

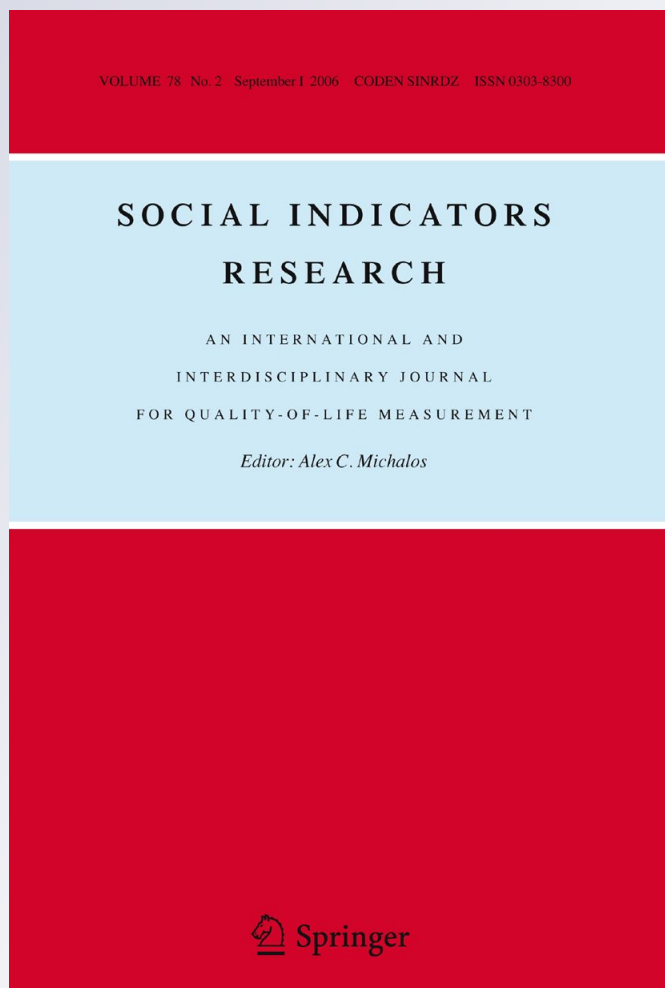
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Can We Improve the Measurement of Attitudes Towards the Welfare State? A Constructive Critique of Survey Instruments with Evidence from Focus Groups

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Abstract There is a large and growing literature on welfare state attitudes, most of which is built on random-sample population surveys with standardised closed-question items. This article criticises the existing survey instruments, especially those that are used within the International Social Survey Programme, in a novel approach with focus group data from Germany. The article demonstrates: firstly, these instruments underestimate the inconsistency (the degree to which attitudes logically contradict each other), the uncertainty (the degree to which individuals are unsure about what to think), the ambivalence (the simultaneous occurrence of positive and negative reactions) and non-attitudes towards welfare state activities that common people have. Secondly, the meaning of these items to respondents seems to vary to such an extent that inference based on such measures is questionable. Finally, the article concludes by suggesting some survey instruments that alleviate these measurement problems.

Keywords Attitudes · Welfare state · Focus groups · Survey · Measurement

1 Introduction

One important topic in comparative welfare state studies is the analysis of what people think, the analysis of welfare state attitudes (e.g. Svallfors 1997; Linos and West 2003; Jaeger 2009; Blekesaune 2007). Most often, these analyses draw on standardised instruments applied to random population samples. Thanks to a huge collaborative effort, there is also an increasing wealth of comparative attitudinal data, such as from the International

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Social Survey Programme. The high degree of establishment of some standardised items in national and international surveys begs the question: do these instruments measure the theoretical concepts well that they are intended to measure?

This article is the first comprehensive study of the quality of measures of welfare state attitudes. Even though we are very sympathetic towards quantitative measurement of public opinion, we argue that attitudes towards the welfare state are not measured well with the existing quantitative instruments. Employing a novel analysis of focus group data and survey data from twelve theoretically stratified groups conducted in 2009 in Germany while reforms to combat the financial and economic crisis were in full swing, we show that the most common instruments of welfare state attitudes in surveys are open to criticism as to their general validity, and more specifically with regard to the measurement of inconsistent, uncertain and ambivalent attitudes as well as non-attitudes. Better and additional survey measures are suggested, such as, for instance, vignettes, open questions and response time measurement.

