

# Social Policy Responses to COVID-19 in Canada and the United States: Explaining Policy Variations Between Two Liberal Welfare Regimes

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## Context

- This article investigates social policy responses to COVID-19 in both Canada and the US. While both of these countries are known to have liberal welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the scope and pace of policy change varied greatly during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis.
- One aspect of the 'liberal welfare regime' is a comparatively low level of social spending. In this case, both countries are broadly similar in terms of the level of social spending. On the other hand, their social policy architectures differ markedly.
- With both countries being federations, the territorial organization of benefits varies within and between countries from one policy area to the next. (ex: Employment Insurance (EI) is centralized in Canada and Unemployment Insurance (UI) is decentralized in the US)



## Methodology

- The article begins with a discussion of the measures enacted in both countries across multiple policy areas during the first months of the pandemic, especially from March to June 2020.
- This comparative analysis draws on a review of public and media documents to compare the scale and speed of social-policy responses to COVID-19 in Canada and the United States. The review comprised the areas of employment protection, unemployment protection, health care, social assistance and family policies, housing, as well as general issues of fiscal policy.

## Findings

- The analysis reveals several fundamental sources of divergence between the US and Canadian social policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- First, as is shown in the cases of unemployment protection and health care, Canada possessed a social policy architecture that enabled a quicker response to rapidly emerging conditions.
- Second, the greater power concentration in Canada's parliamentary system contributed to a faster federal response than in the US, where checks and balances tend to slow down legislative approval.
- Third, despite several moments of bipartisan consensus, US political parties also exhibit an extraordinary level of polarization relative to their Canadian peers.

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## Findings (continued)

- There were some similarities in the Canadian and US responses. For example, where the truly novel features of the crisis demanded new forms of emergency relief, both countries faced implementation issues.
- Even so, the analysis suggests that major differences in the policy and institutional architectures of both countries continue to reverberate for their social policy responses to COVID-19.

## Conclusion

- In general, it was shown that Canadian responses were both more rapid and comprehensive than those of the US. This variation, it is argued, can be explained by analysing the divergent political institutions, pre-existing policy legacies, and variation in cross-partisan consensus, which have all shaped national decision-making in the middle of the crisis.
- Specifically, Canada's quick response can be attributed to distinct pre-existing social policy legacies, a parliamentary system with fewer institutional veto points, and a greater level of cross-partisan consensus.
- Finally, it can be said that for both countries the temporary measures enacted during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis did more to stress the limitation of existing social programs than to bring about permanent change.

## Internship Responsibilities

- Collection of public and media documents to keep track of the scale and speed of social-policy responses to COVID-19 in Canada and the United States.
- Edit and annotate a draft of the research project.
- Assist with two other research projects related to political rhetoric and public perceptions during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

