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Original Research Article

How welfare wins: Discursive institutionalism, the politics of the poor, and the expansion of social welfare in India during the early 21st century

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Abstract

The worldwide explosion of social welfare has been described as the "quiet revolution" of our time. This paper analyses the expansion of social welfare in India during the early part of the 2000s. What explains this expansion of encompassing social welfare in India, following a history of disparate and fragmented social policies? The answer, I argue, lies in recognizing the importance of the "politics of the poor," the ensemble of negotiations that encompass both electoral participation and contentious politics vis-à-vis the political institutions in India. The paper develops this argument by drawing together insights from discursive institutionalism, Indian politics, and the politics of welfare literature. Doing so enables me to examine the ways in which poor people's political practices were interpreted by India's parliamentarians to justify the legislation of India's flagship social welfare program the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. I analyze the discourses communicated through 78 parliamentary debates in English and Hindi to enact the law. I blend this analysis with process tracing of electoral behavior of India's poor and the Maoist insurrection that exploded in the country's poorest districts at the turn of the century.

Keywords: National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, electoral politics, contentious politics, Lok Sabha, united progressive alliance

The worldwide explosion of social welfare has been described as the "quiet revolution" of our time (Barrientos & Hulme, 2010). This paper analyses the expansion of social welfare in India in the early 21st century. Following a history of disparate and fragmented social policies (Mehrotra et al., 2014), the country adopted encompassing social welfare programs in the early part of the 2000s. Beginning in 2005, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Program guarantees employment to any rural resident on public works programs for 100 days a year. Following the introduction of the scheme, the proportion of rural households employed on public works for any duration of time increased from 0.5% in 2004–2005 to 29% in 2011–2012. Although major deficiencies in the delivery of the program remain (Das & Maiorano, 2019; Khera, 2013; Shankar & Gaiha, 2013), its contribution to reducing poverty and enhancing human development in India's unequal contexts has been well documented (Dreze & Khera, 2017; Jenkins & Manor, 2017; Maiorano & Manor, 2017).

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The expansion of encompassing social welfare in India has been intriguing in the light of the scholarship that emphasizes the country's clientelistic features. Politicians in clientelistic polities maintain support by offering discretionary and targeted policies at the expense of encompassing welfare (Hicken, 2011; Keefer & Khemani, 2004; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Welfare policies in India have been characterized as clientelistic (McCartney & Roy, 2016) and associated with the politics of ethnicity and religion that form the basis for electoral competition (Chandra, 2004; Chhibber, 1995). At the turn of the millennium, India's two national parties, the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had indistinguishable platforms encompassing welfare (Kohli, 2012).

Seasoned analysts have explained the expansion of social welfare in India during the first decade of the 21st century by pinpointing successful campaigns by social movements (Chopra, 2014), the increase in revenues earned by India's central government (Manor, 2011), and the effects of multilevel elections during which state governments could claim credit for central government initiatives (Tillin & Pereira, 2017). These insights invite further reflections on the ways in which social welfare was debated in India's Parliament, where issues are discussed, and bills approved into law. How was social welfare framed by lawmakers in India's Parliament? What ideas underpinned their framings? How did lawmakers seek to convince each other about their ideas during their deliberations?

This paper addresses these questions by focusing on India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Program, under which rural households were guaranteed employment in public works programs for 100 days a year. This is one of the largest social welfare programs in the world, reaching almost 300 million people, a population larger than that of the USA. Promised by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance on the eve of the 2004 elections, the program's introduction faced enormous uncertainty due to disagreements within the Congress Party and between different government ministries (Chopra, 2014).[1] Nevertheless, once the program was introduced in Parliament, it was vigorously debated and, rarely for that institution, passed unanimously by its 543 legislators. Drawing on discursive institutionalism, explained in detail in the subsequent section, and blending its insights with the scholarship on Indian politics and the political of welfare literature, I argue that the politics of the poor explains the unanimous support in Parliament for this ambitious welfare program.

Methodological approach: discursive institutionalism

The research on which this paper is based draws on insights from discursive institutionalism, an approach that entails taking ideas and discourses seriously and situating these in their political and institutional context. This approach, Schmidt (2020, p. 71) suggests, helps analysts to focus "on the substantive content of ideas and the dynamics of discursive interaction in institutional context." Whereas ideas have often been taken as a proxy for interests (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993), strategic constructions (Jabko, 2006), and political tools in the battle for control by interest groups (Blyth, 2002), this paper draws on insights that understand ideas as narratives that shape understandings of events (Roe, 1994) or as collective memories (Rothstein, 2005) and national traditions (Katzenstein, 1996). Building on these leads, the paper understands discourse as the substantive content of ideas as well as the interactive processes by which these are conveyed. As Vivien Schmidt (2008, p. 305) puts it, "Discourse is not just ideas or 'text' (what is said) but also context (where, when, how, and why it was said). The term refers not only to structure (what is said, or where and how) but also to agency (who said what to whom)." Institutions are, thus, treated as both structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors (Vivien Schmidt, 2008, p. 314).

The methodological framework of discursive institutionalism allows me to reflect on not only the specific "policy solutions" proposed by politicians and policymakers but also underlying programmatic and philosophical ideas. These reflect political principles (Hall, 1993; Majone, 1989; Schmidt, 2002) that allow politicians to (re)construct visions of the world (Jobert, 1989) in line with "programmatic beliefs" (Berman, 1998) that shape "policy cores" (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Such ideas "define the problems to be solved…; the issues to be considered; the goals to be achieved; the norms, methods and

[1] As behooves a democracy of India's stature, disagreements over the program were substantial. The original draft of the program was opposed by many ministers, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself citing the cost to the treasury. They revised the text of the original draft, extracting some of its teeth. The draft was then referred to a parliamentary committee. Key figures behind the original draft informed the committee of the changes that had been made to the original draft, requesting their proposals to be reinstated. The committee reinserted the original provisions, which then made its way into the Parliament as a bill to be debated.

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instruments to be applied; and the ideals that frame the more immediate policy ideas proposed to solve" (Vivien Schmidt, 2008, p. 306).

