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Welfare State Attitudes

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Synonyms

Attitudes toward extensivity and intensity of welfare state; Attitudes toward inputs and outputs of welfare state; Attitudes toward what is and should be in welfare state; Public opinion toward the welfare state (welfare state); Regime thesis about welfare state attitudes; Self-interest thesis about welfare state attitudes; Social policy attitudes; Welfare state vs. non-welfare state activities

Definition

Welfare state attitudes are individual observable evaluative responses to all government institutions and policies as well as their underlying financing structures that are intended to achieve greater socioeconomic equality and security. Government measures can include regulations, such as maternity leave rules, and (re-) distributive measures, such as tax breaks or unemployment benefits.

Description

Research on welfare state attitudes is almost exclusively about modern and relatively extensive welfare states in democratic policies from the 1970s onwards, even though it is easy to imagine attitudinal research questions about the welfare state in less extensive welfare states, such as those of the interwar era in Europe. The reasons for this late bloom (with a first extensive study Coughlin, 1980) can be sought in the acute concern of the day that governments could suffer from an overload of duties, that deficit countries were unable to maintain extensive welfare states, and, most importantly, that the congruence between the sociopolitical system and citizens’ demands would be diminished in welfare states in crisis.

The extensive modern welfare state is almost omnipresent in everyday life, even though it is not always salient in citizens’ minds. The modern welfare states can complement and substitute individual behavior as well as behavior by families and other more formally organized groups, such as churches, trade unions, and parties. To understand how individuals assess the welfare state is critical for understanding modern societies at large. It is also relevant because what citizens think about the welfare state matters to policy-makers in democratic systems. Indeed, it has been shown that public support for redistribution influences social spending (Brooks & Manza, 2007). Another example is the finding that social groups that are most to benefit from...
a social assistance policy could be shown to be
the ones least likely to develop a consistent atti-
attitude toward that policy – in other words, those
benefitting most were least likely to have a clear
assessment of that policy (Berinsky, 2002).

Welfare state attitudes cover a wide array of
government activities and rules. There are several
basic types of differentiation to structure this
attitudinal universe, which can be used in con-
junction (see Andréß & Heien, 2001; Silvio &
Uusitalo, 1995): (a) attitudes toward the extensity
or intensity of the welfare state: extensity means
the extent of governmental functions that citizens
desire or perceive the status quo to be, and inten-
sity refers to the desired or observed intensity
with which the welfare state is active in
a certain domain; (b) attitudes toward output or
input: individuals can assess either the outcome,
such as welfare state policies or institutions, or
the level or type of financing that goes into wel-
fare state activities; and (c) attitudes about what
should be or what is: measures of welfare atti-
itudes are either about the status quo as observed
by the individual, about the desired state of
affairs, or about an assessment of potential
reforms. In addition to these basic ways of struc-
turing attitudes, measures of welfare state atti-
tudes can be broad, such as the support for
redistribution by the state to reduce income dif-
fferences, or specific, such as the attitude toward
a limited social policy program.

Collecting data on welfare state attitudes com-
monly draws on interview data and most impor-
tantly ▶ closed-format answers in standardized
surveys. From the early days of this research in
the 1970s on, survey researchers, especially com-
parative survey researchers, were at the forefront.
What people think about the welfare state is not
always easy to retrieve because ordinary citizens
do not think about the welfare state or even about
individual programs very much (Goerres &
Prinzen, 2012). This is very surprising because
in the modern welfare states of the advanced
industrial world, almost everybody benefits
from welfare state activities at least at some
point in their lives. Also, research on welfare
state attitudes struggles with measuring the target
concepts properly (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012). It
is difficult, for example, to delineate welfare state
from non-welfare state activities. A classic exam-
ple is education policy. It is a very powerful set
of policies that decreases but also exacerbates socio-
economic inequality and does thus not fit unam-
biguously in common definitions of welfare state
activities. Moreover, it is statistically demanding
to reveal the dimensionality of the universe of
welfare state attitudes, especially in
a comparative study including several nations
(Andréß & Heien, 2001; Jaeger, 2006; Linos &
West, 2003).

Like other research on political attitudes,
repeated measures of welfare state attitudes are
suspected of respondents remembering their own
answers from the last question round rather than
being the manifestation of a latent dimension. So
▶ panel studies do show a high level of
intraindividual stability on general measures of
welfare state attitudes (Andréß & Heien, 2001).
This stability could be due to panel and ▶ sam-
ping problems, but it could also be explained
very well by a general political ideology that
implies certain functions of the welfare state in
a modern society. Other measurement concerns
include non-attitudes (namely, that individuals
have explicitly no directional opinion about an
aspect), the level of inconsistency (the extent to
which attitudes logically contradict each other),
the level of uncertainty (the extent with which
individuals are certain of their assessments), and
the level of ambivalence (the simultaneous posi-
tive and negative evaluation about a welfare state
aspect) (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012).

