

Welfare States and Welfare Attitudes

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The welfare state may in many ways be seen as a particular trademark of the European social model. An extensive set of social and institutional actors provide protection against negative consequences of common life-course risks—for example, by offering economic support in periods of hardship or by ensuring access to care and services. Based on collective responsibility and financing, welfare policies define a set of social rights, meet common vulnerabilities, and address needs for protection from market uncertainties.

However, over recent decades, European welfare states have undergone profound restructuring and recalibration. This is a result of economic and political pressures and of adaptive processes to new contingencies due to demographic changes, international migration and economic competition, and persistent unemployment. New forms of risk, taking different shapes across welfare states, have grown out of precarious and insecure life courses. Rising concerns about welfare state sustainability and the slowly growing “Europeanization” of welfare policies are also common challenges across the continent. Increased provider pluralism and new forms of public management, as well as new forms of policies and state intervention, in particular regarding activation policies, work–family reconciliation, and gender policies, are attempts to adjust to these challenges.

In parallel with institutional and structural developments, collective beliefs and representations about welfare and justice have also evolved, sometimes reflecting exclusion and perceived lack of deservingness of groups of beneficiaries—in particular, members of minority groups. In all of these challenges and processes of change, the attitudes and orientations of the public are important, although often neglected, factors that must be taken

into account. Established viewpoints, normative expectations, concepts of justice, and similar perceptions are often very hard to change, and in this way, attitudes often function as a counterweight to abrupt policy changes. Policy reformers need to deal with normative orientations and expectations that have been established by previous politics and policies, and this often hinders or derails policy changes. Conversely, existing attitudes may be a resource and part of the opportunity structure for actors bent on challenging the institutionalized status quo and effectuating political change.

Attitudes toward the welfare state and other public institutions should be seen as central components of social order, governance, and legitimacy of modern societies. They tell us something about whether or not existing social arrangements are legitimate. Are they accepted only because people see no alternatives or think that action is futile, or are they normatively grounded? Are institutions considered to be fundamentally just or not? And research into the antecedents and consequences of these attitudes also asks us to judge public policies not only by their distributive effects or by their economic efficiency but by their normative effects on mass publics.

In this book, we analyze and report results from a comprehensive research program on citizens' attitudes toward welfare policies across European countries. We also offer a novel comparison with the case of the United States, putting into further perspective the potential regional distinctiveness of the European context as a whole. We are mainly occupied with normative orientations toward the (re)distribution of resources and life chances and toward public policies aimed at ameliorating adverse conditions. We summarize these under the heading "welfare attitudes." Our research focuses on the interplay among individual welfare attitudes and behaviors, institutional contexts, and structural variables. We hope to provide essential input to the interdisciplinary field of comparative studies of welfare state attitudes and to offer critical insights into the public legitimacy of welfare state reform.

Along with the societal and political context, the dominant welfare state theories also have changed considerably over time. The 1970s and 1980s saw a plethora of treatises on "welfare state crisis" (O'Connor, 1974; Offe, 1984), "legitimation crisis" (Habermas, 1975), and "government overload" (Crozier et al., 1975). All of these arguments suggested that a highly problematic relationship existed between the workings of government and the legitimacy of the state. Either citizens asked for too much government, in a

vicious spiral of insatiable demands, or for less government, as expressed in increasing alienation from government and its bureaucratic intrusions into everyday life. As discussed in the next section, many of these arguments seem—with the benefit of hindsight—widely overblown.

Following the publication of the landmark study “Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism” (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and other publications from the “power resource” school of welfare state research (for example, Korpi, 1989; Huber and Stephens, 2001a; Korpi and Palme, 2003), the 1990s and early 2000s were much dominated by the debate on welfare regimes. What were the antecedents and effects of different institutional configurations of the welfare state (Korpi and Palme, 1998)? Did welfare states in fact come in “worlds” or “families of nations” (Castles and Mitchell, 1992; Castles, 1993; Scruggs and Allan, 2006; 2008)?

