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Public Support for Collective Welfare Arrangements: Solving the Puzzle Using Longitudinal Trends in Income Inequality?

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Abstract. This paper will study social solidarity in terms of publics' attitudes towards collective responsibility for social security. In this paper, we want to test whether the rather small amount of explained variation found in most studies looking at the support for a welfare state can be improved by taking into account one of the most important social changes of the last decades: the rise in income inequality that has manifested itself to a smaller or larger extent in most advanced western democracies (OECD 2008). Starting from a conceptual framework that takes account of the trends and driving factors of income inequality changes during the last decades, we formulate hypothesis about the likely impact of these changes on public attitudes towards collective responsibility and evaluate whether this type of longitudinal indicators add to existing knowledge. Furthermore, we assume that a more equal distribution of economic resources creates a stronger sense of community, which in turn, fosters a stronger support for collective welfare responsibility. Unequal distribution of income, however, is expected to lower a sense of community and diminish support for collective responsibility. Furthermore, we expect that income inequality will increase polarization of attitudes among social groups within a country, whereas a more equal distribution of income will create more homogeneous attitudes towards welfare arrangements. Relating past income inequality to welfare attitudes may help predicting the structure of inequality in the future. The latter is derived from an assumption that welfare attitudes represent popular ideological understanding about social justice and solidarity, which in turn determine future social welfare policies.

Micro level data for this research is derived from 4th wave of European Social Survey (ESS) conducted in 2008. Macro level data will be attained from Eurostat and OECD.

Keywords: collective welfare arrangements, income inequality, public opinion, Europe.