenship. Because impoverished individuals cannot provide the material needs that society deems important, their self-respect is threatened. Moreover, from a social control perspective, poverty is also coercive, forcing clients into a relationship with government that often threatens autonomy. With these key constructs in mind, Soss focuses specifically on the politics of establishing eligibility, the move from eligibility to participation, and the implications for policy design and political learning. In doing so, he clarifies the welfare relationship as a space of political action that leaves some clients feeling powerless, while others enjoy increased opportunities.

Initially, Soss turns his lens to the politics of eligibility for SSDI and AFDC that represent multiple layers of political action. For example, Soss suggests that individuals face several dilemmas as they decide to participate in federal welfare programs. Ultimately, by deciding to participate in welfare programs, individuals enter into a very personal relationship with government. Central concerns of agency power and individual dependence, personal identity and obligations to children, and economic security emerge as potential clients negotiate their needs. More specifically, clients offered a variety of reasons for participation. Soss provides stories from women who left horribly abusive relationships only through the economic security offered through welfare. His analysis suggests that others decided to claim benefits when their responsibilities to their children

outweighed their own needs for autonomy. Thus, Soss suggests that participation in welfare serves an important political function for clients who struggle within our current systems of practice.

In order to actuate the political function of welfare participation, Soss suggests that welfare participation hinges not only on the fulfillment of need, but also on the mobilization of demand. Thus, he argues that we must take a critical look at the claiming process as individuals move from eligibility to involvement. Soss provides an overview of the steps involved in advancing claims within our current system of welfare politics. Advancing claims and making demands involves defining problems, gathering information, deciding to act, making a claim, and gaining responsiveness. At each step within this process, clients can face barriers to their full participation. Within this section of the analysis, Soss begins to point to some of the disjoint between social insurance and social assistance programs. He concludes that throughout the entire process, clients on SSDI have an easier time establishing eligibility, making claims, and gaining responsiveness for their demands upon the system.

Some of Soss's most insightful analyses are offered in his description of participation in the applicant encounters. Specifically, he examines the dialectic of subordination and satisfaction within the two-tiered welfare system. In terms of client evaluations of application encounters, many AFDC recipients felt degraded by the process. Some clients felt uneasy answering questions about their sexual history, failing to see its relevance to their level of need. At the same time, wait times for AFDC applications were longer than those for SSDI, with some clients waiting up to three days to speak to a caseworker. Within SSDI, not only were wait times shorter, but clients were subjected to much less obtrusive questions and given more opportunities to express their needs in their own terms. Soss thus concludes that these competing experiences of subordination and satisfaction point to a hierarchy of social citizenship.

Soss also examines the politics of participation in terms of dilemmas of action as faced by welfare clients. Simply put, participation in social assistance programs often presents clients with greater risks than participation in social insurance programs. Because SSDI participants are framed as consumers within the welfare system and have greater opportunities to articulate their needs in their own terms, they are more likely to advance claims and advocate changes within their current package of benefits. On the contrary, Soss cites several stories in which AFDC recipients state that they often fear the power of their caseworkers. They believe that government agencies are looking for every opportunity to suspend benefits; therefore, they are less likely to upset the system and advocate changes to better meet their needs. AFDC clients are more susceptible to feelings of futility and vulnerability within their relationship to government agencies. As such, they are less likely to actuate their claims through participation.

Finally, Soss considers some of the implications of the analysis for public policy and political learning. Primarily, he suggests that participation in federal welfare programs shapes clients' understandings of politics and the functions of government. The lived experiences collected by clients tend to frame this knowledge. Considering that policy design helps to produce these experiences, Soss concludes that policy design has a significant impact on the way that clients understand their politicized position. He notes that SSDI participants are more likely to believe that their participation is effective, that collective action is effective, and that government officials listen to their needs. Because of these disparities between the social insurance and assistance programs, clients within these programs come to understand their spaces of political action differently.

Ultimately, Soss provides readers with a compelling analysis of clients' experiences within two federal welfare programs. To promote democratic citizenship, he argues that policymakers must focus on policy design and how these procedures and practices impact the lived experiences of clients, their understanding of political participation, and the political spaces of action within programs. He concludes his analysis by offering four points that welfare policy in the United States can consider in reaching the political goals of constituents. Initially, benefits must be structured to provide autonomy, dignity, and security for clients. Moreover, benefits should offer equivalent resources for all citizens. Additionally, benefits should recognize individuals as rights-bearing citizens. Finally, policies should enable individuals to become more involved in decision making processes regarding their own rights.

Although Soss offers some compelling changes in terms of policy design, he underscores the agency of his participants in his own analysis. Soss uses the lived experiences of his participants to problematize the difference between social insurance and social assistance programs, but he stops short of incorporating these experiences into his conclusions and suggestions. In other words, he encourages policymakers to consider the voices of clients in their policy designs, but he misses a key opportunity to allow clients to comment on the changes that he suggests. For example, Soss argues that policy design should be structured to provide autonomy

and dignity for clients; however, his commitment to participatory reform might have been strengthened had he let some his participants identify aspects of a program or policy that would make them feel as such. This focus on policy leads also to larger structural concerns of his project. Because he frames his suggestions so explicitly around policy, he fails to consider how these policies might interact with the culture of the organizations. In other words, perhaps different techniques and attitudes generated from within the administration of SSDI and AFDC also contribute to the disparity in recipient's perceptions. Finally, because Soss analyzes these perceptions of resources as opposed to the actual resources themselves, he needs to make a stronger case for offering equivalent resources to all recipients. In particular, he needs to address exactly how this solution would amend these perceived disparities, why differences have been built into the structure of the program to begin with, and what potential consequences (i.e., resource limitations) such a move might invoke. Despite these critiques, the evidence that Soss provides from the perspective of the client offers a necessary, yet often overlooked, political viewpoint concerning democratic participation and daily life. Perhaps policymakers and scholars would benefit greatly by incorporating these perspectives more often.