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Trends in welfare deservingness opinions: the Netherlands, 1975-2006

Marjolein Jeene, Wim van Oorschot & Wilfred Uunk

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Abstract

Although the order of what the public regards as more or less deserving needy groups has been established in the literature, the trend of these opinions in a changing economic and policy context has hardly been examined. In this paper, we address this trend question using twenty-two waves of the repeated cross-sectional survey Cultural Change in the Netherlands (CCN, 1975-2006). We focus on the long term trend and short term fluctuations of the public's deservingness opinions and analyze which macro factors are related to these short term opinion fluctuations through time. As for the long term trend, results indicate that after a steep rise in the early 1980s in the percentage of people who feel that needy groups are deserving of more support than they receive, the overall trend of these opinions is rather stable. Furthermore, economic factors and not institutional and political changes seem to be most important in explaining the short term fluctuations of deservingness opinions around this trend: during economically prosperous times, the Dutch public finds needy groups deserving of more support than during economically difficult times. However, in times of high unemployment, the unemployed and social assistance beneficiaries are more likely to be considered deserving of more support.

1. Introduction

It is known that in the eyes of the general public, some needy groups deserve more welfare support than others. For instance, the old and the sick are often seen as most deserving of support, while the unemployed and those on social assistance are least deserving of support (Coughlin, 1980; Van Oorschot, 2000). This deservingness ranking has been found by a number of authors (see for example Coughlin, 1980; Goul Andersen, Pettersen, Svallfors, & Uusitalo, 1999; Van Oorschot & Halman, 2000). Coughlin (1980) found the deservingness ranking in a number of countries and refers to a 'universal dimension of support'. Previous research has shown that the ranking can well be understood by a number of criteria that people use to determine which needy groups are most and least deserving of public support. The most commonly found criteria are the level of need, control or responsibility of neediness, the needy's identity, the attitude of the needy person, and the degree of reciprocation (Van Oorschot, 2000).

But, to our knowledge, hardly any research exists on trends in deservingness opinions. It may be expected that these opinions change, since the context in which they are formed has changed rather drastically in the last three decades, both economically as well as on a policy level in western countries. The 'golden ages' of welfare state expansion came to an end after the oil crisis in the 1970s, and changed into a time of welfare state retrenchment and stabilization when the economy got back on its feet. For the Netherlands, which will be our focus, welfare state retrenchment mainly meant stricter entitlement criteria for benefits – e.g. shorter durations of receiving support, benefits more strongly related to personal work histories – to reduce the number of recipients and to stress people's individual responsibility, and less collectivity. After the number of recipients were reduced, and the economic reasons for changes subsided when the economy improved from the mid-1980s onwards, the focus of support changed. While the basic premise after the war was that the support was one-sided, i.e. the government being responsible to help the needy, this now shifted to a stronger focus on the responsibility of citizens themselves, by means of differentiation and activation (Van Oorschot, 2006). As for the economic changes, after the recession in the early 1980s, with an unprecedented high unemployment rate in 1983-84, the economy recovered. But there was another downfall in the early 1990s, as well as in 2001 when the internet bubble hit, although not to the same extent as the recession caused by the oil crisis.

In this article, we are interested in the changes that deservingness opinions underwent, in the light of the contextual changes. To our knowledge, there are only a couple of studies that have examined deservingness opinions longitudinally, taking into account changing contextual factors. Such opinion trend research is also scarce when we take into account other welfare opinions. To examine opinion trend questions, we need either longitudinal panel or cross-sectional data for multiple points in time. The fact that such data are rare is one of the main reasons why research on opinion trends is scarce. Fortunately, we have access to a series of twenty-two cross-sectional Dutch surveys, collected between 1975 and 2006 (2008?), with identical questions. Respondents were presented with a list of five different benefits (the disability pension, old age pension, unemployment benefit, social assistance benefit, and sickness benefit), and were asked to indicate whether they felt these benefits were sufficient or not. These data of twenty-two time points presents us with a strong design to examine a trend as the large number of time-points adds to the power of the analyses, and can give better insights into how opinions change when the context changes than a single cross-section or cross-national design can provide.

The following investigation concentrates on the trend in deservingness opinions and the context in which this trend took place, focusing on both the long term trend and the short term fluctuations. The main question of this article reads as follows: How did Dutch deservingness opinions develop over time, and to what extent can the short term opinion fluctuations be explained using both contextual and individual factors? This main question leads to specific research questions: (1) What is the general long term trend of the deservingness opinions? (2) To what extent can we find short term fluctuation in this trend? (3) To what extent can these short term fluctuations be explained with context and individual factors, and finally, (4) to what extent do the answers to the previous questions differ for different benefits? Although we know of only a couple of studies that described the trends in deservingness opinions that we can refer to, we also know of some research on more general welfare opinion trends. We will use this literature to look for contextual factors that have been found to influence other welfare opinion trend, and that could possibly also influence the deservingness opinion trend we will examine.

2. Previous welfare opinion trend research

The literature on welfare opinion trends is scarce and concerns mostly Scandinavian countries, as well as Great Britain and the US, and some Dutch literature. For the Scandinavian countries, the long-term development of welfare opinions were expected to either go downwards, with the traditional high welfare support withering away due to more individualistic values in society (Pettersen, 1995; Wilensky, 1975), or this support was expected to remain at a rather stable level, since strong groups have a vested interest in the welfare state and will therefore always support it (Goul Anderson et al, 1999). The welfare opinions discussed for these countries concern questions of redistribution and whether welfare state (benefits) should be expanded, reduced, or maintained as they are. Findings support the second expected long-term development: data from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland, with different time points between 1965 and 1995, show rather stable or even slightly increasing long-term trend of welfare support (Goul Andersen, 1993; Goul Andersen et al., 1999; Martinussen, 1993; Pettersen, 1995; Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995). Next to these long-term trends, the focus of this literature is mostly on explaining the short term fluctuations.

