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Civic criticism of the welfare state during recession: Multilevel analysis of 21 European countries, 2008

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All surveys show that public support for the welfare state is high in Europe. Yet, at the same time, there seems to be no notable political backlash against the ongoing retrenchment of the welfare state. In stead, highly critical assessments of the welfare state have dominated social policy discussion in most European countries, especially during the present economic crisis. The starting point of this paper is that prior attitude surveys may have over-emphasised the general advantages of the welfare state and neglected the more timely critical aspects of social policy, such as the alleged adverse economic effects, possible procedural problems in social security and unwanted consequences of social security on individual behaviour. This paper asks how commonly such criticism is found among European publics, who are the critical people and has the present economic crisis intensified negative thoughts about the welfare state. The study is based on multilevel analyses on data from the European Social Survey (Round 4, 2008) from 21 European countries. Although the data are cross-sectional, it is possible to use a time-series approach to analyse changes after the September 15 (2008) banking crisis which is covered in the field-work period. The results show that criticism is widely spread. People are not uncritical about the welfare state. The overall balance is on the good side, but there is some indication that the economic crisis has strengthened criticism. The most critical individuals are from lower, not upper, socio-economic segments of European societies. Another important finding concerns the nature of criticism. This evidence suggests that the nature of civic criticism on the welfare state voiced by European publics is rather constructive than disruptive.

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