For ideas to influence and shape policy, they must be conveyed through interactive and relational processes we call discourse. Discourse encompasses the channels through which policies are debated in the "public sphere" (Habermas, 1989, 1996). Coordinative discourses focus on the way policies are constructed, elaborated, and justified by actors seeking agreement and action within the so-called "epistemic communities." Communicative discourses occur in political spaces that entail deliberation, negotiation, and legitimation of ideas among politicians, the media, social movements, and members of the general public. It is on the communicative discourses underpinning social welfare that the present paper focuses on.

Discursive institutionalism enables me to situate ideas and discourses about social welfare in general (and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act [NREGA] in particular) within their institutional context. As the world's largest democracy, India's Lok Sabha (House of the People) offers its 543 Members of Parliament (MPs) the political space to debate ideas, deliberate policy, and convey their (dis)agreements in public. Voted to Parliament through 5-year (mostly) general elections, each MP represents between 1.5 and 2.5 million citizens. Over 100 different political parties from across 29 states and seven Union Territories that have distinct histories, societies, and political economies are represented in the Lok Sabha. As numerous analysts (Tudor & Zegfield, 2019; Vaishnav & Hinston, 2019; Yadav, 1999) have shown, the party system, attendant social movements, and Parliament have changed significantly since Independence. Together, these institutions constrain actors but are also transformed by those very same actors. In line with this insight from discursive institutionalism, the paper contextualizes 78 legislative speeches made by government and opposition politicians debating the expansion of social welfare in relation to the dynamics of electoral politics and radical social movements which shape parliamentarians' perspectives on poor people's politics.

The framework of discursive institutionalism enables me to leverage recent insights from recent works of literature that emphasize the role of "ideology and identity" in Indian politics that emphasize the entwined politics of redistribution and recognition (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). This scholarship helpfully challenges widely prevalent tropes of clientelism, casteism, and corruption that tend to overwhelm studies of Indian politics to suggest that, at least since the turn of the century, India witnessed a "post-clientelist" polity (Manor, 2013) that appropriated social democratic ideas popularized by the Congress Party and its electoral allies (Manor, 2011). An emerging scholarship draws on this literature to usefully reflect on the "coordinative discourse" between bureaucrats, technocrats, and civil society actors that enabled the formulation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill and its introduction into Parliament (Chopra, 2014). This paper picks up the thread from once the bill enters the Lok Sabha to examine the "communicative discourse" that enabled it to be unanimously approved into law.

The discursive institutionalism analyzed in this paper compels an appreciation of "politics of the poor" as an ensemble of negotiations that encompassed both *support for* and *opposition to* the political institutions in India. The politics of the poor was instrumental in persuading the Indian government to consider expanding and consolidating social protections. Combining consent and contest, poor people's politics conveyed their electoral participation and contentious claims to the governments of their countries. On the one hand, poor people voted for pro-welfare *political parties* in elections, thus implicitly signaling their consent to extant political systems. However, their electoral support, while important for such parties, could not be taken for granted. On the other hand, the poor sympathized with, supported, and participated in radical *social movements* that challenged the socioeconomic structures which sustained poverty and inequality. Such movements could not be easily contained within the extant political parties, including those on the left of the spectrum.

India: expanding social policies

Over the last two decades, India expanded its social assistance programs for its poorest populations. Inclusive social policies have been instituted, laying the foundations of a potentially universal social welfare system. Five major programs constitute this expansion: school meals; the Integrated Child Development Services; the NREGA; the public distribution system; and social security pensions for widows, the elderly, and disabled persons. Prior to this expansion, India's welfare system was fragmented and confined to those in formal employment. Social benefits such as old-age pensions, health insurance, and maternity benefits barely touched the millions of people outside formal employment,

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who accounted—in one official estimate—for nearly 90% of the population. Social sector expenditure as a proportion of GDP increased from 0.3% of the GDP in 2004–2005 to 0.9% in 2009–2010 to decline marginally thereafter and presently hovers at about 0.65% of GDP.

Between 2004–2005 and 2011–2012, the proportion of children between 6 and 14 years of age who received a mid-day meal in their school increased from 37% to 50%. The proportion of pregnant women who received any benefit from the publicly-funded early childhood care and education scheme called the Integrated Child Development Scheme increased from 20% to 53% during the same period, as did the proportion of young children who benefited from it (increasing from 27% to 57%). The coverage of social security pensions for elderly men increased from 6% to 22% and for elderly women from 7% to 19%. Over half of all households purchased cereals at subsidized rated from the targeted public distribution system in 2011–2012 compared with 27% in 2004–2005. In 2006, the Congress-led United Progress Alliance (UPA) government launched the National Rural Employment Guarantee Program, under which rural households were guaranteed employment on public works programs for 100 days a year. Following the introduction of the scheme, the proportion of rural households employed on public works for any duration of time increased from 0.5% in 2004–2005 to 29% in 2011–2012.

The expanded coverage of populations under various social policies has been associated with the institutionalization of a rights framework. Most of the aforementioned programs are "centrally sponsored," which means their introduction and implementation are monitored by India's central government. The National Rural Employment Program is now mandated under the aegis of the NREGA, which makes the Indian Parliament its constitutional guarantor.[2] The plethora of schemes provisioning food to diverse sections of the country's population are organized under the rubric of the National Food Security Act. In some cases, Centrally Sponsored Schemes are complemented by social security legislation at the state level, such as the Chhattisgarh Food Security Act 2012.

Prevailing explanations: diffusionist, structural, institutional, and mobilizational factors

This article departs from prevailing "diffusionist" and "structuralist" explanations that dominate the literature on the expansion of social protection in countries outside the North Atlantic. "Diffusionist explanations" emphasize the spread of policy innovations from advanced industrialized capitalist democracies to developing countries (Kurt Weyland, 2005; Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom & Vergari, 1998; Nelson, 1996; Simmons & Elkins, 2004). "Structuralist explanations" emphasize demographic and economic factors and argue that enhanced welfare provisioning is the natural consequence of labor informalization, unemployment, globalization, deindustrialization, increasing incidence of poverty, and the growth of the service sectors (Alesina et al., 1999; Buğra & Keyder, 2006; Fiszbein et al., 2009; Grosh et al., 2008; Hanlon et al., 2010; López-Calva & Lustig, 2010; O'Loughlin & Friedrichs, 1996).