For the Dutch case, Becker (2005) analyses the same data we will use in this article, but from the 1970s up until 2002. A scale in which a higher score indicates that people feel benefits are insufficient (made on the basis of opinions on four different benefits, namely old age pensions, social assistance benefit, unemployment benefit and the surviving relatives' benefit) shows a slightly increasing long term trend. Becker (2005) interprets this as an increasing feeling of solidarity with the needy. When the items in the scale are examined separately, differences appear between the benefits. Over the years examined, people show more solidarity with users of universal benefits such as the elderly benefits, and less so for benefits that are more conditional, like the unemployment benefit. With the exception of social assistance recipients, for whom the public shows most solidarity, the findings are in line with the deservingness theory, since the groups seen as more deserving, are more supported by the public.

As for long term opinion trend among the British public, data from the British Social Attitudes survey shows stability in the proportion of Brits who prefer welfare expansion (Pettersen, 1995) between 1974 and 1987. But for the period between 1987 and 2000, Hills (2002) shows, using the same data, that the balance of people who agree that the 'Government should spend more on welfare benefits for the poor' has steadily dwindled between 1987 and 2000, and a drop can also be seen in the percentage of people in support of redistribution of

income. These opinion changes are stated to be in line with policy changes in which lower incomes are favored, but without the label of 'redistribution' being attached to it. The increasing feeling of the British public that welfare support is related to fraud and disincentives to work is said to be in line with activation policies that were put in place. But both policy changes happened after the change in opinions no explanation for these opinion changes are given (Hills, 2002).

In the US, one of the most stable elements of public opinion is the unpopularity of welfare. Based upon published public opinion polls, MacLeod et al. (1999) and Weaver et al. (1995) show that between 1938 and 1995, a majority of the American public believed that the government spend too much on welfare. On the other hand, in this same time period, a steadily increasing percentage of Americans thinks that it is the responsibility of the government to provide for the needy, although this number has eroded slightly after 1987. Overall, results show that a majority of Americans do feel that the truly needy should be provided for (people who really deserve it), but a growing percentage of the American public also feels that welfare recipients are to blame for their poverty, and not deserving of governmental support (MacLeod et al., 1999; Weaver et al., 1995).

Although the just mentioned literature does show some long term trends, what becomes clearer, and what these and other authors focus on, are the ups and downs in welfare state popularity. These opinion fluctuations are thought to be due to different contextual factors, such as the state of the economy. But while a number of authors point to the relation between the economic context and welfare opinions, there seems to be a debate as to how, in what direction, the economic context influences public opinion. On the one side are authors who find that economic prosperous times makes the public more confident in individual responsibility and believe in a more limited role for governmental support (Blekesaune, 2007). But during economically difficult times, which affects many, the need for support becomes more obvious (Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995), and people are less likely to blame benefits claimants for their situation (Bryson, 1997; Fridberg & Ploug, 2000; Hills, 2002), increasing welfare state support (Soede, Vrooman, & Wildeboer Schut, 2009). Another presumed mechanism is that when the economy decreases, people realize that their taxes are being spent to benefit other people, not themselves (Blekesaune, 2007). This line of reasoning is mostly used in studies examining

unemployment opinions and using the unemployment rate as a measure of the economic situation.

But there are also authors often focus on more general welfare state opinions, and find an inverse relationship between the state of the economy and welfare state opinions, where economic revival is associated with increasing support (Becker, 2005; Goul Andersen, 1993). Their reasoning holds that when economic problems arise, people lose their sense of security, causing them to focus on self-interest and to give less weight to the concerns of the disadvantaged (Alt, 1979; Durr, 1993). Also, the way people experience a recession is presumed to mediate the impact of a economic decline on opinions (Goul Andersen et al., 1999; Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995). When people's own economy is likely to decline, their altruism reduces, since 'people are as generous as they can afford to be' (Alt, 1979, p. 184).

Erikson et al (2002) reconcile these supposedly opposing views, when they find that that a rising unemployment rate shifts public opinion to the left (more welfare support), while inflation causes a move to the right (less welfare support).

Another factor that has been stated to explain welfare attitudes is the cycle of political preferences, stimulated by political campaigns (Pettersen, 1995; Weaver et al., 1995). The idea is that the breakthrough of right wing parties coincides with more liberal views and lower deservingness perceptions. In line with this notion is the finding that a general dissatisfaction with expanding welfare spending increased when the strength of right wing parties increased as well (Goul Andersen et al., 1999; Pettersen, 1995; Wlezien, 2004).

Finally, Soede et al (2009) focus on the impact of policy events on the opinion trend. Their research uses the same Dutch data we use, and Becker (2005) used as well, but focuses only on the unemployment and social assistance benefits. The authors discuss changes in the benefits and examine if these policy events are reflected in the opinion trend, which is presumed to be the case. When benefit levels tighten in 1985, the dissatisfaction with the benefits increases, but other changes in the benefits only show modest, insignificant effects on opinions.

In sum, the just described previous literature gives economic, political and policy factors as explanations for fluctuations in different welfare attitudes. But for many of the studies, the findings are based only on interpretations of descriptive analyses or ad hoc explanations. We extend to this literature by examining explanation for the fluctuations in deservingness opinions on five different benefits, and using statistical analyses to do so. In the following section, we will

formulate hypotheses on the effects of the previously found determinants on fluctuations in deservingness opinions.

Hypotheses

Context factors

Slow moving long term changes, like the aging of society, increasing individualism, changes in the composition of the population (social-demographic changes), and cultural changes, cannot explain more rapid short term fluctuation in deservingness opinions. We thus have to look for other factors, factors that also fluctuate, as an explanation. The literature just described gave us some clues on the possible contextual factors that could explain the fluctuations in deservingness opinions: economic fluctuations, changes in the strength of certain political parties, and policy events. In this section, we will formulate hypotheses on the effects of these previously found factors on deservingness opinions.

As we have just shown, there is a debate in the literature as to what effect the economic cycle has on welfare opinions. The different findings that created this debate are mostly due to different measures of the economic situation and their effects on unemployment opinions or more general welfare opinions. Here, we include two measures of the economic situation, namely economic growth and the unemployment rate, and take into account opinions on five different benefits. Following Erikson et al (2002), we formulate different hypotheses for these different ways to look at the economic situation. Taking into account a more general measure of the state of the economic, economic growth, we hypothesize that when the economy is up, benefit receivers can enjoy this as well, and are considered to be deserving of more support (Becker, 2005). But during economic downfall, people focus more on their own situation, their own deservingness, and not so much on the hardships of others (Alt, 1979; Durr, 1993) resulting in less deserving needy groups.