Here a much more harmonious relationship between welfare states and the attitudes among their citizens transpired. As suggested by the political labeling of Esping-Andersen’s three welfare regimes (liberal, conservative, and social democratic), welfare regimes were seen as rooted in distinct political values and ideologies. Furthermore, existing welfare regimes tended to mold welfare attitudes among their citizens in distinctive ways, making for some degree of congruence between welfare state institutions and opinions among mass publics (Svallfors, 1997; 2003).

In the last few years, concerns have been raised that the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of Europe constitutes a threat against welfare state legitimacy (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Banting and Kymlicka, 2006; Boeri et al., 2002). National welfare states were predicated on maintaining clear borders between the population that should be covered by welfare state protection (and asked to finance it) and those who were outsiders. With increasing international migration, both within Europe and from elsewhere, borders have become much more permeable, and the distinction between those who “belong” and those who do not is now less clear-cut. The ethnic fragmentation of the United States and its impediments for the establishment of a universal welfare state have been held up as the new problematic future for European welfare states (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004).

In this volume, we pick up elements from all three strands of research, but we apply them within our comparative framework, focusing on welfare attitudes as key lynchpins of institutional legitimacy. We conduct our analyses in a context of “permanent austerity” (Pierson, 2001), in which the

demographic situation of European countries particularly makes welfare state sustainability a problematic issue. Even if the “crisis and overload” literature was not written in the same climate, many of the themes about demands on and evaluations of welfare policies are relevant also today.

Furthermore, we rely to some extent on the literature about welfare regimes for framing our own inquiries. But we are less concerned with comparing levels or group patterns of attitudes across regimes—as argued below, these are exercises with diminishing returns—than on testing to what extent associations and processes play out differently in different welfare regimes. To some extent, we are also involved in transcending the regime framework into more general tests of the influence and interactions of different macro features of the countries we compare.

Finally, a novelty of the book concerns the analysis of the relationship between diversity and welfare attitudes. By investigating the effects of new forms of diversity among both target populations and the populations at large, it touches on the social consequences of various forms of migratory flows in European societies.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

A substantial number of previous studies have analyzed how institutional and cultural factors impinge on the formation of attitudes toward the welfare state in different contexts (for a selection of recent book-length examples, see Cook and Barrett, 1992; Roller, 1992; Jenssen and Martinussen, 1994; Borre and Scarbrough, 1995; Svallfors, 1996; Gilens, 1999; Svallfors and Taylor-Gooby, 1999; Andress et al., 2001; Arriba et al., 2006; Larsen, 2006; Brooks and Manza, 2007; Svallfors, 2007). From the 1990s onward, a growing number of such studies have used a cross-national and comparative approach (see, for example, Svallfors, 1997; 2003; 2007; Bonoli, 2000; Van Oorschot and Halman, 2000; Andress and Heien, 2001; Mau, 2003; Jæger, 2006; Larsen, 2006; Van Oorschot, 2006; Brooks and Manza, 2007; Larsen, 2008).

In order to place these contributions, and the ones from this book, in context and perspective, the history of analyses of welfare attitudes needs to be recapitulated. This field was for a long time marred by a lack of data. While reasonably good data had been available for some time when it came to issues such as social mobility, income distribution, and economic indica-

tors of all sorts, that was not the case (even by the late 1980s) when it came to comparing attitudes across countries. This situation is now completely changed with the establishment and growth of data production collaborations such as the *European Social Survey*, the *International Social Survey Program*, and the *World Values Survey*. The field is now “data-rich,” but advanced analyses, explanations, and interpretations lag behind. We hope to make a substantial contribution in this respect through this book.

Although election studies and other general surveys had occasionally investigated welfare attitudes from the 1950s onward, more extensive and systematic research did not take hold until the 1970s. It took both the maturation of extensive welfare states and their political questioning in the wake of the economic problems of the 1970s to make public opinion about the welfare state a salient research issue. This first generation of scholars in the field had to make do with compiling, reanalyzing, and comparing national surveys on welfare attitudes—something that made conclusions fragile.

One of the earliest attempts to compile and reanalyze existing surveys was made by Richard Coughlin (1979; 1980). Coughlin compared attitude data from eight rich countries using existing national surveys. Another influential series of reanalyses of existing survey data were carried out by Peter Taylor-Gooby (1982; 1983; 1985), who used British surveys to describe patterns and pinpoint ambivalences in welfare attitudes.

