Statement of Research Interests
Keith Bentele

Main Areas of Research Interest

My primary areas of research interest are stratification and political sociology. I am particularly interested in examining the impact of various economic and social policies on outcomes relevant to social stratification. Additionally, I am interested broadly in the determinants of policy change with particular attention to the role of partisanship, government ideology, and social movements in shaping legislative outcomes. I generally use quantitative methods, but I strive to use a range methodological techniques in order to balance the strengths and weaknesses of particular approaches.

Prior and Current Research

My interest is stratification research dates back to my undergraduate years. In my master’s paper, *The Temporal Dynamics of Income Inequality in the U.S. States, 1976-1995*, I examined changes in the impact of economic, political, and social factors on income inequality at the level of U.S. states. A substantial portion of my subsequent research has branched off from this project. In my dissertation, *Rising Earnings Inequality in the United States: Trends, Determinants, and Paths*, I use a variety of methodological approaches to characterize and explain state-level patterns of change in earnings inequality. I focus on earnings inequality, as transformations in the distribution of earnings are the largest contributing factors to the overall increase in income inequality since the late 1970s. This research has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the University of Arizona’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute. In order to conduct these analyses, I use Current Population Survey data on individual earnings to generate a variety of annual summary measures of earnings inequality for each state since 1978. In additional to various regression analyses, I have used Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to assess whether, and characterize the manner in which, states have taken distinct causal paths to higher levels of earnings inequality.

Stated broadly, a major conclusion of this work is that individual states have experienced rising earnings inequality as a consequence of distinct combinations of causal processes; states vary both in terms of the number and the type of inequality-increasing factors that have converged upon them since the late 1970s. One goal in this analysis is to assess the extent to which state institutional and political characteristics (minimum wage laws, levels of unionization, and the ideological composition of state governments) have mediated national inequality-increasing trends. A central finding is that states with weaker unions experience both larger increases in inequality and require fewer contributing factors to experience substantial increases in earnings inequality.
For example, in a subset of states with low union density declines in the real value of the minimum wage alone are sufficient to produce substantial increases in earning inequality. In addition to state institutional characteristics, regional dynamics of rising inequality appear to be driven heavily by the extended playing out of economic restructuring in different regions of the country. Examining business cycles separately, deindustrialization is influential nationally in the 1980s, but particularly so in the Rust Belt. In the 1990s, loss of manufacturing is concentrated in the Northeast and the West Coast, while in the 2000s deindustrialization contributes to rising inequality primarily in the Southeast. I suggest that the role of industry shifts (the dramatic loss of manufacturing employment and expansion of service sector employment) to rising earnings inequality has been underemphasized as a result of a reliance on styles of analysis that are ill-suited to capture the complicated and contingent nature of the impact of deindustrialization. Last, it appears that the factors driving rising earnings inequality are quite similar within the 1980s and 2000s business cycles (a falling minimum wage, high unemployment, deunionization, & deindustrialization), but quite different within the 1990s business cycle. I am currently exploring the unique nature of income growth during the 1990s business cycle.

A chapter from this project, “Distinct Paths to Higher Inequality? The Dynamics of Systemic and Regional Earnings Inequality in U.S. States, 1979-2005”, was recently awarded the University of Arizona’s 1st Place Raymond V. Bowers Sociology Paper Award. Additionally, what initially began as a problem of controlling for business cycle effects within my dissertation analyses, developed into a separate paper examining the contribution of macroeconomic fluctuations to rising earnings and income inequality. This paper, “Have Macroeconomic Forces Contributed to Rising Earnings Inequality in the United States?”, was awarded the 2nd Place Raymond V. Bowers Sociology Paper Award in 2006. After spending many years examining the determinants of levels and change in inequality, I am interested in exploring the effects of income and earnings inequality as independent variables. Research on both the political and health impacts of rising inequality has been burgeoning in recent years and I look forward to entering those discussions.

