unchanged. The implications of these results are clear: “Conservatives enjoy a natural advantage over liberals in pursuing their favored policy goals during hard economic times” (p. 163).

While the book in its entirety is ambitious and important, there are some points at which lingering questions are left unaddressed. For example, in Chapter 4, the authors argue that motivated reasoning causes people 1) to evaluate conditions more favorably when their party is in power and 2) to put more weight on areas where their party is performing well when assessing how much they trust the government. The logic behind the first point has been well documented by scholars of political psychology, but it is not entirely clear why the second dynamic would happen as well. That is, if partisans are already going to assess conditions in a biased way based on what best serves their party’s interests, then why would it also be necessary to shift their evaluations to areas where their party is performing better?

Another example comes when the authors attempt to explain why trust in government would affect citizens’ policy preferences. They argue that trust operates as a heuristic, allowing people to determine whether they should support or oppose more government involvement without having to understand fully the policies being discussed or how they would be implemented (this argument is laid out very clearly on p. 121). Yet if this is how trust operates, then one would expect it to be most influential for individuals who pay less attention to politics. Those who know the least about politics and government should have to rely on the trust heuristic the most. Unfortunately, the authors never provide a test of whether this is the case, which leaves the argument about trust in government as a heuristic still a bit untested.

Finally, perhaps the most important contribution of this book is the presentation of a convincing explanation for understanding gridlock and dysfunction in Washington that focuses on public opinion, rather than on elites and institutions. Indeed, it is quite easy to read Why Washington Won’t Work and better understand the rise of Trump, a candidate whose support at least partly came from giving voice to the deep distrust that so many Republicans felt at the end of eight years of a Democratic presidency. However, while the mass behavior explanation that Hetherington and Rudolph offer is convincing, it is important that we not lose sight of the role that institutions might play in either magnifying or muting the effects they document. For example, do primaries encourage politicians to foster distrust of the other party in order to ensure that they maintain sufficient support from their base? How does the structure of Congress or our separated system of government help to magnify the issues created by the polarization of trust? Are there any institutional reforms that would allow for effective governance, even in the presence of such partisan-defined distrust?

Given that Hetherington and Rudolph are not particularly sanguine about the potential for restoring trust in government, it may be that we must ultimately consider institutional solutions for the problems they have identified.

Social Democratic America. By Lane Kenworthy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 238p. $27.95 cloth, 19.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592717001736

Lane Kenworthy hopes to send the nation down the path toward a social-democratic state. Such a state, not unlike the ones in Scandinavia, will allow more people to escape from poverty. It will expand government tax receipts to create larger and more inclusive social programs. Kenworthy suggests, among many other things, universal health insurance, paid parental leave, expanded access to unemployment compensation, an increase in the statutory minimum wage, an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit level, and, even more ambitiously, making the government the employer of last resort.

This book provides a primer on how to reach those results. It contains a series of ingenious arguments showing that social democracy and the American political tradition are not incompatible. While following its own historical path and respecting its own traditions, America will ultimately produce an “array of social programs” that “will increasingly come to resemble those of the Nordic countries” (p. 8). The object of the book, therefore, is to offer an “evidence-based case for the desirability and feasibility of an expanded government role in providing economic security, enhancing opportunity, and ensuring rising living standards in the United States” (p. 15).

Kenworthy writes in the straightforward, easy-to-grasp manner of someone trying to reach a large audience. The simplicity is, however, only surface deep. In fact, he is more of an academic social scientist than he is a pamphleteer. He delves deeply into Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s work on the international aspects of welfare capitalism and, in general, pays close attention to the literature on the comparative welfare state. He employs sophisticated quantitative techniques to display his data. To illustrate that government revenues have grown at about the same rate as the gross domestic product per capita and, hence, to show that increasing tax rates do not necessarily impede economic growth, Kenworthy provides a figure that contains two graphs. They show a steady pattern of growth of government revenues and gross domestic product per capita over time. The construction of these graphs, with their simple message, is far from straightforward. Government revenues come from all levels of government, and the line that he fits to the government revenue data is a “loess curve.” GDP per capita is expressed as a “natural log of inflation-adjusted...
GDP per capita.” The line that he fits to GDP per capita is “a linear regression line” that represents “a constant rate of economic growth” (all quotations p. 83).