Both approaches suffer serious limitations while explaining the expansion of social protections in countries such as India. "Diffusionist" explanations assume that developing countries are "policy-takers" (who accept policy conditions because of their inability to negotiate). However, as recent scholarship has illustrated, the depiction of countries such as India as "policy-takers" is empirically inaccurate (Hopewell, 2014; Serrano, 2016). As both countries wield a significant degree of policy autonomy, the suggestion that they imported social welfare expansions due to the intervention of multilateral institutions ignores the role of endogenous political choices, often resulting from political compulsions. "Structuralist explanations," while useful to contextualize expansions in social welfare, underspecify the causal connections that lead to the emergence and consolidation of such policies. They also ignore the motivations of political elites in adopting social protections in developing countries (Kpessa & Daniel, 2013; Mares & Carnes, 2009). Against these perspectives, scholars are beginning to explore political factors focusing on "institutional" and "mobilizational" explanations to explain the proliferation of social protections.

Institutionalist explanations pinpoint the role of state institutions in the expansion of social welfare. Tillin and Pereira (2017) study the effects of federalism and multilevel elections for social protections. Institutional factors such as the importance of capacity (Sandbrook et al., 2007), commitment (Vu, 2007),

[2] This provision has introduced elements of uncertainty about the survival of the Act after 2014 when the Narendra Modi-led BJP ascended to power. As Prime Minister, Modi has sneered at the NREGA (Roy, 2015), curtailed and/or frozen spending on the NREGA (Sen, 2023), and has generally sought to dilute the rights-based foundations of welfare programs (Aiyar, 2013). These subsequent developments do not, and should not, of course, undermine the significance of the right to work being constitutionally guaranteed.

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and credibility of the state (Singh & Vom Hau, 2016) directly impact the performance of social, but by restricting their attention to formal and institutional channels of politics, they ignore the political terrain outside formal politics that nevertheless shape such politics (Chatterjee, 2004; Christophe Jaffrelot, 2003; Heller, 2000; Pai, 2002; Prerna Singh, 2016).

An emerging scholarship directs attention to the role of popular mobilizations in the making of social welfare, highlighting the importance of "social welfare movements" (Agarwala, 2013; Mooney et al., 2009; Vanhuysse, 2006) and the threat of popular uprisings (Henley, 2014; Slater, 2010) in expanding social welfare in regions as diverse as Latin America, China, and southern Africa. However, a major limitation of the literature on popular mobilizations is the assumption that poor people advance their claims on political elites exclusively in the domain of social movements and contentious politics, outside the arena of electoral politics. Scholars writing in this vein tend to undermine the ways in which the politics of electoral consent and the politics of contentious social movements are entwined.

The approach favored in this paper leverages insights from institutionalist perspectives and scholars attending to the role of popular mobilizations and blends insights from these literature studies with an analysis of the discourses that underpinned the passage of the Act in India's Parliament. By emphasizing the discourses deployed by parliamentarians during their debates on the bill, the paper reflects on the resonances of *both* institutionalist and mobilizational approaches as these emerged from the lawmakers' speeches.

Discursive institutionalism: communicating the politics of the poor

The paper draws on transcripts of 78 parliamentary speeches, available in English (35) and Hindi (43), during the debates over the introduction of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill in 2004 and 2005. Each one of the transcripts was manually read and coded for the parliamentarians' attitude toward the bill (supportive or oppositional) and the underlying justifications. Every one of the parliamentarians who spoke on the bill supported it, and, moreover, justified support in the name of the poor. In itself, their justification is unsurprising. Poor people constitute, after all, a large part of India's electorate. Few politicians can afford to appear indifferent to their claims or oppose policies framed in their name. Beyond the general claims of politicians to support pro-poor legislation; however, a closer analysis of their discourses reveals their diverse understandings of why poor people deserved the state's support.

The stage was set by the remarks of India's Minister of Rural Development, Raghuvansh Prasad Singh while introducing the bill in the autumn of 2004. Singh was a legislator from the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), one of the Congress Party's allies in the UPA government that had been voted to power earlier that year. During the election campaign, the Congress-led UPA unveiled its Common Minimum Program, in which it had promised to institute a massive network of public works that would guarantee employment to rural inhabitants for 100 days. Such public works had been implemented in the countryside since the 1970s under the aegis of schemes operated by the central and state governments, and where they were implemented at all- tended to benefit poorer households. The promise of guaranteed employment to rural households, particularly in the wake of exacerbated agrarian distress, was particularly relevant to the poor and the very poor, who eked out their livelihoods as agricultural laborers or subsistence peasants, artisans, fisherfolk, and pastoralists in the countryside.

The UPA won a plurality in the 2004 elections and—supported by the Left Front (LF) comprising India's several communist parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a party that championed the rights of Dalit communities historically oppressed as "untouchables," and others—went on to form the government. Once Parliament convened, the government faced intense pressure from its allies to fulfill its electoral promise of enhanced social protection. The allies specifically pressed for the introduction of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which guaranteed employment for 100 days to the rural population (without means-tests) as a constitutional right.

Standing in Parliament to introduce the bill, Singh recounted his own party's commitment to the rural employment bill. The RJD claimed allegiance to a socialist heritage that prided itself in championing the cause of poor people and members of communities that had historically been oppressed as "low caste," "untouchable," and poor (Roy, 2021; Witsoe, 2013). Singh urged his colleagues thus:

> This legislation is oriented towards the poor, towards the villages. The poor of this country are eagerly anticipating the promise made by our coalition in our National Common Minimum Program. I appeal

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> to all my colleagues. If you oppose this bill, the message to the villages will be that you are against the poor. (Singh, 2004, p. 161)

The discourse of the poor in which Singh anchored his appeal to support the NREGA not only referred to the National Common Minimum Program developed by the UPA during its election campaign but also cautioned other parliamentarians against opposing the poor. His challenge was picked up by speaker after speaker who supported the legislation on the grounds that it was essential to the poor.