It is important to deal with measurement issues of welfare state attitudes for several reasons: the development of new instruments is rarely carried out within a broader study where analytical questions are in the foreground. So, research on optimising measurement instruments is worthwhile not only for those interested in cautious measurement, but also those practitioners in command of a broader project about public opinion and the welfare state. Furthermore, a whole research area is affected by the choice of measurement instruments. Very often, the research output of the principal investigators is only a small fraction of the total research output from a survey. A large number of seminal articles about public opinion towards the welfare state consist of secondary survey analyses (for example Andreß and Heien 2001; Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Iversen and Soskice 2001; Jaeger 2006, 2009; Brooks and Manza 2006). If serious measurement problems are detected with regard to the items used in these analyses, obviously the conclusions from these analyses must be questioned, too. For example, if the measurement error correlates with an important predictor in a regression analysis, such as education, the estimates about the impact of education in these secondary analyses are biased. Additionally, public opinion towards the welfare state is an important given for policy-makers. Better measurements can thus trigger better policy-making. For example, if policy-makers pick up the notion that those in the higher income brackets are less likely to support high pension spending without being reminded that a substantial portion of this group may also show inconsistent and uncertain attitudes, the political implications of such a notion are radically different.

The outline of this article is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on measurement of welfare state attitudes and puts together a list of potential problems to guide the empirical analysis. Section 3 presents our empirical approach and data, followed by the empirical analysis in Section 4. In Section 5, we suggest new survey measurement of welfare state attitudes. Section 6 concludes the article.

2 Literature Review: Characteristics of Attitudes and Existing Critiques of Measurement

2.1 Definitions of Welfare State Attitudes

Attitudes are defined as observable evaluative responses by individuals to an object, such as the welfare state. The welfare state includes all governmental activities aimed at achieving greater socio-economic security and equality of the citizenry (Flora et al. 1977).

Thus, welfare state attitudes are all those observable reactions implying some evaluation to any of the governmental activities or institutions as well as their consequences that were set up to achieve greater socio-economic equality or security.

The traditional view of the psychology of survey response regards attitudes as stable and easily accessible (see for example Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Wilson and Hodges (1992) illustrate this assumption with a file drawer model: people asked for an attitude statement, such as their Aunt Marie or the abolishment of atomic power plants, look for a file marked "Aunt Marie" or "atomic power plants" and report the evaluation it contains.

Nevertheless, this traditional view has often been criticized by survey methodologists (e.g. Tourangeau et al. 2000; Wikman 2007; Groves 1989: chapter 9; Krosnick 1999). Those researchers focused on a diversity of effects that refuse the "true and stable attitude" assumption. For example, question order, question wording, social context, mode or response alternatives were investigated and found to influence the answer (Schwarz and Sudman 1992). From this view, attitudes are rather described as contextual and fluid utterances (Chong 1993). Theoretically, those findings that contradict the stable-attitude-assumption can be explained by multiple considerations for and against an issue every individual has. Depending on contextual cues, e.g. the survey situation or prevailing issues in the media, the respective considerations are more salient than others and are thus more likely to influence the survey response (Zaller and Feldman 1992). Similarly, another view about political attitudes claims that individuals can give a meaningful answer even when they have only little information about a topic. According to this perspective, individuals' opinions depend on their value orientations and their information they have about a certain issue. Depending on the consistency and context of values and the level of information, the attitudes expressed appear more or less stable and unidimensional (Alvarez and Brehm 2002).

2.2 The Measurement of Political Attitudes in General

There exists a growing number of critical studies about the measurement of political attitudes; and when reviewing them, we must make sure that we do not enter the much wider discussion about the determinants (the x-variables) of these attitudes (y-variables).

There is, for example, the phenomenon of non-attitude. Ordinary citizens do not necessarily have a clear and fully developed attitude about an issue. People with non-attitudes are sure about having no opinion, but they nevertheless tend to state an attitude.¹ This non-attitude is likely to be due to the low salience of the phenomenon in question for the respondent. In order to satisfy what survey respondents perceive to be the expectations of the interviewer, respondents choose a response option and thus state an attitude, although they do not have one (Converse 1964). In contrast to Converse who described the respondent flipping a mental coin when answering, Schuman and Presser (1980) held that some respondents refer to an underlying disposition not specific to an issue, but relevant to it when answering a question while lacking an opinion. In doing so, they rather report an underlying disposition, but not an "informed opinion". This conclusion from underlying disposition may or may not be consistent with similar attitudes, it may as well just be a "feeling".

