The idea for this volume originated during the second annual conference of ESPAnet (the European Social Policy Analysis network) in Oxford in 2004. Each ESPAnet conference involves at least one stream of papers which deal with comparative methods in cross-national social policy analysis. In this context the editors of this volume discussed the current international debate about welfare reform and welfare state change, and the notion that the strong interest in this topic within the scientific community has not been matched by considerable academic progress. There are plenty of leitmotifs aimed at capturing the nature of welfare state change (or the lack of it), as well as competing accounts of how to explain policy reform. At the same time, there has been a noticeable paucity of how to empirically and systematically conceptualize, operationalize and measure change within and across welfare states. It is this ‘dependent variable problem’ and its various aspects which led the editors to invite international experts to a ‘thematic seminar’ in May 2005 at the University of Stirling, and subsequently to organize a panel on this topic at the 2005 ESPAnet conference in Fribourg, Switzerland. This book provides the results of these and subsequent discussions on the subject. It aims to reflect on a number of dimensions of the ‘dependent variable problem’ within comparative welfare state analysis, and to provide suggestions as to how to address and tackle it empirically.

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