Although the "communicative discourses" anchoring discussions on the NREGA centered on the poor, the normative justifications for such a focus varied widely. Government legislators reminded their audience of the promise for enhanced welfare made by their parties to the poor and the NREGA as a means of fulfilling that promise. Opposition legislators emphasized the limitations of the proposed bill which they nevertheless supported to demonstrate their own commitment to the poor.

Constructing the poor as a source of support

Sonia Gandhi, the President of the Congress Party and the Chairperson of the UPA coalition, endorsed the minister's approach:

> This legislation is the most important part of the promise we made to the people in 2004. We are going to fulfill the promise we made to the poor in this country. These are people who search unsuccessfully for employment. They suffer from the lack of the lack of infrastructure… this bill has been drafted in consultation with social workers, NGOs, experienced administrators, and poor people in rural areas. (Gandhi, 2005, p. 103)

Singh's RJD colleague Devendra Prasad Yadav endorsed the legislation thus:

> Our party has rural origins. This legislation will benefit our constituents. Our villages are populated by the poor, the farm laborer, the oppressed people who have been toiling in their fields and farms for years. How can we improve their lives? What can we do to bring economic development to them? How can we improve their standard of living? These questions trouble us. This legislation will help us achieve our dreams. (Devendra Yadav, 2005, p. 128)

Another RJD legislator, Mohan Singh, celebrated the fact that Parliament was debating such a strong legislation for the poor (Kalyan Singh, 2005, p. 121). "Unemployment begets poverty," he added, making it imperative to provide employment to the poor, as the NREGA proposed.

Suravaram Sudhakar Reddy, a legislator from the Communist Party of India (CPI), which was allied with the UPA, endorsed the bill thus:

> This is a historic bill. The rural poor in this country have finally got the attention they deserve. I was born in a very backward district. I have seen poverty first-hand. I agree that poverty is poverty [responding to the criticism that the bill distinguished between the rural poor and the urban poor], but we have to start somewhere…. Yes, we will find the money to help the poor. The corporate houses, those who can pay, those who became multi-millionaires after Independence, should be justifiably taxed and the necessary money should be provided for this scheme. (Reddy, 2005, p. 164)

In advancing and supporting the bill, government legislators emphasized the promise they had made to the poor during the election campaign. The introduction of the NREGA, they claimed, was a fulfillment of that promise. Government legislators referred time and again to the "rural revolt" against the governance of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), from whom they had wrested power earlier in the year. According to this narrative, the NDA lost the rural vote (and, consequently, the elections) because they were perceived to be favorable to the urban middle class. However, as James Manor (2011) has ably demonstrated, the narrative of a "rural revolt" was a myth (the UPA gained in urban areas more than it did in rural ones), but a myth the UPA was happy to perpetuate. In power, many influential UPA legislators resisted the introduction of the bill but eventually caved in under pressure from the alliance's leftist constituents such as the RJD and communist parties. Furthermore, as we shall see subsequently, pressures from social movements also played an important role in convincing the UPA that introducing the bill was politically sound.

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The electoral politics of the poor

In referencing the promise to the poor made by the UPA, government legislators demonstrated their awareness of the electoral importance of poor people in India. Although poor people rarely voted as a social bloc, their relevance was increasingly recognized after 1989. Poor people's electoral participation witnessed a remarkably steep increase during the 1990s. Drawing on longitudinal data assembled through the National Election Survey (NES), Yadav (1999) estimates that the odds ratio that the "very poor" would vote in an election increased from 0.89 in 1971 to 1.24 in 1996. Similarly, the odds ratio that the "poor" would vote increased from 0.98 to 1.13 during the same period. Their increased electoral participation has been referred to variously as a "democratic upsurge" (Yadav, 1999) and a "silent revolution" (C. Jaffrelot, 2002), reflecting as it did the increased politicization of the poor in India.

Underpinning the surge in electoral participation was the growing espousal of the vocabulary of social justice, particularly in rural areas to direct attention to disparities between castes, to claim political representation for India's diverse castes and communities as well as themes of communitarian self-respect and identity. This "electoral participatory upsurge" accelerated the decline of the Congress Party (Yadav, 1999, p. 2394), which had ruled India for most of the first 50 years since Independence. The poor began to vote for alternative parties with a provincial presence as the CPI (Marxist) in West Bengal and Kerala, the RJD in Bihar, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, and the Samajwadi Party and BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

The reduction in the Congress' electoral presence through the 1990s was accompanied by the meteoric rise of the Hindu nationalist BJP, which increased its vote share from 11.5% in 1989 to 28.8% in 1996. However, poor people's votes were cast in favor of the United Front, a coalition of communist, socialist, and regional parties that went on to form a short-lived government with outside support from the Congress between 1996 to 1998. Their electoral behavior is borne out by a detailed analysis of the dataset collected by the NES for the elections that year. The NES dataset divided respondents into five occupational categories: "very high," "high," "middle," "low" and "very low." Table 1 suggests that people at the low and lowest end of the occupational hierarchy voted in favor of the constituent parties of the United Front. The BJP commanded the vote shares of those at the top two occupational tiers, and the Congress Party was the chosen favorite of those in the middle. The indispensability of the poor to political parties hoping to win elections and form governments could not have been clearer.

The United Front government collapsed when the Congress withdrew its support in 1998, plunging India into mid-term elections. After over a year of political uncertainty, the BJP and its allies went on to form a coalition government that completed its 5-year term from 1999 to 2004. Although the BJP remained primarily a party for which elite and middle-class Indians tended to vote, the coalition considerably diversified its social basis during this decade, thanks largely to allies such as the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar, the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal, and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh. As a matter of fact, as Table 2 demonstrates, during the 1999 elections, the NES dataset estimated that support among the "very poor" for the BJP's allies outstripped that for the BJP itself.