Another finding is that of uncertainty which can be interpreted as the respondent's difficulty to make a judgement about an issue or to give an unequivocal standpoint.

¹ This phenomenon is more prevalent, of course, if survey designers do not offer the opportunity of having "no opinion".

Answers to attitude questions—in contrast to questions regarding behaviour or facts from the outer world—have the highest degree of uncertainty (Wikman 2006). The issue asked for in the survey question may be complicated or new to the respondents. They may lack structured and connected political considerations to give a summarising statement. Additionally, the cognitive burden of searching for considerations or weighting arguments might be too high. Another example is answers using the middlemost category of a Likert-scale. These “middle” answers do not only capture neutrality of opinion, which it is actually intended to measure, but also ambivalence and uncertainty. Thus, the heterogeneity of what people think about the phenomenon in question is underestimated with those scales (Klopfer and Madden 1980).

2.3 The Measurement of Welfare State Attitudes

In addition to the critical studies on measurement of political attitudes, there are other relevant findings on measurement issues of welfare state attitudes. Firstly, there is the question about measuring the correct number of attitudinal dimensions as well as the correct types of dimensions (Sabbagh and Vanhuyse 2006; Andreß et al. 2001; Roller 1992; Sihvo and Uusitalo 1995; Gelissen 2000; Cnaan 1989; Krömmelbein et al. 2007; Coughlin 1980; Nüchter et al. 2008, 2009, 2010; Glatzer et al. 2009). In this body of knowledge, the main emphasis is on understanding the dimensions and their empirical operationalisation. Still, underlying all of these studies is the idea that individuals have a fixed set of attitudes about the welfare state. Implicitly in these studies, the attitudes are rather rigid and not easily amenable to outside influence.

In a second line of inquiry, attitudinal measures, especially those concerned with the intensity of welfare state activities (mostly about whether spending should be increased, maintained or decreased) are criticised as “cheap” talk (see Boeri et al. 2001). Here, the main point of criticism is about the relevance of general attitudes towards the welfare states or partial aspects thereof. These critics argue that respondents must be stimulated to give costed estimates about what they are willing to support. For example, Boeri et al. asked respondents to give an estimate about how much reduction in public pension they would be willing to accept by comparing their loss in pension entitlements with their loss in wage income. Another example is to ask respondents to give explicit statements about two or more concrete policy proposals, which differ in their material effects on respondents, in order to get a more concrete picture of underlying preferences (Hansen 1998).

Thirdly, researchers call the consistency of welfare state attitudes into question (see also Hansen 1998). Inconsistency of attitudes exists if individuals make contradictory statements on policies, issues etc., such as expressing to favour the abolishment of all governmental spending and being in favour of raising the unemployment aid. Inconsistency can hardly be measured with closed questions (Feldman and Zaller 1992: 270). Feldman and Zaller (1992) find in a random-sample survey study of open-ended questions that citizens differ in the level of consistency with which they utter their opinions towards the welfare state whereas many of them are very able at drawing consistently upon arguments within their political culture to support their attitudes.

Fourthly and strongly related to the last body of studies, researchers detect ambivalence among welfare state attitudes. Ambivalence denotes the fact, that individuals hold positive and negative evaluations towards a *single* object at the same time. A conflict concerning two different attitude objects is not ambivalence. An individual could have a positive reaction to higher governmental pension spending because s/he is worried about old age poverty and a negative reaction because s/he is concerned with the accumulation of public

debt and the burdening of future generations. This is an example of ambivalence because both positive and negative attitudes are opposing and concern the same object, namely governmental pension spending (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Gainous 2008; Gainous et al. 2008).

In sum, this literature review suggests that there is a growing body of knowledge that highlights measurement issues with regard to attitudes towards the welfare state² as well as political attitudes in general. These studies highlight some problems, but seem not to have much of an impact on survey practitioners in the field. Especially in comparative studies of the International Social Survey Programme (Edlund 2009), the items measuring welfare state attitudes remain unchanged, a finding that also reflects the bias in repeated surveys to re-use certain items in order to ensure longitudinal comparability. Also, none of the studies focuses explicitly on all measurement problems of welfare state attitudes and tries to suggest improved measures.