These first attempts at probing the patterns of welfare attitudes were soon followed by a wave of national surveys, in which different aspects of attitudes toward welfare were investigated. In the 1980s, national surveys were conducted and analyzed in a host of advanced capitalist countries, including the United States (Cook and Barrett, 1992), Germany (Roller, 1992), Sweden (Svallfors, 1989), and Britain (Saunders, 1990).

Although conclusions emanated from different data sets and various comparisons, and differed in substance and emphasis, a set of common key findings from these early works may be summarized in five short points:

1. Overall, attitudes were strongly supportive of an encompassing welfare state. In contrast to sweeping statements in the public debate about generational processes leading younger generations away from support for welfare policies or about rising resistance against bureaucratic-administrative intrusions, the early research in general showed the welfare state to be quite popular. Encompassing welfare policies, which are collectively financed

and publicly organized, proved to have overall support from the citizens of the advanced capitalist economies.

2. At the same time, a clear difference in support for universal and selective programs was found. Universal encompassing programs such as pensions and health care received strong support, while more targeted or selective programs such as unemployment benefits and social assistance received much lower support. This pattern essentially applied in most, if not all, advanced capitalist democracies.

3. A clear difference was also documented between general and specific support for the welfare state. General support, in the form of attitudes toward objects such as “the public sector” or “social reforms,” proved to be more dependent on changes in the public discourse and general ideological dispositions, and public support was therefore more volatile at this level. Specific support for concrete welfare policy programs, on the other hand, was shown to be more stable because it was rooted in everyday life experiences.

4. The clear support for welfare policies coexisted with considerable ambivalence regarding several aspects of welfare policies. Quite widespread suspicions about welfare abuse and cheating, for example, and concerns about bureaucracy and inefficiencies in the public sector were important qualifications of the overall support for the redistributive and risk-reducing aspects of welfare policies.

5. The early research also confirmed that class and “class-related” factors (such as income and education) were the most important determinants behind welfare attitudes—in contrast to widespread arguments about sector-related cleavages as the new main factors behind welfare attitudes (Dunleavy, 1980; Saunders, 1986: Ch. 8).

Although these first-generation analyses were severely restrained by the nonexistence of truly comparative data, they formed an important backdrop to later developments in the field. Simply by making welfare attitudes a topic for systematic social scientific research, instead of the object of political and speculative projections, they laid the ground for subsequent extensions and improvements. Important single-country studies continued to flourish over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, often focusing on change in welfare attitudes over time—and often finding very little change. (For a selection of analyses based on single-country surveys, see Jensen and

Martinussen, 1994; Svallfors, 1996; Van Oorschot, 1998; Blomberg-Kroll, 1999; the individual chapters in Svallfors and Taylor-Gooby, 1999; Andress et al., 2001; Arriba et al., 2006; Staerklé et al., 2007.)

But crucially, from the 1990s onward, research on welfare attitudes also took an explicitly comparative turn. The precondition of this was the establishment, consolidation, and increasing sophistication of comparative data sets. Data collected (in order of appearance) through the *Eurobarometer*, the *European* (later *World*) *Values Surveys*, the *International Social Survey Program* and the *European Social Survey* have formed the base for systematic research about the political and institutional impact on welfare attitudes and about the interplay between institutional and attitudinal change.

Perhaps the most important single enterprise in the first round of systematic comparison of welfare attitudes was the Beliefs in Government (BiG) project, headed by Max Kaase and Kenneth Newton (for a summary, see Kaase and Newton, 1995). In their five volumes, the BiG research team aimed to take stock of what could be learned from the first rounds of genuinely comparative attitude research. In particular, the volume on the “Scope of Government” added a host of valuable analyses of citizens’ orientations toward government activities and spending (Borre and Scarbrough, 1995). In making a distinction between attitudes toward the *range* of government activities and toward the *degree* of government involvement, these analyses questioned the “government overload” hypothesis, in which voters’ insatiable requests for ever more government intervention overloaded government budgets and capacities. It was clearly not the case that voters asked for further and further extensions of government responsibilities; on the whole, such demands were quite stable over time.