Thus, although the Congress Party won back the votes of the poor and the very poor during the elections of 1999, such support was not overwhelming. The Congress and its allies claimed the vote of nearly 40% of the "very poor" (those categorized as being "very low" in economic status) and 37% of the "poor" ("low" in economic status). By comparison, 30% of the "very poor" and 38% of the "very poor" reported voting for the BJP and its allies. A further 11% of the "very poor" claimed to have cast their vote

Table 1. Electoral support of stratified occupation groups to three leading political alliances during the 1996 Indian parliamentary elections.

Occupation groups	United Front		Congress Party		Bhartiya Janata Party		Others		
Highest	15.7	3	30.9	5.5	47	9.3	6.4	3.8	5.7
High	24.8	16.7	30.9	19.3	38.8	26.9	5.5	11.8	20
Middle	29	19.9	33.3	21	29.5	20.7	8.2	17.5	20.3
Low	32.1	35.3	32	32.5	19.9	28.3	10.9	37.7	32.6
Lowest	34.7	25.1	32.5	21.7	28.8	14.8	12.9	29.2	21.4
Total	29.6		32.1		28.8		9.5		

Source: Ruparelia (2015, p. 156).

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Table 2. Electoral support of social classes to political alliances during the 1999 Indian parliamentary elections.

	Congress	Congress allies	Congress Plus	BJP	BJP allies	NDA	Left	BSP	Others
Highest	31	2	**33**	40	12	**52**	4	0	6
High	30	2	**32**	32	17	**49**	6	1	6
Middle	33	4	**37**	27	18	**45**	5	2	6
Low	32	5	**37**	19	19	**38**	6	4	8
Lowest	34	6	**40**	13	17	**30**	11	5	8

Notes. BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; NDA = National Democratic Alliance. Bold values refer to the aggregate vote shares won by the two largest alliances.
Source: Yadav et al. (1999).

Table 3. Electoral support of the "poor" and the "very poor" to two leading political alliances during the 2004 Indian parliamentary elections.

	Cong	Cong allies	UPA	BJP	BJP allies	NDA	Left	BSP	Others	N
Rich	26	7	**33**	31	12	**43**	7	3	4	3,630
Middle	28	8	**36**	25	13	**38**	8	4	4	4,334
Poor	27	11	**38**	22	14	**36**	7	5	6	7,783
Very Poor	25	13	**38**	16	15	**31**	9	8	5	6,803
Total	26	10	**36**	22	14	**36**	8	5	5	22,550

Notes. UPA, United Progress Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BSP = Bahujan Samaj Party.
Source: Yadav (2004, p. 5394).

in favor of the Left parties and another 13% for regional parties not aligned with either the Congress or the BJP. In such times of electoral flux, the Congress Party could not count upon the votes of the "poor" and the "very poor" as it once did. For its part, the BJP and its allies too recognized the need for them to woo the poor in a more concerted manner.

The fragmented political allegiances of poor and very poor voters were confirmed during the 2004 parliamentary elections, as shown in Table 3. The Congress Party and its allies, which contested these elections under the umbrella of the UPA, secured 38% of the votes of the "very poor" and "the poor." By contrast, the BJP and its allies, who now constituted the NDA, claimed 31% of the votes of the "very poor" but as much as 36% of the votes of the "poor." Poor and very poor people preferred the UPA only slightly more than they did the NDA.

Poor people in some of India's poorest states in fact supported the BJP-led NDA more than they did the Congress-led UPA. In Jharkhand (poverty rate: 40.3%) and Odisha (poverty rate: 46.4%), the support of members of marginalized Adivasi communities for the BJP, at 25% and 35%, respectively, was not inconsequential. Thachil (2014) avers that this support for the BJP stems from the private provision of welfare by its affiliates to impoverished rural and especially tribal populations. Similarly, Desai and Roy (2016) argue that the BJP makes concerted attempts to reach out to impoverished Dalits and Adivasis by offering them a sense of respect and integration into an undifferentiated Hindu community. Table 4 shows the electoral support of "poor" and "very poor" voters in key impoverished States.

Thus, poor and very poor people preferred the UPA only slightly more than they did the NDA. Moreover, their votes tended to be directed toward such regionally salient parties as the LF in West Bengal and the BSP in Uttar Pradesh. For example, in West Bengal, 56% of the very poor and 52% of the poor voted for the LF. Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP won 36% of the votes of the very poor and 23% of the votes of the poor. The socialist-oriented Samajwadi Party won 24% of the votes of the very poor and 27% of the votes of the poor.

It is noteworthy that the proportion of support for the NDA among the "poor" and the "very poor" in rural areas was higher than that of the poor in towns and cities, a point noted by Manor (2011) in his prescient analysis. Far from a "rural revolt" against the NDA's governance, the votes of the "poor" and the "very poor" were in fact quite fragmented—neither beholden to the Congress Party or its allies as it once did nor willing to embrace the BJP as wholeheartedly as wealthier sections of the population did.

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Table 4. Electoral support of the "poor" and the "very poor" to two leading political alliances in key states during the 2004 Indian parliamentary elections.

State	Population (in million)	Incidence of poverty	Vote share of the poor		Vote share of the very poor	
			UPA	NDA	UPA	NDA
Bihar	83	41.4	47	30	42	40
Chhattisgarh	21	40.9	45	42	39	51
Madhya Pradesh	60	38.3	35	44	40	48
Rajasthan	56	22.1	53	39	42	49
Uttar Pradesh	160	32.8	12	18	11	23
All India	1027	27.5	38	31	38	36
Sources	Census of India (2001)	Panagariya and Mukim (2014, table B5)	National Electoral Survey data published for Bihar (M. Yadav, 2004), Chhattisgarh (Mayaram, 2004), Madhya Pradesh (Ramshankar, 2004), Rajasthan (Lodha, 2004), Uttar Pradesh (Verma, 2004), and India (Y. Yadav, 2004)			

Poor people's support remained a matter of intense competition for India's political parties: they could neither be counted upon nor ruled out (Yadav, 2004).