For the expectations of the unemployment rate on opinions, we refer to a theory on deservingness. This theory states that needy are considered more deserving when they meet certain criteria. The level of need, the level of responsibility for the neediness, the identity and attitude of the needy person, and the degree of reciprocation can all be of importance to

determine whether or not a needy person is seen as deserving (Van Oorschot, 2000). When the economic cycle moves up and down, the extent to which needy groups meet these criteria can differ as well. When the unemployment rate rises, people are more likely to be sympathetic towards the troubles of those out of work and regard them as victims of their predicament, not responsible for losing their job and having to rely on a state benefit and unable to escape from the situation (Bryson, 1997). In deservingness terms: When the unemployment rate increase, the perception of the level of need of jobless individuals rises, and the level of control that benefit recipients seem to have over their situation declines. This could result in the public to regard these disadvantaged groups as deserving of more support than when these criteria are not met (or are met to a lesser degree) as is the case when the unemployment rate is low. Since only the situation of the unemployed and the social assistance beneficiaries are directly affected by the unemployment rate, we expect this positive relationship (between a higher unemployment rate and needy groups being considered to be deserving of more) only for those groups (e.g. Soede et al., 2009).

As for the political factor, the Dutch case is somewhat more complicated than some other countries, due to the multiple party's involved that are not always as easily put into a left/right division (Pettersen, 1995). In this research, we measure the rise of right wing parties by the ratio of the Liberals (VVD) vs the Social-Democrats (PvdA). We take into account these parties since they have been two of the three largest parties in the Netherlands during the period we examine, and are best to categorize as right (VVD) vs. left (PvdA) parties. The VVD is known to be liberal, and to support lower taxes, less involvement of the state, less welfare, and lower benefits, while the PvdA traditionally stride for more governmental support for the economically weak. Petterson (1995) examined Dutch public support for increasing old age pensions in the 1970s and the 1980s, and links drops in support for these pensions with drops in support for the socialist parties and increased support for liberal parties. This presumed relation might be even stronger for opinions on less deserving needy groups. More deserving groups are likely to be supported by all parties, since their deservingness is not likely to be questioned. But when there are more Social-Democrats in parliament, the public might become more aware of the deservingness of the other groups as well. We thus hypothesize that needy groups are considered to be deserving or more support during governments with more Social-Democrats present in the Parliament compared to Liberals, while we expect the deservingness to decline when the strength of the

Liberals increases. This relation is expected to be stronger when it concerns less deserving groups, such as the unemployed or social assistance beneficiaries, than for the more deserving (the old, sick and disabled).

Policy events are the last factor presumed to explain the short term fluctuations of deservingness opinions (Soede et al., 2009). Since the retrenchment of the welfare state started in the early 1980s, a number of policy changes were put in place to try to decrease the welfare state expenditure. These policy ‘events’ entailed stricter eligibility criteria to receive a (full) benefit, activation measures to increase the flow out a beneficiary position, and lower benefit percentages. We hypothesize that these policy events affected the public opinion in such a way that when the event took place, tightening the benefit, the percentage of people that considers needy groups to be deserving of more support than they get increases¹.

Individual factors

Next to these context factors, that we use to explain short term fluctuations, we will also focus on the general association of individual characteristics and deservingness opinions over the years. The most commonly used framework in that respect is that of self-interest: those individuals with more personal interest in the welfare state will be more likely to support its cultivation and expansion, and we hypothesize that these individuals would also be more likely to view needy groups as deserving of more support. The ‘interests’ can be divided into different types: 1) as a distribution of perceived risks, with those most prone to have to rely on some form of benefit being most supportive, 2) as consumers of services, referring to for example elderly and the unemployed, and 3) as tax payers (Goul Andersen, 1993; Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995). Those with higher risks to have to rely on benefits and those that already receive a benefit will be most likely to feel that people on the dole are deserving of more public support while those least likely to benefit from the benefits are also least likely to support them. Put differently, older individuals, lower income groups and the lower educated (lower or working class) have vested interests in maintaining and expanding the welfare state (Pettersen, 1995) and would therefore be more likely to be more supportive of benefit recipients, considering them as deserving of more support. Women are also often found to be more supportive of the welfare state, often based on the ‘rationality of caring’, but these gender effects might disappear when we control for the different class positions of men and women (Goul Andersen et al., 1999). In contrast, the third type of

interests refers to tax payers. Theories of tax frustration indicate that the well-to-do would be most resistant towards the welfare state, since they benefit least from it (Blekesaune, 2007; Pettersen, 1995). We would thus expect a reduced deservingness view among the upper income groups who are more heavily taxed.

Although these interests are now stated as general interests in the welfare state, it is likely that the interests differ for different programs, which would affect the support. For instance, people's position in the life-cycle affects their interests in the welfare state: the elderly have vested interests in pensions, while the young have more interests in employment benefits (Goul Andersen et al., 1999; Pettersen, 1995). This could also have an effect on the deservingness opinions, where the elderly would be more positive on the deservingness of pensioners than younger individuals, while the young are more likely to consider the unemployed as deserving of more.

However, the institutional perspective states that in more extensive welfare states, almost everyone is a potential user of welfare, which blurs calculation of self-interest and thus reducing the reasoning mentioned above (Goul Andersen et al., 1999).

4. Data & methods

To answer our research questions, we use twenty-two waves of the Cultural Changes in the Netherlands (CC) survey data set, namely 1975, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006. The CC survey is a national representative survey of the Dutch public aged 16 and over, commissioned by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). Each wave consists of approximately 2000 respondents, our aggregate sample consists of between 39,887 and 44,078 respondents, depending on the specific analyses.