The comparative analyses in the BiG project were still severely restrained by data access. As readily admitted by the editors, many aspects of comparative welfare attitudes could simply not be tapped with the existing data. Time series were still too short and the range of countries still too restricted to allow more wide-ranging conclusions. Furthermore, one could note that the BiG project was still way short of establishing any coherent theoretical framework with which to understand the pattern of attitudes toward state intervention and redistribution. The many interesting analyses it included were not driven by an integrated set of analytical concepts and perspectives.

What gradually emerged as somewhat of a master frame for comparative inquiries was the “worlds of welfare” categorization famously introduced by Esping-Andersen (1990). A number of studies analyzed whether attitude patterns and conflict patterns corresponded to the typology he suggested and what might explain instances of noncorrespondence. Pioneering studies in this regard were Svallfors (1993) and Svallfors (1997), which compared attitudes to redistribution in different Western countries, using Esping-Andersen’s worlds of welfare as a frame for country selection and analysis. These studies were followed by many others (Bean and Papadakis, 1998; Evans, 1998; Edlund, 1999a; 1999b; Matheson and Wearing, 1999; Bonoli, 2000; Gelissen, 2000; Andress and Heien, 2001; Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Svallfors, 2003; Jæger, 2006; Larsen, 2006; 2008).

The main findings of this “comparing-attitudes-in-regimes” industry are not completely clear-cut, since both conceptual and empirical problems beset the analyses (see following). There appears to be agreement, however, on some findings: We do find substantial differences among countries in overall public support for the welfare state, corresponding roughly to welfare policy commitment. Support for equality, redistribution, and state intervention is strongest in the social democratic regime, weaker in the conservative regime, and weakest in the liberal regime. However, we do not find any clear regime-clustering of countries. Differences and similarities among countries show interpretable patterns, but they are too complex to be summarized as “worlds of welfare attitudes.”

Furthermore, there are general similarities across countries in the impact of different social cleavages: Categorical differences along class, gender, or labor market status lines show similar *patterns* across welfare regimes. Where interesting differences among countries in the *magnitude* of categorical attitude differences were found, they did not at all follow the model suggested in the closing chapter of Esping-Andersen’s treatise. Instead, they seem to follow the historical articulation of particular social cleavages in different contexts. For example, class differences were especially pronounced in Sweden and some other northwestern countries, reflecting the comparatively high salience of distributive and class-related issues in the political programs and practices of these countries.

Even though much has been learned about comparative welfare attitudes from the comparisons of welfare regimes, this whole line of inquiry has currently reached an impasse. At present, we may expect little new to

be learned from yet another comparison of how welfare attitudes differ in “x worlds of welfare capitalism.” In reaching this impasse, a number of conceptual and empirical problems with the analytical framework have emerged.

One of these problems is specifically related to the regime concept itself: What are “welfare regimes,” really? Are they country clusters, or are they ideal types that countries approximate more or less well? Are regimes constellations of institutions, constellations of distributive outcomes, or constellations of political actors *and* political institutions? None of this is entirely clear from reading Esping-Andersen’s founding monograph, and different authors have taken different directions in trying to indicate and compare welfare regimes (see Castles and Mitchell, 1992; Korpi and Palme, 1998; Huber and Stephens, 2001b). If a loose fit is found between country clusters and some particular outcome (such as, in this case, welfare attitudes), is this an indication of a loose coupling of institutions and attitudes or of the fact that countries do not “fit” the welfare regime (see Scruggs and Allan, 2008)?

Another more general problem is how welfare state support should best be measured in relation to welfare regimes. Studies vary widely in the kind of indicators they use for attitudinal support, often without much explicit argument as to why a particular measure was chosen. Analysts vary as to whether they choose manifest summary measures composed of multiple individual indicators (for example, Svallfors, 2003), some kind of latent constructs (for example, Andress and Heien, 2001), or some kind of “global” single-item measure (for example, Jæger, 2006). They also differ as to whether they try to measure support for specific welfare policies or attitudes toward (re)distribution in more general terms. All in all, this particular “dependent variable problem” has made comparisons between different analyses hard and cumulation painstakingly slow.