Competing for the support of the poor

The intense competition for poor people's support was demonstrated during the debates on the NREGA. Opposition politicians affiliated with the NDA sought to outdo the government in their support for the bill. Welcoming the legislation, Kalyan Singh, a legislator from the opposition BJP, congratulated the minister, even as he insisted that the Bill was not enough:

> This is a historic bill, but it could have been stronger, more comprehensive. You have not applied it universally, but only restricted it to rural households for 100 days. (Kalyan Singh, 2005, p. 95)

The discourse invoked by legislators such as Singh emphasized the limitations of the official proposal. It did not oppose the policy but called for universalizing it. Such a criticism was of course ironic since the NDA had made no substantive promise pertaining to social welfare in its own election manifesto.

Nitish Kumar, who led one of the several parties allied with the BJP, went a step further:

> Why has the government restricted the legislation to a few districts? Why does it not extend it to poor people across the country? And why will it provide employment for only 100 days? Why should it not provide employment to those who need it throughout the year? … You may say you have no money. Well, I say—find the money! (Kumar, 2005, p. 144)

Both Singh and Kumar called for the universalization of the policy to cover all poor people across the country, not only the rural poor. The competition for the support of the poor was evident from the way in which they not only supported the bill but also demanded that the urban poor be covered under its ambit as well. If the Congress-led UPA was seeking to woo back the rural poor, the BJP-led NDA was aiming to attract the urban poor.

Mohitey (2005, p. 149), a legislator from the Shiv Sena, another ally of the BJP, pointed to the exclusive use of the male pronoun to refer to the worker in the bill. He urged the minister to add the female pronoun to not discriminate against women workers. Mohitey also questioned the provision in the draft bill to pay workers only after the bureaucrats were satisfied with the quality of work undertaken. This, he argued, would open the door to corruption. Instead, he insisted that workers should be paid as soon as the works are completed, rather than after their quality was verified. Another legislator from yet another ally of the BJP, Tathagata Sathapathy of the Biju Janata Dal, also urged the government to expand the program to poor people across the country and not only limit it to rural areas.

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Rarely for India's Parliament, the legislation was passed unanimously by its 543 legislators. Support from the UPA and its allies was expected since they had, after all, promised an employment guarantee in their Common Minimum Program. The overwhelming support received by the legislation from the BJP and its allies appeared surprising to contemporary commentators, given their refusal to commit themselves to enhancing social welfare. Such support becomes less surprising when we consider the intense competition for poor people's votes and the data which suggests that the rural poor tended to support the NDA more than they did the UPA. Their electoral competition translated into a discursive competition as legislators from rival alliances sought to outbid one another in communicating their commitment to the interests of the poor.

The poor as a source of contention

During the debates on the NREGA, several legislators invoked the possibility of Naxalite violence being the result of poverty and inequality. From the opposition benches, Kharbela Swain of the BJP argued that:

> Since the mid-1980s, there was economic acceleration of about six percent per year … but the relative poverty has increased…. There is a Naxalite movement because they say that the level of poverty is very high…. (Swain, 2005, p. 199)

Hasnain Mollah, a legislator from the CPI (M), one of the coalition partners of the UPA government, traced violence to the liberalization policies pursued by the NDA government from 1998 to 2004:

> Liberalisation is an illness. You remain human only on the surface but you lose all your humanity… We are seeing a decrease in the per capita grain consumption in our villages….The previous government ignored the anger of the poor, and paid for it. (Mollah, 2005, p. 115)

The government's allies argued in favor of expanding the scope of the NREGA. Devendra Prasad Yadav, from the same party as the Minister of Rural Development and an ally of the government, urged his colleagues:

> You can't ignore the problem of extremism. The program should be expanded to include all districts affected by extremism. All States and districts that are economically backward, where extremist forces have flourished, should be covered by the program. (Devendra Yadav, 2005, p. 131)

"I see a direct link between unemployment and terrorism, naxalism," Tejaswini Seeramesh (Seeramesh, 2005, p. 276) of the Congress Party declared, in her impassioned speech in defense of the bill.

Responding to the debates on the bill, Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh made explicit the link between poor people's contentious politics and the NREGA:

> The poor have a stake in this country. They have declared a war. This bill is the result of their struggle. (Kalyan Singh, 2005, p. 86)

The war to which the Minister referred was the Maoist guerrilla rebellion that flared across central and eastern India's poorest districts at the turn of the millennium. Although violent left-wing extremism was not unheard of since India's Independence, these were usually carried out by splinter groups that rarely, if at all, coordinated their actions and were known to turn on each other. However, by 2004, these different groups had converged to constitute the CPI (Maoist) and sought to wage a revolutionary war against the Indian state. A secretary of one of the outfit's divisional committees declared that their objective was to "liberate India from the clutches of feudalism and imperialism" (*The Economist*, 2006a: http://www.economist.com/node/7799247). The force and extent of the rebellion prompted the usually mild-mannered Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to declare it "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country" (*The Economist*, 2006b: http://www.economist.com/node/7215431). The Maoists operated across over 200 districts, thereby forming what came to be called the "Red corridor," stretching from districts of the Southern State of Karnataka all the way north to the frontier with

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Nepal. They were popularly referred to as Naxalites, after the North Bengal village of Naxalbari, where the movement first erupted.

Observers remained divided over interpreting the Maoist rebellion (Shah, 2013; Sundar, 2013). The police and executive machinery of the state identified the rebels as extortionist gangsters who posed a critical law and order problem. In support of their claims, they pointed to the indiscriminate use of violence against state and civilian targets by the Naxalite cadres. Liberal observers, whose voices are perhaps the most influential in shaping policy opinions (Kennedy, 2014; Mehrotra, 2014), argued that the rebellion was a response to poverty and a lack of basic service provision and infrastructure. They backed up their claims by arguing that the Naxalite writ ran large in among the poorest districts of the country (Bannerjee & Saha, 2010). Others drew on large datasets to argue that the presence of aggrieved Dalit and Adivasi communities was the best predictor of Maoist insurgency (Hoelscher et al., 2012). The Naxalites themselves and their radical sympathizers directed attention not so much to the lack of development but to its *extractive* manifestation across the mineral-rich tracts in central and eastern India. Scholars supporting this view pointed attention to the ways in which the Indian state sought to secure access for corporate investors to minerals such as Bauxite, iron ore, and aluminum in central and eastern India (Miklian, 2009).