This void is filled by the following analysis. It is guided by the piecemeal evidence from the studies reviewed. It strives to detect evidence for inconsistency of attitudes, uncertainty, ambivalence as well as non-attitudes. Through a novel approach of using focus group data in combination with survey data, the analysis identifies the concrete problems and suggests additional, better measures to use in surveys in the future.

3 Data and Methods

In order to explore the measurement issues about welfare state attitudes, we draw on focus groups data, a qualitative source of evidence that increasingly finds usage in the social sciences (e.g. Lindsay and Hubley 2006), as well as survey data pertaining to the same groups. Firstly, we describe the data. Secondly, we explain how qualitative evidence from focus groups and its combination with standardised measurement can be used to shed light on welfare state attitudes.

3.1 The Data

We conducted twelve focus groups in Cologne (Germany) with each group consisting of four to eight people aged 17–89. The discussions took place between January and June 2009, a period of heightened salience of welfare state activities in the German media due to the financial and economic crisis. Participants were paid 25 Euro for 2 h of their time including a discussion and filling out a standardised questionnaire. At all times, participants were given an explicit “don’t know” option on the questionnaire for them to take an exit road not to be forced into the existing categories; thus to avoid “false positives” (Gilljam and Granberg 1993). They were also encouraged to ask if they had a problem with understanding, which was taken up by those who had vision problems. In the questionnaire, we replicated some of the survey items about the welfare state from the 2001 (Social Networks II) and 2006 (Role of Government) ISSP modules that are also used in other surveys (see for example Nüchter et al. 2008, 2010). Most importantly, we asked whether respondents were in favour of much more/more/the same amount/less/much less

² Furthermore, there are studies on framing that show that attitudes towards, for example, programmes for specific social groups are contingent on the way the deservingness of these groups is portrayed in the survey (Slothuus 2007). Nevertheless, framing can best be evaluated by experimental approach that is why we do not deal with it in our focus group analysis.

governmental spending in the areas of education, environment, pensions, health, unemployment and arts and culture. Thus, we have pieces of information from the participants alike the ones from a standardised survey as well as a flurry of information (statement, non-verbal signals) from their participation in the group discussions.

For the recruitment of participants, we made use of flyers, personal communication, ads, press articles and also approached natural groups, such as senior social groups. The volunteer-to-group allocation followed a theoretical line of reasoning. All groups were stratified by education, i.e. group members had similar levels of formal education (high = *Abitur* [university entry qualifying school leaving certificate] or university degree, low = everything else). Ten of the groups were age-homogenous and were to allow for discussions between individuals of similar age who are likely to be in similar age-related situation in the welfare state. Two of the groups were age-heterogeneous and were to facilitate discussions between members of different generations. The strategy of age-homogeneity and similar educational background within the groups was based on the knowledge that education and age are important predictors of welfare attitudes (Busemeyer et al. 2009). The homogeneity within the groups thus eases the focus group participants' ability to draw on similar terminology, language and general social codes (Merton et al. 1956). Furthermore, differing degrees of homogeneity across the groups as to age is essential due to the focus of the group discussion on expectations from the welfare state. In doing so, we tried to maximise the heterogeneity of dynamics of attitudes. In all, we cannot say how representative or prevalent certain dynamics across the German population are that we found, but we can be sure to measure a high level of heterogeneity of the dynamics with a variety of different, but within-homogenous groups.

The course of each group discussion was kept very similar across all 12 groups. In sum, we had a series of six stimuli, followed by certain probes and some concluding questions. The discussion started with a warm-up exercise. Participants were asked to turn towards a board where statements were written on movable cards and to discuss which statements were more important to them than others and as a group to sort the cards accordingly on the board. The content of each card was one deliberately vague statement about what the state ought to do. As a second stimulus we presented a brief description of the fiscal situation, referring to the action scope of an overly indebted state and the question whether future generations should be burdened or not. As a third step, we presented a dilemma for a 68 years old hypothetical woman who was concerned about her pensions as well as about her grandchildren's future in the welfare state. We asked our participants to imagine themselves being in her shoes with regard to thoughts, understandings and feelings. The fourth stimulus was based on sociological findings on public and private generational exchange: According to scientific findings, the grandparent-generation received more money from the public welfare state exchange system than it contributed to it, whereas it spent more time and money for the younger familial generations (their children and grandchildren) than it received from them (Kohli 1999). Our participants were asked to compare those scientific findings with their own experience. Fifthly, we presented two statements, one representing the group of the young in the welfare state and one representing the elderly in the political sphere, suggesting political conflictive scenarios. The focus group participants were asked to take a stand regarding those quotations and their implications for society. The last stimulus described the proposal for a franchise reform, namely that parents should be allowed to cast a vote for their children as long as they are underage. The participants were to describe in how far this reform would affect their vote. Also, they were asked to describe if this change in franchise triggered an intergenerational