While working on my master’s thesis it came to my attention that the generosity of various U.S. state-level social welfare transfers have diverged since the 1990s. Upon realizing this I was immediately attracted to the idea of examining the determinants of these different trajectories in generosity, with an eye to testing how the rich cross-national literature on differences in welfare state generosity fared at the U.S. state-level. I have been collecting state-level data on various state welfare programs for years, and the first paper to emerge from this line of research, Ending Access as We Know It: State Welfare Benefit Coverage in the TANF Era, is currently under review at the American Sociological Review. In this co-authored paper, we use linear growth modeling (or HLM for change) to
examine the contribution of state-level economic, political, and racial factors, as well as changes in administrative practice, to declining access to welfare benefits since the 1996 reform. This project lead to a spin-off paper, Stability and Convergence Following Reform: The Spatial Dynamics of Change in Welfare Benefits and Caseloads in the TANF era, in which I utilize spatial statistics to examine the role of inter-state diffusion in recent changes in both state welfare benefit levels and caseloads. I hope to continue research in this vein examining changes in other state anti-poverty programs, such as state earned income tax credits, and to continue my efforts to develop useful state-level summary indicators of state welfare generosity or adequacy (measures which capture net impacts across a wide variety of programs).

While my recent work on state welfare programs examined the consequences of the 1996 TANF legislation for access to services, I am also deeply interested in the causes of policy change. A paper co-written with Brayden King and Sarah Soule, The Ecology of Congressional Agenda-Setting: Civil and Political Rights Hearings, 1960-1986, was recently published in Social Forces. In this paper we examine the factors influencing attention to a particular set of issues, rights-related issues, within Congress. While previous research has largely failed to establish a connection between social movement protest and policy change, in this paper we argue, and demonstrate, that protest is influential at the early agenda-setting phase of the policymaking process. More recently I have been collaborating with a former colleague from Arizona, Rebecca Sager, on a paper examining state-level passage of faith-based legislation. Using negative binomial regression and event history analysis, we examine state-level factors that increase the likelihood of passage of faith-based legislation. We find that the ideological conservatism of state legislatures, the strength and resources of state Christian Right social movements organizations, and institutionalization in the form of the creation of state offices of faith-based initiatives all contribute to explaining state variation in the passage of faith-based legislation. We will be presenting this paper, State Faith-Based Practices and the Dual Cultural Processes of Desecularization and Devolution of the Public Sector, at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management annual meeting this November.

Future Research Agenda

Beyond completing the various aforementioned projects and continuing my research in the areas of income inequality, welfare state generosity, and policy change, I have a couple projects in nascent stages that I look forward to working on.

One project on the drawing board is an examination of the impact of the recent collapse in the housing market on racial wealth disparities. For years now I have
been following the proliferation of the subprime mortgage market primarily as an academic hobby. This attention stemmed initially out of a more general interest in racial disparities in experiences with predatory lending, a topic on which geographers, and some sociologists, are now doing excellent work. Given the huge racial differences in terms of who is being impacted by the subprime implosion and the credit crunch broadly, I am very interested in attempting to examine the consequences of these historic foreclosure rates on assets held by minorities and on racial wealth disparities. As home equity makes up the majority of assets in any family, and given that this is disproportionately true in the case of African-American families, I expect the racial impacts to be substantial. Further, I am interested in attempting to apply my recently learned skills in spatial analysis and GIS to this project, perhaps linking foreclosure and census tract data to get a sense of the racial and class distribution of the fallout.

Finally, over the last couple of years I have become interested in literature examining slums and the growth of slums in the developing world. I have been discussing a pilot project examining the expansion of colonias in the U.S. (unincorporated communities with little or no infrastructure found in Texas, Arizona, California & New Mexico) with a colleague who has skills in remote sensing, satellite imagery, and GIS. Given the increasing quality, accessibility, and affordability of these types of data, I am excited about sharpening and expanding my familiarity with techniques of spatial analysis which can be applied to many sociological questions.