The extent to which poor people involved themselves in the Maoist insurgency is even less clear. While the Naxalites and their sympathizers keenly emphasized the passionate recruitment of the poor to the cause of social revolutionaries, researchers intimately involved in the study of the movement treated such claims with skepticism. Bhatia (2005) argued that poor people associated with the movement longed for "change" rather than for "revolution." Kunnath (2012) suggested that, although impoverished Dalits were initially attracted to the insurgency, their enthusiasm cooled off upon the realization that the leadership of the movement remained in the hands of the higher castes. Nevertheless, that the poor were sympathetic to the Naxalite insurgency even if they may not all have actively participated in it cannot be denied (Sundar, 2011; 2013).

The UPA government recognized the potential of social protections in undermining the appeal and actions of the Maoist insurgents. In turn, Bannerjee and Saha (2010) note that the Maoists rarely objected to the implementation of social protections, in sharp contrast to their usually suspicious attitude toward state-led interventions. Indeed, Maoist insurgents often encouraged their constituencies to access programs such as the NREGA and supported people's demands for timely work and wages. Corbridge et al. (2013) aver that the launch and extension of social protection programs such as the NREGA, mid-day meals, and old-age pensions among others were aimed at stemming possible recruitment to Maoist insurgencies. Policymakers in the UPA agreed that programs such as the NREGA were key to win the "hearts and minds" of the poor in some of the country's most impoverished districts (a view most cogently expressed by Mihir Shah, 2009). That they may well have succeeded in their efforts is borne out by Hoelscher et al. (2012)'s admittedly cautious inferences, suggesting that the launch of the NREGA appeared to have stemmed from Maoist-led violence. Further evidence of the use of the NREGA as a counter-insurgency strategy is provided by Zimmerman (2014) who argues that the implementation of the NREGA was accompanied by a *spurt* of violence in the short run, as local populations became more willing to support police action against Maoist insurgents.

An analysis of the communicative discourses defending the NREGA thus suggests that worries about poor people potentially sympathizing with the Maoist insurgency layered onto the electoral competition for their votes. Legislators recognized the possibility that poor people may have supported the Naxalites against the growing inequality spurred by India's economic liberalization. Their communicative discourses suggest an appreciation of the role of social welfare in containing Maoist violence and persuading poor people to remain supportive of India's parliamentary democracy.

Alternative explanations

I have argued that the "politics of the poor" led to the expansion of social welfare in India. Drawing on the perspectives from discursive institutionalism and the analysis of communicative discourses in the Indian Parliament, I have outlined the ways in which poor people's electoral participation and contentious claims were both invoked by legislators to justify the expansion of welfare. To sustain the argument, we must consider alternative arguments that seek to explain the expansion and consolidation of social welfare in the two countries. Below, we consider alternative explanations based

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on (1) diffusionist factors, (2) structuralist factors, (3) institutionalist factors, and (4) mobilizational factors.

Diffusionist factors

Diffusionist explanations highlight the ways in which policy innovations spread from one country to another, usually through the interventions of global or multilateral elites. In the context of developing countries, this literature suggests that policy ideas originate in such multilateral financial institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and are thereafter transmitted to (or imposed upon) countries of the Global South. The assumption in much of this literature is that developing countries are "policy-takers" (who accept policy conditions because of their inability to negotiate). However, as recent scholarship has illustrated, the depiction of countries such as India as "policy-takers" is empirically inaccurate (Hopewell, 2014; Serrano, 2016). As the country wields a significant degree of policy autonomy, the suggestion that India imported social welfare expansions due to the intervention of multilateral institutions ignores the role of endogenous political choices, often resulting from domestic political compulsions.

Structuralist factors

Structural explanations prime researchers to expect that poverty and inequality are adequate conditions for expanding social welfare. These explanations, which emphasize demographic and economic factors, argue that enhanced welfare provisioning is the "natural consequence" of labor informalization, unemployment, globalization, deindustrialization, increasing incidence of poverty, and the growth of the service sectors. Reducing guarantees of formal employment, restrictive unemployment insurance, tightening work requirements, privatization of services, and fewer benefits to workers lead to increased means-testing social assistance schemes, free health-care services, and cash transfers to the poor (Barrientos & Hulme, 2008; Gough & Wood, 2004) by political elites. Drawing on the insights offered by the welfare state development literature in the context of the North Atlantic countries (Wilensky, 1975), this literature suggests that the structural transformation of developing countries, shaped by emergent production regimes (Haggard & Kaufman, 2008; Wibbels & Ahlquist, 2011), undermines informal support mechanisms, poses new forms of social risk, and provides enhanced revenues to pay for social protections which address the consequent upheavals. A related approach suggests the causal connections between production regimes and welfare provisioning, thereby implying that the extent and generosity of social protection are determined by the economic production structure that predominates in a country (Rudra, 2007).

Applied to India, these explanations would prime us to believe that social dislocation in the country, following the economic liberalization of the 1990s, mechanically led to political elites adopting social protections. However, while inequalities increased in the aftermath of economic liberalization, poverty did decline (Himanshu & Sen, 2013). Increasing inequalities, while surely useful to contextualize expansions in social welfare in India, underspecify the causal connections that lead to their emergence and consolidation. Why did political elites respond to growing inequality in India in the early 2000s by adopting and expanding social protections? What were the political pressures that compelled them to do so? Structural explanations provide economic context but do not allow us to chart political causes.

In contrast with diffusionist and structural explanations, political explanations highlight the role of coalitions and conflicts over the distribution of authority and resources. Two such political explanations are (1) institutionalist factors and (2) mobilizational factors.

Institutionalist factors

Institutionalist explanations pinpoint the role of state institutions in the expansion of social welfare. Tillin & Pereira (2017) note the effects of federalism and multilevel elections for social protections. In India, they note, expansions in social protections occurred because political parties governing states could claim credit for their implementation. Friedman and Maiorano (2017) direct attention to the role of courts in supporting demands for social protections advanced by civil society actors in India and South Africa.