conflict in society in their view. Finally, depending on the group composition, the participants were asked some special questions, e.g. how they perceive their future in the welfare state.

All focus groups were video- and audio-taped and transcribed by a professional German native according to a notation system fine-tuned to our needs. Text excerpts in this article are translation by the authors.

3.2 Criticising Survey Items with Focus Group Data

To what extent can we make any sensible statements about the quality of survey measures with focus group data? There are several reasons for the sensibility of such an approach:

Triangulation: Quantitative researchers tend to subscribe to a positivist notion of social science (see also Goerres and Prinzen [2010]). Thus, they (like us) believe that reality exists independently from the researcher. Its (social) phenomena are measurable by a variety of techniques and researchers employing the same techniques. If attitudes towards the welfare state exist independently of the researchers and their techniques, both survey techniques as well as focus group discussions must find at least partially similar dynamics (e.g. Møller et al. 2010).

Purposeful sampling: Survey researchers could say that we did not have a random sample of any underlying population and are thus unable to make any statements about anyone apart from the participants of our groups. However, our sample of focus groups was theoretically stratified to mirror known facts, namely that education and age are important predictors of differences of welfare state attitudes. Thus, we can be sure that we captured a lot of the heterogeneity in attitudes that exist in the population. It may even be argued that we found out more about the dynamics of difficult-to-reach groups, such as the very young, the very old and migrants, groups that are typical of dropping out of samples.³ Within each group, most groups were homogenised in order to ease communication because their life worlds were likely to be similar.

Crucial cases: In addition, we know from other studies which kind of people volunteer to be included in a focus group. Primarily, these volunteers are interested in the topic under discussion (Kitzinger 1995)—in our case politics. Our participants were in all probability more politically interested than the average population. For example, their intensity of political information through the media was much higher than for average Germans. Thus, our findings of low levels of understandings, inconsistency and ambivalence, carry actually more weight as our participants are politically more interested than others. Thus, other people with low, more average levels of political interest are likely to show even lower levels of understanding towards the welfare state (Eckstein 1975).

Appropriate qualitative method: One might argue that, besides focus groups, qualitative in-depth interviews might be as well suited for our purpose. Indeed, both are common methods for developing and evaluating survey questions. Focus groups are appropriate as politics is not a daily topic to ordinary citizens; they may thus not be aware of all their arguments or attitudes and may need some time to think about. A discussion among individuals of similar background, in which they can choose the language they prefer may

³ Sometimes, it can be more difficult to get a group together to talk than to survey individuals in single interviews. For instance, rich people are not willing to get together in groups to talk about wealth (Glatzer et al. 2009).

stimulate and elicit such statements. In contrast to this, the atmosphere in a face-to-face interview might be less informal as answers to the interviewer's questions and probes are expected with little delay even if interviewers are trained to solicit answers by appropriate techniques (Mangold 1960; Merton et al. 1956; Pollock 1955). For example, in a study of wealth in Germany, researchers conducted focus groups about the shared understanding about what "wealth" means to them (Glatzer et al. 2009). Groups stratified by income could talk about the meaning of wealth and being rich with reference to themselves and others.

However, focus groups also entail disadvantages for measuring attitudes. For example, it is difficult to interpret non-participation that might be due to not having an attitude or being intimidated by groups (Mangold 1960). The facilitators can do some things to alleviate the latter, for instance, by actively asking a person or by using various stimulating techniques. Both focus groups and standardised interviewing run into the risk of forcing an individual to indicate an attitude even if that person does not really have one. The group situation may be better in that not saying something is actually an option in the focus group, compared to an in-depth interview. Also, social desirability may shape the behaviour of individuals in a group setting more than in a survey interview situation because the social setting enhances the social meaning of the matters discussed. However, since researchers can follow the course of the discussion, they can see on video records where, for instance, a group opinion develops and creates social pressure for others to conform to that opinion.