To sum up, all these national and comparative studies have clearly contributed to our understanding of the formation of, causes behind, and changes in welfare attitudes. Yet, both data limitations and analytical shortcomings apply to existing analyses. This book yields added value because it includes analyses that (1) combine individual-level attitudinal data with country-level data on the institutional setup of welfare policies; (2) are more firmly based in welfare state theory; (3) more clearly specify the relevant dependent variables that may reveal variations among different institutional

and cultural environments; and yet (4) use data that are comparable across a larger number of countries, compared to earlier surveys.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our book is based in comparative analysis, in which actors located in spatially different settings are compared, and elements of the environment in which they are located are used to explain differences and similarities that arise. Such comparisons have often taken the form of comparing countries, the different actions and outcomes that occur within these settings, and the aspects of national settings that may explain why they occur. Important aspects of distributive processes, such as wage and income distribution or access to the labor market, are structured by national institutions of various kinds. Furthermore, countries differ in their basic characteristics such as the age structure of the population or their economic structure. Our aim in this book is to use such macro-factors to study both their main effects for welfare attitudes and their impact on micro-relations of various kinds.

We argue that welfare attitudes constitute a key aspect of the moral economy, in which conceptions of the mutual rights and obligations in a society are condensed (Kohli, 1987; Mau, 2003; Svallfors, 1996). According to Mettler and Soss (2004: 61), public policies and political institutions, as well as other aspects of the social environment, “influence the ways individuals understand their rights and responsibilities as members of a political community.” The notion of a moral economy pinpoints that people’s notions of social relations are guided by normative ideas of reciprocity, justice, obligation, and responsibility, and not only by narrow self-interest.

We bring various kinds of macro-variables into our analyses. One type relates to features of the institutional settings, in particular those related to the programmatic structure of the welfare state. Here we are interested in institutions as configurations—that is, “regimes” (Esping-Andersen, 1990)—but we are also interested in other, more specific features of welfare state institutions, such as their level of social expenditure or their age-spending profiles (Lynch, 2006).

We also put emphasis on different distributional profiles of countries. This emphasis relates to the level and structure of inequality and stratification in different country contexts: income distributions, levels of poverty,

and the like. But it also pertains to the size and composition of different (potential) claimant groups: the age structure of the population, the number of immigrants and other “risk-groups” in the population, the relative poverty rates in specific population groups, and so on. All these factors are clearly affected by the institutional setup of different countries, but they are hardly to be seen as institutional features themselves.

Another type of macro-variable indicates the prevailing discourse on social policy matters in different countries. In some chapters, such political articulation by various political actors (such as parties and trade unions) is seen as potentially affecting attitudes or group differences in such attitudes.

In discussing what kind of macro-to-micro effects on values, beliefs, and attitudes among mass publics we could expect, it might be useful to think of these in the same terms that Pierson (1993) and Svallfors (2007: 267–68) use to discuss feedback effects from institutions and public policies. Pierson summarizes such effects under the headings of “resource and incentive” effects and “interpretive” effects. The resource and incentive effects are present when macro-factors affect the material interests of individuals—for example, when differing risks of unemployment and poverty affect the material interests of members in different classes. Interpretive effects are manifested as different degrees of visibility and traceability of social conditions and policies. For example, the size and composition of claimant groups might affect their visibility, and thereby people’s perceptions of the size and nature of different social problems. To this should be added a normative mechanism (Svallfors, 2007: 267–68). A normative mechanism is present where macro-factors such as public policies and discourse provide citizens with a sense of not only what their material interests are and the current state of affairs but also what state of affairs they would like to see. What do institutions and policies tell citizens about what the world *should* look like?

Macro-to-micro effects such as these should not only be expected to affect levels of attitudes in various respects (“main effects”), but they can also be expected to affect categorical differences in attitudes and the mechanisms through which attitudes are affected (“interaction effects”). As shown in the chapters that follow, all of these forms of effects are present and can be examined through comparative analysis.