However, while institutionalist explanations nicely explain why some states do better than others in *provisioning* welfare, they may be less effective in highlighting the wide-ranging political factors that shape the adoption, expansion, and consolidation of social welfare. Scholars highlight institutional

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factors such as the importance of capacity (Sandbrook et al., 2007), commitment (Vu, 2007), and credibility of the state (Singh & Vom Hau, 2016) in directly impacting the outcomes of social welfare. Their interventions provoke us to think about the political justifications that shape the adoption of social welfare in the first place. These justifications often invoke developments outside of the formal political institutions.

In India, we have noted the importance of electoral politics to people's political practice but have also seen that it was by no means the only one. The Naxalite movement was a major political force across the central and eastern districts of the country. The role of other social movements and non-governmental organizations in bringing pressure on the newly elected UPA government has also been noted in recent scholarship: for example, Chopra (2014) notes the role of advocacy by such organizations as Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti in specific states and vis-à-vis sympathetic members of the new Indian cabinet as a factor in the adoption of the NREGA. Institutionalist explanations thus only offer a partial perspective on the adoption and expansion of social protections in India during the early 2000s.

Mobilizational factors

An emerging scholarship directs attention to the role of popular mobilizations in the making of social welfare, highlighting the importance of "social welfare movements" (Agarwala, 2013; Mooney et al., 2009; Vanhuysse, 2006) and the threat of popular uprisings in expanding social welfare in regions as diverse as Latin America (Huber & Stephens, 2012; Mares & Carnes, 2009; Weyland, 1996), China (Cook & Kwon, 2007; Hsiao et al., 2014), and South Africa (Nattrass & Seekings, 2001; Pelham, 2007; Seekings & Nattrass, 2005).

Such scholars build on the leads offered by researchers of social protections in the context of the USA, where the government responded to "poor people's movements" of the 1960s (Piven & Cloward, 1979) with an introduction and expansion of welfare programs (Fox & Cloward, 1993; Gurr, 1980; Isaac & Kelly, 1983; Offe, 1982). This focus on popular mobilizations helpfully distances us from the conceptually and empirically distinct approach to studying the emergence of social protections in north-western Europe (Esping-Andersen, 1990) as the product of class conflict (Evelyne Huber & Stephens, 2001; Korpi, 1983; Stephen, 1979; Walter Korpi, 1978) or class compromise (Melling, 1991; Przeworski, 1980; Stephens, 2007). After all, the processes of capitalist accumulation in "most of the world" (Chatterjee, 2004) have *not* polarized society into a capitalist bourgeoisie controlling the means of production and a working-class proletariat alienated from the means of production (Bernstein, 2010). However, a major limitation of the literature on popular mobilizations is the assumption that poor people advance their claims on political elites exclusively in the domain of social movements and contentious politics, outside the arena of electoral politics. Scholars writing in this vein tend to undermine the ways in which the politics of electoral consent and the politics of contentious social movements are entwined.

The threat posed by the Naxalite insurgency was invoked by several legislators including—as we have seen—Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh himself, lending some weight to mobilizational explanations. However, these explanations neglect the changing social foundations of the political parties in power and in opposition. Legislators appreciated that their electoral success and political power rested on the votes they were able to garner from poorer electors, making them sympathetic to the demands of the Naxalites rather than apathetic or, worse, antagonistic. An emerging literature in India points to the role of social movements and nongovernmental organizations in persuading the UPA to adopt and expand social protections in the country (Chopra, 2014). However, this literature focuses on the advocacy networks between middle-class activists and bureaucrats, thereby neglecting the role of poor people's electoral practices and political choices. Like their institutionalist counterparts, mobilizational explanations offer only a partial slice of the political factors that led to the expansion of social protections in India.

Politics of the poor: extensions

The "politics of the poor" presented in this paper offers a comprehensive and unified framework to explain the adoption of social protections in India. But it offers analytic weight to explaining the expansion of social protections in other countries that (1) are not "policy-takers" in the global political economy, (2) have witnessed rapid economic change since the 1990s (encompassing growth and

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inequalities), and (3) have experienced heightened political participation of historically oppressed communities and classes. It thus resonates with emerging research on the politics of social welfare (Roy, 2018). Recent scholarship discusses the ways in which members of Mexico's indigenous communities participate in that country's electoral politics but also contest the writ of the state via armed insurrections, thereby compelling the government to initiate social protections such as the Opportunidades (Yörük et al., 2019). A similar dynamic has been explored in the case of Turkey, where the poor have compelled the state to expand social protections through a combination of consent and contention (Yoltar & Yoruk, 2021). The analysis presented in this paper illustrates a comparable dynamic in India.

The "politics of the poor" speaks to, but also nuances, the literature that suggests that democracies are more likely to invest in social welfare because politicians use social policies to attract votes (Haggard & Kaufman, 2008; Lake & Baum, 2001; Mares & Carnes, 2009). A related cluster of explanations argues that the processes of democratization shape the expansion of social welfare (Barrientos & Pellissery, 2015; Sandbrook et al., 2007). Under such conditions of democratic deepening, poor people's political practices in India were instrumental in persuading their governments to consider expanding and consolidating social protections in their respective realms. These practices conveyed their electoral affiliations and contentious claims to the center-left political coalitions governing the country.

The methodological framework offered by discursive institutionalism enables a granular understanding of the ways in which these political practices were mobilized by legislators. This framework can be fruitfully extended to examining the ways in which poor people's politics are interpreted by executives in authoritarian polities. The absence of free and fair elections in such polities does not rule out a range of political practices by the poor in authoritarian regimes such as China (Gao et al., 2013; Ho et al., 2022; O'Brien & Li, 2006). The ways in which such practices are interpreted, mobilized, and appropriated by policymakers are enabled by the attention to communicative and coordinative discourses espoused by discursive institutionalism.

As social protections have proliferated across the world, so have studies explaining their proliferation. This paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on the global use of social protections as a response to poor people's political choices—beyond exclusively institutional arenas or mobilization outside institutions. Further research, involving small-*N*-focused comparisons and large-*N* analysis, is required to confirm that the "politics of the poor" explains the worldwide expansion of social protection that has been accurately referred to as the "quiet revolution" of our time.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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