4 Empirical Results

The results from the focus groups reveal that participants' attitudes towards the welfare state show important characteristics that are usually not captured in the standard survey items. These characteristics are presented in the following order: inconsistency of attitudes, i.e. evidence for attitudes that are factually not consistent with each other; uncertainty of attitudes, i.e. evidence for attitudes that are not fixed, but show uncertainty on behalf of the individual; non-attitudes, i.e. evidence for no stance at all towards certain aspects of the welfare state; ambivalence, i.e. evidence for simultaneous positive and negative evaluations of some aspect of the welfare state and further validity problems. We close this section with an explicit critical review of our own evidence where we deal with some arguments that can be brought forward against our analysis.

4.1 The Inconsistency of Welfare State Attitudes

We found plenty of evidence that participants indicated certain attitudes in the standardised questionnaire and made statements in the discussion that were factually not consistent with them. These findings highlight two potential problems: on the one hand, the standardised items could be valid indicators, and the latent attitudes would be inconsistent; or on the other hand, the standardised measures would not be a valid measure of attitudes and would wrongly suggest consistent attitudes. In either way, such evidence raises doubts about the reliability of these measures.

An example from our focus groups shall illustrate this inconsistency: A participant indicated preferences for higher levels of spending in all kinds of policy areas in the standardised questionnaire. At the same time, he uttered that he was critical of governmental spending as his generation and future generations would suffer from public debt.

Andreas⁴, 24 years, male,
high education

In general, I think just focusing on those living today is short-sighted because [if we do that] we could also say that we take up more public debt, so that those who are alive today are doing great. But, I think, there also has to be a long-term perspective. I believe that public debt will have a strong influence on our lives. Because the mountain of debt is getting bigger and bigger. And surely, we will have to suffer from this.

Even though he had been reminded in the questionnaire of that more spending would mean more taxes, he was very much pro-spending, and was concerned with future generations. There is a logical tension in these attitudes towards the intensity of the welfare state (spending attitudes) and towards financing of the welfare state (public debt). This tension may either be due to the survey measure being invalid or to inconsistency in his attitudes that again would be fully lost in the survey measures that only asked for spending preferences.

Another participant indicated in the survey that she was in favour of lowering spending in the area of unemployment benefits whereas she was in favour of more or the same level of spending in all other five policy areas. In the discussion, however, that was about state activities and the economic crises; she judged current unemployment benefits as too low for a decent standard of living.

Maria, 42 years, female,
high education

I have to agree with Mister Smith [participant] that the minimum income of people out of work is too low. They just can't live off it.

This clear contradiction to what she had indicated in the survey could be the result of the lack of rigidity of her attitudes. Through the discussion where she explicitly took up someone else's opinion, she may have changed her mind, again something that would not be captured through the standardised items alone.

4.2 The Uncertainty of Welfare State Attitudes

In contrast to inconsistent attitudes, where an individual gives logically conflicting attitudes, uncertain attitudes are reflected in an individual giving one opinion and then showing signs of uncertainty about his or her statements. For example, the person can add that he or she actually does not know or finds it too hard to make a judgment.

In our discussions, a participant stated that she does not support government spending for companies that went out of business because of their own fault. This attitude statement

⁴ All names were changed.

was detailed and seemed convinced, but was surprisingly followed by a sign of hesitance, hinting at an uncertain attitude.

Elisabeth, 65 years, female,
high education

I am not able to see through this when firms are being supported again and again [by the state], right? This firm gets something, that one [gets] something, then Opel gets something [the Adam Opel Inc., a daughter of General Motors]. Then it is X, then Y. I am asking myself: when are we getting to the bottom of this? But I am lacking the expertise. Because I think someone should go bankrupt if he played to riskily. Right? [laughs out loud]. And then I read in the papers that they are still somehow getting these high salaries. Then I think that is not quite right. But still, I would not dare to make a judgement about the matters whether it is necessary to support the financial markets.

...