Two grand stories dominate the classic
approaches about interindividual differences in
attitudes toward the welfare state. The regime
thesis implies that individuals grow up in
certain political-institutional environment with
a clear set of welfare state activities (Jaeger,
2006; Svallfors, 1997). Individuals learn through
their own experience and through important
socialization agents, such as their families,
peers, school, and the media, what a welfare
state looks like. For example, even more than
a decade after unification, Germans socialized
in the GDR were still much more likely to support
public childcare provisions by the state, a feature
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of the Socialist system, than their age peers from the West or younger cohorts (Goerres & Tepe, 2012). The individual learning process of a welfare state regime is only mediated by social class defined by education, income, and occupation.

The self-interest thesis, as a second grand story, implies that individuals are primarily motivated by their own material well-being (Blekesaune, 2007; Fong, 2001; Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Meltzer & Richard, 1981). They support those institutions or policies of the state more that bring them greater material payoff, and reverse, they reject those aspects that are of no benefit to them, but pose costs. This payoff can materialize either directly or in the form of an insurance against personal risks, such as unemployment. A rational cost-benefit calculation faced with incomplete information lies at the heart of this economic explanation. For example, individuals who are in an occupation with higher unemployment risks have a higher demand for unemployment benefits than other individuals. Political economists were successful in using this thesis in combination with various add-ons, such as the family household or a wider family with several generations as the maximizing unit instead of just the individual (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Boeri, Börsch-Supan, & Tabellini, 2001; Goerres & Tepe, 2010).

Next to these two grand stories, further causal factors are currently considered widely. There is a lot of evidence that values or specific beliefs have a strong influence on welfare state attitudes; social and political trust (Edlund, 1999), different kinds of altruism (Goerres & Tepe, 2010; Lindbeck, Nyberg, & Weibull, 1999), religious beliefs (Scheve & Stasavage, 2006), beliefs about fairness and justice (Hochschild, 1981), beliefs about social mobility (Bénaou & Ok, 2001), and the beliefs about deservingness of groups benefitting from a social policy, such as the elderly, the immigrants, or the unemployed (Van Oorschot, 2006). Whereas it is difficult to summarize all of these findings, these values and beliefs give individuals cues about the need for the welfare state to step in and whether such activities could pay off for a personal or greater good. What is clear, however, is that the foundation of attitudes toward the welfare state has a strong social basis.

At the heart of the most important current research lies the question of support for necessary reforms to the welfare states. High state deficits, changed social conditions, such as labor market participation and family structures, and increases in life expectancy make it necessary for policy-makers to reform the welfare state. In democratic systems, they need to understand which reforms bear what costs for their reelection chances. Here, an insight from social psychology, namely, prospect theory, recently had an important impact on the field (Vis, 2009). Individuals are very reluctant to move away from the status quo and tend to value a loss of personal payoff more strongly than winning the same amount relative to the status quo.

Research in this area suffers, in general, from a lack of communication between different disciplines. Welfare state research is primarily populated by political scientists, sociologists, and economists with further contributions by social psychologists, social work researchers, and others. Thus, it could be a perfect example of interdisciplinary collaboration. Instead, research output is characterized by a divide between economists on the one hand and all other scientists on the other hand. This divide is highly visible in the different disciplinary outlet journals and their citation patterns.

Moreover, comparative survey evidence, sometimes with weak indicators, is overly used, even though some of these problems are difficult to circumvent. For example, one data series, the International Social Survey Programme, is very often used in a series of analyses that confirm older analyses based on the same data. Some analyses do not make use of proper measurement exercises as there are now easily available, for example, in the form of multilevel structural equation models.

There are innovative survey instruments that are intended to tackle weaknesses of existing instruments (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012). For example, with the help of survey vignettes, one...
can try to understand which types of reforms are desirable in the minds of citizens. Or, by giving clear alternatives for policy reform, respondents are forced to weigh personal costs and benefits of a reform, thus revealing a clearer picture about their preferences. Survey researchers are also trying to generate behavioral measures as part of their surveys that are a better approximation of actual preferences predicting welfare state preferences. For example, respondents can donate the money that they earned by participation in the survey to a certain organization in order to measure altruism or views of certain social groups.

In addition, some researchers fruitfully use qualitative data collection and analyzing techniques to get a better understanding about the communicative group and individual cognitive construction processes (see Hochschild, 1981). By using in-depth individual interviews and focus groups, they complement the quantitative survey analyses aimed at finding robust causal effects by emphasizing causal mechanisms. Experiments are another growth industry in which interesting findings can be expected. Especially lab experiments in which welfare state issues are combined with games played, according to behavioral economists’ insights can add to our understandings of welfare state attitudes in the future.

Cross-References

- Attitudes Towards Government Spending in the Asia-Pacific Region
- Belief in a Just World
- Beliefs About Poverty
- German Welfare Survey
- Income Distribution
- Income Re-Distribution
- Political Trust
- Social Policy
- Social Welfare
- Welfare Expenditures

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