

Discussion Questions for 17.317, U.S. Social Policy

Part III: The Policymaking-Process

- This portion of the course examines how issues come on the political agenda and how several of the main policymaking institutions – Congress and the Courts in particular – function.

Policy-Relevant Institutions: Congress II; the Case of the Hidden Welfare State

- What techniques do politicians use to escape blame?
- What do we mean by the “hidden welfare state”? What programs are we talking about? Why are they hidden?
- In what ways are the hidden and visible welfare states similar and different? How large is the hidden welfare state in comparison?
- What are the incentives for politicians to use the tax code to implement social policy rather than regular spending programs? How is this a case of blame avoidance?
- When did “hidden welfare state” programs develop – at the same or different times than the regular welfare state? How have they grown over time?
- What are the distributional consequences – who benefits from these programs?
- What are the political consequences? Do hidden welfare state programs have the same resource/engagement/mobilization effects as visible welfare state programs? Why or why not? What might be the consequences for people’s feelings about government of hiding the benefits people receive?
- Why has the EITC proven such a successful anti-poverty program both economically and politically? But why are most hidden welfare state benefits directed toward the affluent?