[I am amazed about] how specialists deem it to be necessary to guarantee stability. Really, I can only say that I have to pass on that one. I really cannot assess this. I don't know. And I do not have an opinion of this...whether this is acceptable for future generations or not. I just do not know.

There is another example of uncertainty we found in our focus group analysis. In the discussion about the economic crisis and public debt, participants showed uncertainty of their attitudes towards governmental spending. Discussing whether, how and to what extent public debt should be raised in the current economic situation many participants uttered their being self-aware that they did not understand what was going on in that area, how the state could actually get money and how anyone could be a creditor to the state. For example, one participant described the situation from his view, explaining all economic interrelations and concluding that he could not give a judgement.

Thomas, 23 years, male,
high education

Well, I think that [the accumulation of public debt] is somehow not easy to see through...how all these things go together. Because there is now investment, because it is hoped that there will be economic recovery. A recovery that maybe manifests itself, maybe. And then there is the expectation that there will be a positive yield. That should then pay off public debt. And this is then the question: what is the relationship between the two. It is a reaction to a crisis. And if we did not do anything today, then maybe public debt would not rise NOW. But this would then beg the question when recovery would kick in, if it kicked in at all. Or because it is very complex, I think. It is difficult to judge from a layman's perspective.

Similarly, another participant explained that he cannot make any judgment on public debt and the burdening of future generations as he does not understand the processes and consequences.

Martin, 51 years, male, high
education

Well, I am unable to follow the line of argument if people say, yes, the coming generations have to pay for that. I—as an insignificant person [als kleiner Mensch]—cannot have the overview of how this will develop. Or whatever.

It seems to be a perfectly valid inference that a lack of understanding of the complexities of economic policy is prevalent even among politically interested citizens and that they are aware of it. However, these findings cast a new light on survey questions on spending. In the most popular items, citizens are reminded that more spending could lead to higher taxes. But actually in reality, a rise in public debt would be the first step. Thus, if citizens cannot relate to the process of public debt, the implications of being in favour of more spending must be questioned. What is more, it is even difficult to judge from what people say freely in group situations whether uncertainty or inconsistency drives their utterances. The underlying considerations of the individual are probably only weakly linked in both cases.

4.3 Non-attitudes Towards the Welfare State

We also found evidence for participants not having any attitudes towards the welfare state that they uttered in the discussion and at the same time indicating very strong preferences in the survey. One woman, a 61 year-old migrant from Greece who had been in Germany for several decades and spoke fluent German, but with grammatical errors, asked for help when filling out the questionnaire; after the battery of items had been explained in detail, she chose to indicate strong preferences for the highest levels of spending across all six policy areas. This pattern when taken literally suggests very strong preferences for higher state spending across the board.

Although she was active in the discussion otherwise, she hardly said anything in the ensuing discussion about financing the welfare state and did not make any statement about her preferences. Thus, the wider evidence for this person seems to have been that she may actually not have had strong attitudes or no attitudes at all in this area. The format of the questionnaire may have led her to indicate preferences just in order to get through the questionnaire without losing dignity.

4.4 The Ambivalence of Welfare State Attitudes

Some findings suggest the presence of ambivalent welfare state attitudes. In one of our youngest groups, there were two women who explained their views towards the public pay-as-you-go pension system. Both did not give a unipolar statement about public pension policy but rather seemed to be torn between positive and negative evaluations of the pension system. One of them, Anne, held the view that members of her generation were disadvantaged as they had to pay contributions into the public pension system, but would not receive enough public pensions for an acceptable standard of living of their own. She was also aware of having to provide a private old age pension for herself on her own. So she clearly had a negative view on this topic but at the same time she expressed a positive view, namely she felt committed that her generation should pay into the public pension system so that today's retirees had a high standard of living. Also, she felt obliged to support today's pensioners as they had been paying into the public pension system their whole life. The other woman, Sarah, argued similarly. On the one hand, she supported the obligatory generational contract as it provides pensioners with some kind of security (for quantitative evidence on this point see Nüchter et al. 2008), but on the other hand, she felt forced to contribute to a contract she never had the chance to join voluntarily. So she was

torn between a positive and a negative evaluation, which is at the core of the concept of ambivalence.