4.1 Deservingness opinions

Our main variable of interest is whether or not different needy groups are considered to be deserving of more as measured by the following question: 'I will give you a list of social benefits. Could you tell me for each of these if you think they are sufficient or insufficient?'. Respondents

were given the option 'sufficient' and 'insufficient' as answer categories. The option of 'too good' was only given when the respondent refused to choose between sufficient and insufficient². The listed social benefits were the old age pensions, social assistance benefit, unemployment benefit, disability benefit, and the sickness benefit. Due to the low number of respondents who answered 'too high', we included this category with the 'sufficient' category. Since there was a significant percentage of people who responded 'don't know' to these questions (ranging between 7,9-18,5% for the disability benefit to 17,8-30,1% for the social assistance benefit), we included this answer as a separate category. Further analysis showed that these 'don't know' answers were not randomly distributed among the respondents – the option was more often chosen by individuals with a lower income and education, and women – and could therefore not be discarded.

We use this question as an indicator of deservingness. The SCP uses this question as a measure of a similar concept of solidarity (Becker, 2005), while Soede et al. (2009) refer to a (dis)satisfaction with the benefits. The average percentage of people that feel that a certain needy group is deserving of more support could be partly a reflection of the actual level of benefits. But for the short term opinion fluctuations, this is not the case, since benefits are connected to the last earned wages (for unemployment benefit, sickness benefit, and disability pension) or minimum wage (old age pension and social assistance), both of which do not show the drastic fluctuations that we see in this opinion variable (Watson Wyatt Worldwide Archive, 2010). Also, as the questions are posed together, respondents are prone to distinguish between different needy groups, as is done in deservingness theory.

Since our final dependent variables now have three categories, deserving of more, sufficiently deserving, and 'don't know', we use multinomial logistic regression analyses to test our expectations.

4.2 Contextual factors

The OECD Stat Extracts provides data on real GDP growth as well as on unemployment rates for all survey years. For real GDP growth we used the growth at $t=0$. Although the information of real GDP growth for a certain year becomes available when that specific year has ended, we expect the public to be aware of the economic situation due to media coverage and prognoses. For the unemployment rate, we used the rates on $t-1$, since for this rate, we expect there to be a

short delay before people are aware of the situation on the labor market. To be sure, we did analyses with these two variables on $t=0$, $t-1$ and $t-2$. Results show our expectations were confirmed, since the biggest effects were found using $t=0$ for real GDP growth and $t-1$ for the unemployment rate. The Political data handbook of OECD countries (1991, 1997) provided us with the number of seats in the 150-seat Parliament of the Liberal Party (VVD) and the Social-Democrats (PvdA) of which we computed percentages. We then calculated the ratio of VVD/PvdA. This way, we take into account the strength of the liberal party compared to the strength of the Social-Democrats. This measure is problematic since it does not take into account whether or not the party is also a governing party, whether it is the beginning or end of a term, whether or not it is election time, and the strength of other liberal/social-democratic parties. These factors could influence how people judge the views of the party. But since it is a factor that is often used in the literature, we do take it into account.

4.3 Micro characteristics

We also take into account a number of individual characteristics. Educational level is measured by the highest attained educational level, consisting of seven categories: 1 primary education, 2 lower vocational education, 3 intermediate secondary education, 4 intermediate vocational education, 5 higher secondary education, 6 higher vocational education, 7 university. For income, we used the logged annual gross household income, measured in Euro's and corrected for inflation rates. Because of a large amount of missing values (21,5 per cent for the aggregated sample), we assigned the mean score to respondents with a missing value on this variable, and included a dummy variable for a missing value (1) or not (0), of which the effects are not shown in the tables. We use four dummy variables for work status: unemployed, retired, disabled for work, and other daily activities. Employed respondents are the reference category. Finally, we included respondents' sex (woman = 1) and age.

The descriptive statistics of the independent variables for the aggregate sample can be found in table 1.

Table 1 about here

5. Results

5.1 Long term trends

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the Dutch public that feels that recipients of old age pensions, disability pensions, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, and social assistance benefits are deserving of more support than they receive, for the time period between 1975 and 2006.

Figure 1 about here

When looking at the entire time period, figure 1 seems to show an increasing long time trend with rather large short term fluctuations (which we will discuss in a later section), indicating that the percentage of people who feel that the different benefit recipients are deserving of more increased over time. But looking more closely at the long term trend, a tipping point is visible in the early 1980s. Before this time, the long term trend can be described as rather steady (and even decreasing in case of the social assistance opinions). But in the early 1980s, at the height of the recession, we see a clear tipping point, where an obvious change took place, lifting the opinions to a new, higher, level. The opinions then stabilized on that higher level, from the mid-1980s until the end of our time line in 2006. Such a tipping point was not found in previous welfare state opinions literature. This could possibly be because of the Dutch case we describe, and that a change like this did not happen in other countries, or that other literature missed the tipping point, due to a lack of the number or the right time points.

The overall long term trend is the same for the different benefits. But something else that is interesting to look at, is the order of the opinion trends for different benefits. Although the results shown in figure 1 support deservingness theory by showing that the old and disabled are more often thought to deserve more support than the unemployed, the finding that these percentages are especially high for people on social assistance is at odds with this theory, since this group is usually found to be least deserving of support. An explanation could be that while people do use the deservingness criteria to rank certain needy groups in the extent of the deservingness of these groups, this is only done after a basic level of need is met. While societies

increasingly become more individualized, the basic norm seems to be that all citizens are entitled to a decent level of income, preferably coming from their own efforts, but otherwise provided for them with governmental means (Martinussen, 1993). Bowles and Gintis (2000) also refer to this willingness of the public to assure everyone of an acceptable minimal standard of living, which they termed ‘ basic needs generosity’. Both the old age pension as well as the social assistance benefit are percentages of the minimum wage, but the former is often topped with additional, and relatively generous private pensions, increasing the amount of money people have to live on (Adema & Ladaique, 2005). Since social assistance is means tested, there is no (legal) way to top that income, keeping these recipients at a subsistence level, which, according to the results found here, much of the Dutch public feels is not enough, that these individuals deserve more.