In other words, unlike many of his colleagues, Kenworthy is content to sacrifice his method to his message, even though he more than holds his own as a methodologist.

The book looks at big changes over long periods of time. Although it was written before the election of Donald Trump, the results of the 2016 election cast the book in a slightly different light. At least on the surface level, a social-democratic state appears as elusive as ever. Kenworthy urges us to focus on the long run. Of course, elections do matter in the short run and maybe even in the long run. For example, the author points to Medicaid as an enduring social program that has enjoyed considerable expansion in the last 30 years. The growth of Medicaid indicates America’s fundamental willingness to accept expanding social-welfare programs. Maybe so, but in the short run the program faces considerable pressure from the Republican Congress and the White House to change its basic design and become a more permissive state-run program of health insurance for the indigent. That short-run change might have permanent effects and make Medicaid a stop along the road to a more conservative, more market-oriented America, rather than a social democracy.

In general, Kenworthy proposes a long list of reforms that would bring America closer to a social-democratic state. He is more interested in showing that such programs are not antithetical to American tradition than he is in specifying the details of those programs. But sometimes those details matter, as in his recommendation of a universal health insurance program based loosely on Medicare. Such a suggestion begs many public policy questions. Should the new health insurance law more closely resemble Medicare as it was passed in 1965, or the quite different program passed in 2004 to provide Medicare beneficiaries with prescription drug coverage? These sorts of questions go to the very nature of the American welfare state and, at least in my opinion, demand some attention.

Despite his insistence on a long-run perspective and desire to not get bogged down in policy details, Kenworthy has little trouble accepting the historical judgments that Americans appear to have made. The labor union movement, he admits, is currently moribund, but he parts company with other progressives who believe we must somehow reverse this outcome. Unions, like steel mills, are not poised to make a recovery anytime soon. He sees little possibility of a guaranteed annual income but accepts the utility of the programs we have, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Social Security. He keeps wishful thinking to a minimum and spends as much time debunking proposals from the Left as he does critiquing arguments from the Right.

Still, accepting Kenworthy’s arguments requires a certain suspension of disbelief in the age of Donald Trump and Paul Ryan. One has to believe that long-term trends outweigh short-term variations and that, as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama believed and Kenworthy quotes in the front matter of the book, the “moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” For people who share that belief, Social Democratic America makes a rich, indispensable contribution to the social policy literature.


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— Christopher Howard, College of William & Mary

Like Sherlock Holmes, Adam Seth Levine is puzzled by the dog that did not bark. In Levine’s case, the “dog” is a large segment of the American public whose lives are financially precarious. Millions of Americans find it very difficult to save for retirement, afford health care, sustain themselves when unemployed, or pay for their children to attend college, and yet these same Americans are poorly organized and weakly represented. Why do these people not become more involved in politics? Why are they not pushing the government harder to make their lives less insecure? Part of the answer, according to the author, is that efforts to mobilize these people by emphasizing their insecurity can backfire. Many of these individuals might respond by conserving their scarce resources, focusing on what they and their families need in the short run, rather than by becoming politically active and potentially helping themselves in the long run. Thus, at a general level, Levine wants to understand how political rhetoric can create psychological barriers to collective action.

The first half of American Insecurity is clear and concise, but offers few surprises to a scholarly audience. (Undergraduates, however, might find these chapters more useful.) Chapter 1 nicely locates this study in the context of several scholarly literatures without getting bogged down in the details of previous studies. The author also offers a few quick examples of what he calls “self-undermining rhetoric” to demonstrate the plausibility and potential scope of his broader argument. He shows in Chapter 2 that many Americans do view retirement, health care, unemployment, and college costs as serious financial threats. Evidence from multiple Gallup polls indicates that these concerns routinely rank high on the list of the most important problems facing the country. On the basis of data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Levine finds, not surprisingly, that these concerns are usually stronger among individuals who are facing financial insecurities in their own lives.

Chapter 3 reviews familiar trends in interest groups, political parties, and campaigns. While broad-based groups (e.g., labor unions) have declined over the last half century, more specialized citizen groups have grown in number and influence. Hardly any groups focus on all