

Does popular support for welfare states depend on their outcomes? A multi-level analysis using ESS data

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Abstract:

Does support for the welfare state depend on the degree to which welfare state provisions result in adequate standards of living for citizens? Based on theoretical reflection, a positive as well as a negative relation between welfare outcomes and welfare legitimacy could be expected. It could be the case that good outcomes are ‘rewarded’ with high levels of welfare legitimacy, while bad outcomes are ‘punished’ with low support. However, it is equally plausible that weak outcomes increase support for the state’s responsibility in the provision of welfare, because government intervention is seen as a necessary condition to improve standards of living for vulnerable groups (improvement reaction). According to a similar argument, good outcomes could weaken support, because people feel ‘overburdened’ with taxes necessary to uphold the extensive programs that produce the good outcomes. Surprisingly enough, we know very little about the relationship between welfare performance and support. Nevertheless, these questions are impelling, especially in the light of the current economic crisis and the immanent welfare cuts.

This paper provides an empirical, cross-national study of how performance of the welfare state affect opinions on the role of government intervention. In contrast to previous research, this study does not only take actual performance of the welfare state into account, but also focuses on individual perceptions of performance. Furthermore, I argue that it is of crucial importance to make a distinction between different target groups of welfare programs, depending on their deservingness. Using European Social Survey (round 4, 2008/09) data makes it possible to carry out separate analyses regarding opinions toward pensioners (high deservingness) and the unemployed (lower deservingness). Multi-level analyses are performed on 30 European countries. Variables that might intervene in the relation between welfare outcomes and support – such as indicators of interest and ideological dispositions – are controlled for.

Key words: welfare outcomes, role of government, European Social Survey

Suggested stream: *16. Welfare state attitudes and economic crisis* (Ursula Dallinger & Ferry Koster)