Focusing on the distance between the opinions on the different benefits, figure 1 shows that this distance increases and decreases through time, with the smallest distance occurring in 1981 and 2002, points in time where the Netherlands suffered economic difficulties. It thus seems to be the case that when the economic downfall is largest, the distance between the deservingness opinions of the different benefits is smallest.

Although all of the just described findings are interesting in itself, and need additional examination, future research can focus more on those issues. In this paper, we choose to focus on another aspect, namely the short term fluctuations in the deservingness opinions. The next section will examine these fluctuations, and the possible causes thereof.

5.2 Explaining short term fluctuation in deservingness opinions

As can be seen in figure 1, there are quite large short-term fluctuations in the deservingness opinions between 1975 and 2006. But how can these fluctuations be explained? In line with the existing literature on welfare opinion trends, we will try to explain these fluctuations on the basis of contextual factors and examine which of these factors, or combination of factors, best explain the development of deservingness opinions. We will take into account social policy events in the different benefit schemes that took place during the period examined, economic factors (real GDP growth and the unemployment rate), and the strength of certain political parties.

Policy events

In period examined here, as stated before, the Dutch welfare state has gone through some rather drastic changes. After the oil crisis in the 1970s, the welfare state expansion that was going on since the end of World War II came to an end, and cuts had to be made to retrench on welfare expenditure. When the economy improved from the mid-1980s onwards, more focus was put on the individual responsibility of citizens to mend for themselves. To see if the trend as shown in figure 1 is a reflection of social policy changes we have to look at the specific changes that were put in place for the different benefits (for a more thorough explanation of the different benefits and their adaptations through the years, see Van Oorschot, 2006).

The minimum wage has increased steadily over the years (Watson Wyatt Worldwide Archive, 2010), without the rather large fluctuations that can be seen in the deservingness opinions of old age pensioners and social assistance receivers, although both benefits are percentages of the minimum wage. The old age pensions were individualized in 1985 (giving each partner 50% of minimum wage, instead of 100% to the male partner (Van Oorschot, 2006), but this change is not reflected in a specific opinion fluctuation in (or around) that year. Social assistance was adapted in 1996, when it was simplified into three rates (50% of minimum wage for singles, 70% for single parents, 100% for couples). In that same year, deservingness opinions increased as well. A higher percentage thus felt that social assistance beneficiaries are deserving of more than they get, then before this change was implemented. We also see an increase in 2004, when the Act on Work and Assistance replaced social assistance, and municipalities were given more responsibility and incentive to activate claimants, but this could also reflect something other than the policy change, since the other benefits show the same opinion fluctuation (a sharp decrease in 2002, increasing again in 2004), without any policy changes.

As for the workers' insurances, these are percentages of last earned wages, which, like the minimum wage, rise steadily, and do not fluctuate to the extent that the deservingness opinions do. Specific policy changes for the unemployment insurance are stricter work record requirements to assess entitlement and duration that were implemented in 1987 and 1995, but these are again not reflected in opinion fluctuations. The disability benefit going from 80% of the last earned wage to 70%, and sharpened assessment criteria in 1985 could be reflected in the opinion trend, but since the percentage of people who thought that disabled people were deserving of more than they got was already rising for a number of years, it is unclear whether

the specific policy changes were a factor. The same goes for opinions in 1993 when disability pensioners were re-assessed again, and many lost their benefits.

Previous research included a dummy variable for a policy event year to empirically test if opinion change when an event occurs. Results indicated that this was the case for some of the policy events of the examined unemployment and social assistance benefit (Soede et al., 2009). We extended this method by not only taking into account this year-dummy variable for the specific benefit for which there was a policy event, but also including this dummy variable for the analyses on benefits that did not have a policy event that year. The results show that for many policy event-years (as indicated by the bold coefficients in table 2), the public opinion changed as well. Since these policy events usually mean the tightening of entitlement rules or criteria, the results would thus indicate the public disagreeing with these changes, considering beneficiaries deserving of more. But the results also show that although the opinions on a specific benefit are more likely to be different in the event year than in other years, so are the opinions on other benefits, for which no policy event occurred. This indicates that it might not (only) be the event that affected the opinion change, but something else that was specific for that year.

Table 2 about here

In sum, the policy events that took place could possibly have influenced the opinions, but over the years, there have been many more fluctuations than could be explained by the limited policy changes. The limited indications we found for a possible effect of policy events on opinions could also be explained by a lack of knowledge that people have of the changes.

Economic changes

As we have discussed above, the short term opinion fluctuations cannot be (fully) explained by specific social policy events. Another factor that we hypothesized to explain these opinion fluctuations was the state of the economy. To test these hypotheses, we used multinomial logistic regression analyses. The results of these analyses for each needy group are shown in table 2. We

focus on the difference between the ‘deserving of more’ and the ‘sufficiently deserving’ category, as these are our main categories of interest.

The findings support our expectations. For all benefits, a higher real GDP growth (a better economic situation) increases the odds of finding the different needy groups deserving of more support. Put differently, when the economy is booming, more people feel that needy groups should be able to bear the fruits of that as well, while in economic downfall, people seem to be more worried about themselves and needy groups are considered sufficiently deserving. This relation is also graphically visible in figure 2.

Figure 2 about here

Controlled for real GDP growth, we also find effects of the unemployment rate, another measure of the economic situation. For three of the five benefits, namely disability pensions, old age pensions and sickness benefits, the direction of the effect is similar to the GDP effect: when unemployment increases (a lowering economic situation), the odds of finding needy groups deserving of more support decreases.

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Table 3 about here

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But for the two the other two benefits, the results show an opposite relation: the odds of finding the unemployed and those on social assistance deserving of more support actually increase when the unemployment rate increases. For both needy groups, the only way out of their situation is by finding employment and during high unemployment, the odds of these groups finding a job are against them. The public might thus indeed be more aware of declining level of control over the unemployment, and more aware of the level of need that these groups face, increasing the deservingness perceptions. But since the effect of unemployment is opposite for the other needy groups, there seems to be a trade-off: when the unemployment rate increases, so does the deservingness of needy groups most reliant on the labor market to improve their

situation. But to support these groups a little extra, other needy groups are sidetracked for a moment.

Some authors assume that the way people experience the economic situation mediates the impact of that situation on their opinions. But personal experiences of societal events and trend often have a smaller effect on opinions than perceptions of aggregated *collective experiences* of the situation do. These collective experiences are then seen as the result of information provided by the media, experts, and political elites (Kumlin, 2004). Thus, an alternative explanation of our findings of the economic situation could be that the collective experience of the economic situation effects the deservingness opinions. When the collective faces economic troubles, people's opinions change accordingly.

The last contextual factor that we examined was the ratio of two political parties: the Liberals and the Social-Democrats. We hypothesized that needy groups would be found to be deserving or more support during governments with a stronger Social-Democrat party in the Parliament compared to Liberals, while we expected the deservingness to decline when the strength of the Liberals versus Social-Democrats increases. Contrary to our expectations, for three of the five benefits, both deserving (disabled and sick) and undeserving (social assistance beneficiaries) the odds of thinking these groups are deserving of more actually increases when the strength of the Liberals increases, compared to the Social Democrats. This could be the public's counter reaction to the strength of these parties and their (lack of) focus on certain issues. For the deservingness of pensioners, the finding is in line with our expectations: when the ratio of Liberals versus Social-Democrats increases, the odds of this group to be considered deserving of more decreases.

Table 4 about here

As for the individual characteristics, the results are for the most part the same for all benefits. For women, lower educated, and those with a lower income, the odds of finding the different benefit recipients deserving of more support is higher. The unemployed and those disabled for work, consumers of services, also have higher odds of finding these groups

deserving of more than the employed do. These findings are in line with self-interest theory. The findings confirm that those with higher risks to have to rely on benefits (lower educated, lower income), and those that already receive a benefit are more likely to feel that people on the dole are deserving of more public support.

For pensioners, however, the results are mixed: odds of finding the disabled deserving of more support are *lower* for pensioners, in comparison to the employed. A more striking finding is that the same effect is found for the old age pension: pensioners are less likely than the unemployed to consider themselves deserving of more support. This is the opposite of what we would expect on the basis of self-interest. It could thus be the case that other people consider pensioners to be more deserving than these pensioners consider themselves to be. Other explanations could be that the elderly feel that other people are more needy than they are or that pensioners are in general quite satisfied with the support they get (Litwin & Sapir, 2008). The odds for finding the sick deserving of more are actually higher for pensioners than they are for the employed. Possibly, having to deal more and more with their own decreasing health, pensioners become more aware of the needs of other people dealing with health issues as well. The opinions of pensioners do not seem to differ from the opinion of the employed on the deservingness of the unemployed and social assistance beneficiaries.

6. Conclusion

The long term trend of Dutch deservingness opinions of five different needy groups have, after a rather steep increase in the early 1980s, been rather stable. However, there have been rather large short term fluctuations in these opinions as well. To explain these fluctuations, we looked at contextual factors that fluctuate as well, and that previous research also found to affect other welfare opinion fluctuations: policy events, political factors, and economic factors. An overview of the policy events that happened in the examined time period showed that there are more fluctuations in the opinions that could be explained by these events alone.

While an explanation of the strong short term deservingness opinion fluctuations cannot be found in social policy changes, they can be interpreted as reactions to the economic climate: during more economically prosperous times, the Dutch public finds all examined needy groups deserving of more support than during economically difficult times. However, the effect of an increasing unemployment rate differs for needy groups most dependent on a good labor market. When the unemployment rate increases, the unemployed and social assistance recipients become more likely to be considered deserving of more support. In accordance with deservingness theory, we interpret this as the public being aware of the lack of control these needy groups have over their situation. When more and more people become unemployed, both getting in the position of having to rely on government support, as well as getting out of that situation when finding a new job is something these people seem to have less and less control over. Also, the public might become more awareness of the level of need these groups face. Both criteria could explain the increasing deservingness of the unemployed and social assistance beneficiaries. Put together, changes in the state of the economy can explain short term fluctuations in (deservingness) opinions, and the relation between the two can differ when taking into account different measures of the economic situation and different needy groups. This shows that future deservingness research should be aware of the (economic) time in which these researches take place, also when doing cross-national research.

Furthermore, in light of the current economic crisis, that the Netherlands and many other western countries have found themselves in, our findings shed some light on the effects of these economic times on deservingness opinions. When politicians are considering cutbacks, the results can give insights into the public's reaction to these cutbacks.

Another factor that we found to explain short term deservingness opinion fluctuations was the strength of a Liberal party versus a Social-Democratic party. We found that for the old age pension, the findings were as expected, with the odds of considering this group to be deserving of more decreasing when the strength of the Liberal party increases. The opposite was found for the disabled, the sick and social assistance beneficiaries, who are all more likely to be considered to be deserving of more support when strength of a Liberal party versus a Social-Democratic increases. A possible explanation could be that this finding reflects the public's counter reaction to the strength of these parties and their (lack of) focus on certain issues.

Finally, we add to the existing literature on welfare opinion trends in a number of ways. First of all, the focus on the trend in deservingness opinions is rare. Second, we use a large data set of 22 time points between 1975 and 2002. This time frame is both longer and more recent than most other research on welfare opinion trends. Third, most other literature mainly present descriptive findings and theoretical insights without any multivariate analysis, while we could test our hypotheses of the economic and political context using multinomial logistic regression analyses, including micro as well as contextual factors. Finally, by taking into account different measures of the economic situation, we show that the debate on the effect of the economic situation could possibly be solved by taking into account different measures of that situation, and different needy groups.

Notes

¹ It is also possible that the public already responds to an intended policy event. Influenced by the media coverage leading up to a policy event, the public can change their opinions. Also, a change in the public opinion can lead to a political response. Although we are aware of these issues, here, we will only focus on the effects that certain policy events can have on opinions.

² We regret that the survey did not give 'too much' as a standard category because that would have given a more diversified view of people's opinions.

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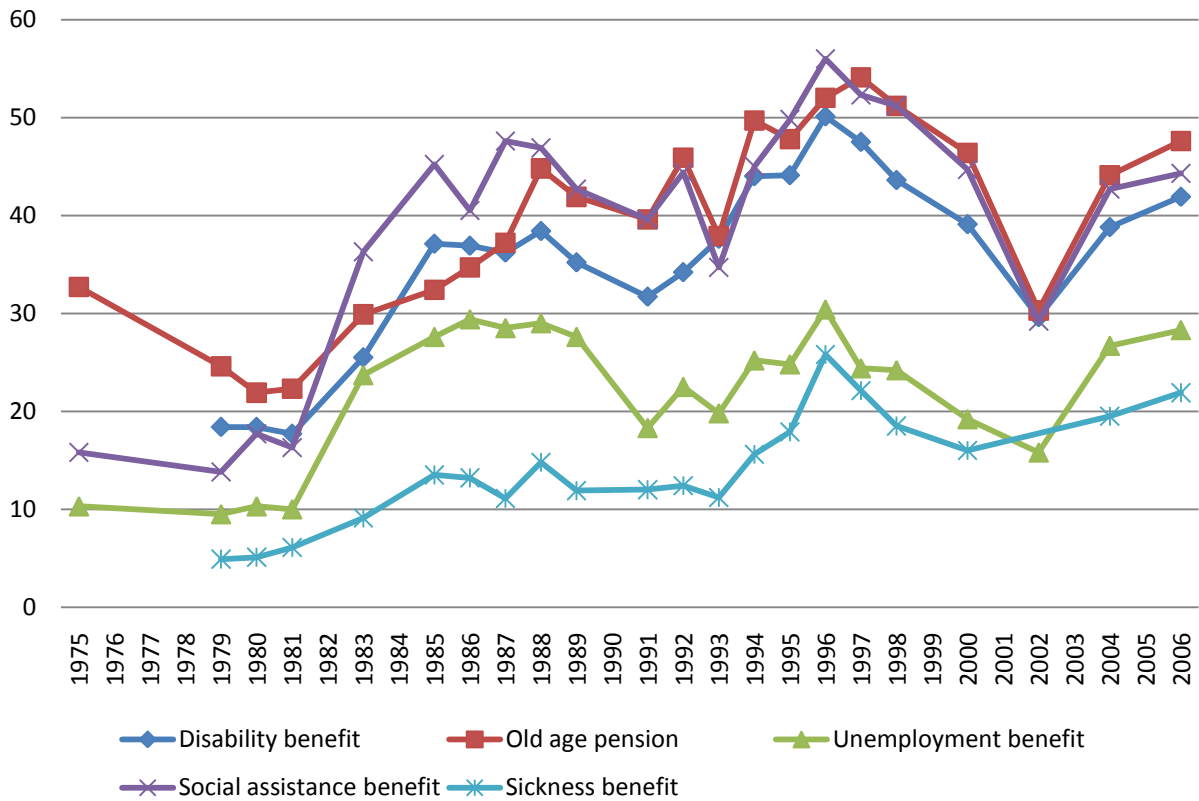


Figure 1. The percentage of people who believe that recipients of benefits are deserving of more than they receive, 1975-2006.

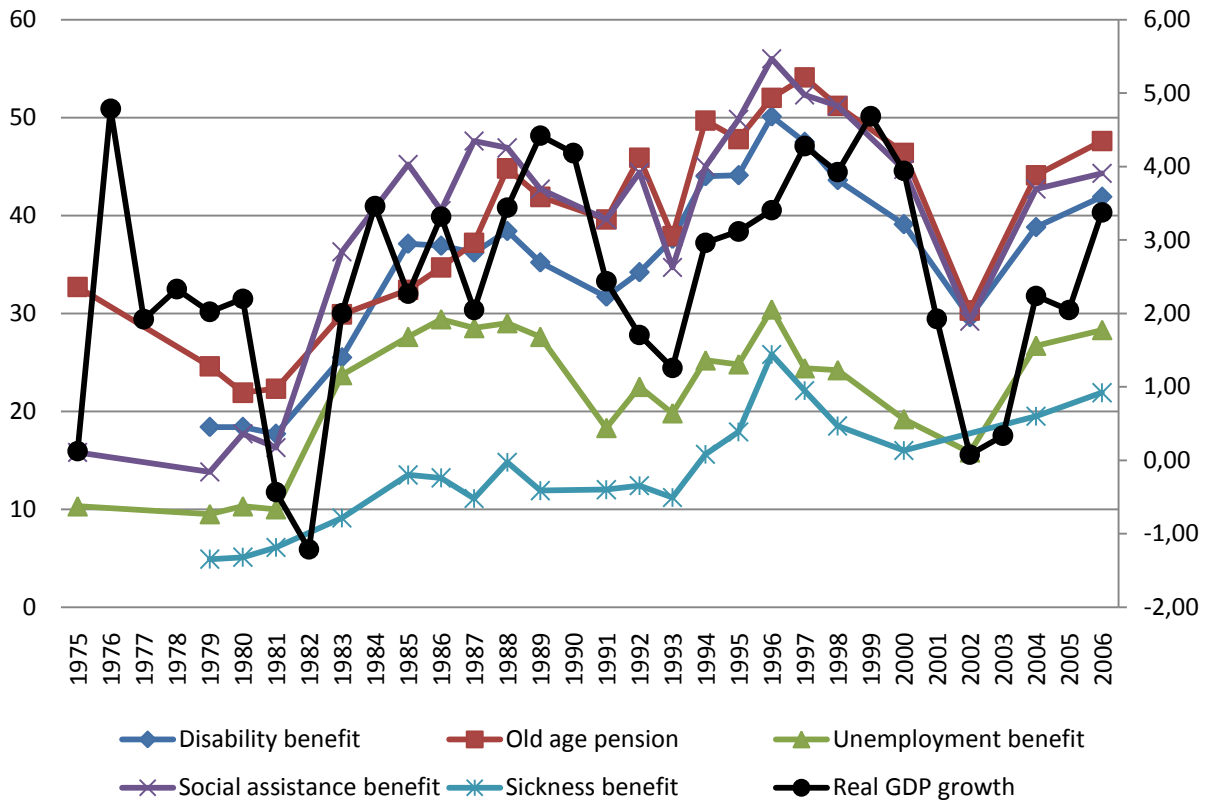


Figure 2. The percentage of people who believe that recipients of benefits are deserving of more than they receive, 1975-2006 (left axis), and real GDP growth (right axis)

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of independent variables

	N	Range	Mean	Standard deviation
Age	45121	16 – 99	43.39	17.04
Woman	45103	0 – 1	.53	
Educational level	44816	1 – 7	3.67	1.90
Income (log)	45163	3.91 – 15.69	9.54	.62
Work status				
Employed	44544	0 – 1		
Unemployed	44544	0 – 1	.03	
Pensioner	44544	0 – 1	.11	
Disabled for work	44544	0 – 1	.05	
Other	44544	0 – 1	.38	
Real GDP growth	45121	-.43 – 4.42	2.48	1.31
Unemployment rate	45121	2.20 – 8.90	5.78	1.70
Ratio VVD/PvdA	45121	.45 – 1.04	.68	.17
Valid N (listwise)	44249			

Source: Cultural changes in the Netherlands, 1975-2006 (own calculations)

Table 2 Multinomial logistic regression analyses on deservingness opinions: coefficients event years, 1975-2006, deserving of more vs sufficiently deserving

	Disability	Pension	Unemployment	Social assistance	Sickness
1985	.282***	-.072	.123*	.303***	.363***
1987	.357***	.243	.427***	.547***	.060
1988	-.010	.183***	.092	.032	-.041
1992	.110**	.529***	.219***	.519***	.126*
1993	.447***	.253***	.210***	.126**	.132
1994	.267***	.302***	.057	.035	.022
1995	.322***	.275***	.007	.203***	.257***
1996	.587***	.346***	.279***	.462***	.740***
1998	.146***	.100*	.019	.286***	-.025
2002	.579***	.085	.794***	.623***	. ^a
2004	.260***	.100**	.639***	.442***	.649***
2006	.134**	.026	.381***	-.002	.415***
N	42018	44078	43917	44018	39887

Source: Cultural changes in the Netherlands, 1975-2006 (own calculations), * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$, ref cat: sufficiently deserving (don't know vs sufficiently of more not presented)

Note: Controlled for individual characteristics: age, sex, educational level, income level, work status, real GDP growth and unemployment rate.

We ran separate models for each survey year, coefficients of years in which an event took place are in bold.

^a This item was not part of the 2002 questionnaire.

Table 3 Multinomial logistic regression analyses on deservingness opinions: effects of individual and context factors, 1975-2006

	Disability		Pension		Unemployment		Social assistance		Sickness	
	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient
Age	-.002**	.000	-.001	-.040***	.003***	.015***	.002**	.011***	.002**	.009***
Woman	.297*	.479***	.336***	.266***	.271***	.451***	.413***	.219***	.193***	.277***
Educational level	-.103**	-.074***	-.046***	-.040***	-.141***	-.090***	.013**	-.080***	-.081***	-.021**
Income level	-.099**	-.237***	-.159***	-.232***	-.225***	-.237***	-.137***	-.158***	-.273***	-.344***
Work status (ref = employed)										
Unemployed	.297***	.436***	.320***	.537***	.613***	-.348**	.757***	-.060	.426***	.461***
Pensioner	-.272***	.472***	-.156***	-.060	-.062	.621***	-.034	.562**	.186**	.841***
Disabled for work	.606**	-1.032***	.432***	.444***	.604***	.392***	.720***	.296***	.640***	.401***
Other	-.110	.395***	-.201***	.170***	.066**	.615***	-.010	.449***	.161***	.862***
Real GDP growth	.293***	.188***	.302***	.215***	.248***	.187***	.326***	.111***	.331***	.174***
Unemployment rate	-.035***	-.015*	-.080***	-.048***	.059***	-.019**	.044***	.015*	-.078***	-.014
N	42018		44078		43917		44018		39887	

Source: Cultural changes in the Netherlands, 1975-2006 (own calculations), * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$, ref cat: sufficiently deserving

Table 4 Multinomial logistic regression analyses on deservingness opinions: effects of economic and political context factors, 1975-2006

	Disability		Pension		Unemployment		Social assistance		Sickness	
	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient	Deserving of more vs sufficient	Don't know vs sufficient
Real GDP growth	.283***	.187***	.307***	.231***	.247***	.191***	.319***	.114***	.307***	.185***
Unemployment rate	-.019**	-.012	-.084***	-.062	.061***	-.021**	.051***	.012	-.065***	-.020*
Political Party strength: Ratio VVD/PvdA	.412***	.075	-.133**	-.445***	.039	-.084	.228***	-.092	.523***	-.250**
N	42018		44078		43917		44018		39887	

Source: Cultural changes in the Netherlands, 1975-2006 (own calculations), * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$, ref cat: sufficiently deserving

Note: Controlled for individual characteristics: age, sex, educational level, income level, and work status.

Appendix

Table 1 Policy events 1975-2006

Disability pension for workers	
1985	From 80% of last earned wage to 70%
1987	Partial pension for partially disabled First re-assessment of disabled workers
1992	TAV (new law): Bonus-malus for employers
1993	TBA (new law): Stronger assessment criteria Duration age related Second re-assessment
1998	PEMBA: Premium differentiation (employers pay higher premium when many of their employees get disabled/sick)
2002	Gatekeeper Act
2004	Abolition disability pension self-employed Third re-assessment Extensions sick pay from 1 to 2 years
2006	Income & Work Law (WIA) successor of Disability pension for workers (WAO)
Old age pension	
1985	Individualisation Married partners: entitlement for married women Singles: 70%
1987	Equal treatment for married and unmarried couples
1988	Means-tested in case of partner < 65: 70% + 30%
1994	From 70%-30% to 50%-50%

Unemployment benefit

- 1985 From 80% of last earned wage to 70%
- 1987 Limited wage related period
Stronger work record requirements
- 1995 Stronger work record requirements

Social assistance

- 1996 100% of minimum wage for singles, 50% + 20% for couples
- 2004 Work & Social Assistance law (WWB) successor of general social assistance scheme (ABW)

Sickness benefit

- 1996 Privatisation