Anne, 24 years, female, high education	That's why I have been saying that they [younger people] have been drawn into this involuntarily. What do I mean by involuntary? Because I think it will be to our disadvantage since we have to pay into the system for other people, but will not receive anything at the end.
Sarah, 24 years, female, low education	You will HAVE to subscribe to this contract at some point.
Moderator	What are you feeling when you are thinking about it – when you say that one has to subscribe to such a contract?
Sarah	On one hand, very positive. Because it is of course important to older people to know that one [younger people] is not being asked whether one wants to join the generational contract or not. On the other hand, very negative. I always think it is difficult if people are being forced to do whatever. That's why I don't know. But I also think it is important and RIGHT.
Anne	I think it's important to pay into the system now. I think that we have obligations toward older people who are there today, I also think it is depressing that I know that my situation will be different when I am old ...
Moderator	Anne, you have said that you think it is an obligation towards older people. Can you expand on that?
Anne	The older people of today cannot be blamed that the state is faring somewhat worse now. They themselves also paid into the system for years. I think that they have a right to receive money. To spend their autumn of life nicely [schön]. And if we did not pay, they would not get it.

Clearly, the women had both negative and positive standpoints towards public pensions. This can be interpreted as the presence of an ambivalent attitude. Anne's answers in the written questionnaire reveals that a unipolar measurement, in this case as the question of being in favour of more or less governmental spending for pensions, is probably an insufficient instrument. She indicated being in favour of keeping the current governmental spending for pensions. This might only reflect her positive attitude towards pensions in general or her sense of duty to support pensioners. The negative part of the attitude was lost in the measurement. The other woman, Sarah, indicated in the standardized questionnaire that she cannot state whether there should be more or less governmental spending for pensions. This answer might be caused by her ambivalent attitude.

4.5 Further Validity Problems of Survey Measures of Welfare State Attitudes

The discussion about inconsistency and uncertainty has already brought to light some issues about the validity of standardised survey measures. When we compare the answers given in the questionnaire with the participants' statements in the focus group discussion, we can see that the ISSP-items where respondents are asked if the government should spend more or less for a certain policy may not be a valid instrument for one theoretical concept, but that many things seem to trigger the answers to that.

One participant, a student, indicated in the survey that he was in favour of more spending in all six policy areas. However, in the discussion he turned out to be motivated primarily by self-interest. He contradicted himself by saying the following:

Marcus, 33 years, male, high education	If I had something that I was particularly interested in, it would be free access to universities—with regard to fees, I mean. In that case, I would say: okay, please go ahead and raise VAT. I endorse that. But if I see that there is nothing changing in areas of interest to me, then I really do not want to pay taxes. Then, I find it stupid.
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Thus, he actually amended his position in that he said that he would only support more expenses if spending was also increased in a policy area of direct interest to him, namely university spending. But in his survey questionnaire, he was generous in supporting all kinds of policy spending, some which such as pension spending are unlikely to be perceived to be of direct interest to him.

There is also evidence for the survey measure potentially underestimating an attitude. One participant indicated many “don’t know”-answers in the survey including for education spending. In the discussion about the role of the welfare state, she contradicted by giving a clear opinion. She said that she clearly was in favour of governmental spending for education.

Angela, 44 years, female, high education	I think it is very important that the state guarantees free school and university education for all adolescents. I think education is very important. I find it important that there is equal treatment, that education is not only for those who earn more.
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Thus, she seems not to have been able to relate to the questions in the survey, even though she obviously had a very firm opinion on these matters. Obviously, the measurement instrument, the survey question, did not validly capture the attitude.

Another problem of these general spending items is their high level of generalisation that stems from them being developed in a comparative framework where all national idiosyncratic institutions must be covered. So, the questions on spending in the area of pensions may be difficult to interpret for Germany that has a public, contribution-based scheme. Different from other countries, Germany’s public pension current system does not administer a basic pension scheme that guarantees the same level of pensions for everyone like the Netherlands. Thus, it is questionable whether the measurement is functionally equivalent across countries, a gold standard of international survey research (Smith 2004).

One respondent indicated that she wanted to see more spending on pensions. At the same time, she said the following in the discussion:

Ingrid, 76 years, female, low education	I am not taking anything from the state. I worked for 43 years. My pension does not come from the welfare state. Rather, I paid for it myself. I do not consider this as a gift or as income support. I think it is a right that I deserve.
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So it seems difficult to judge what she actually meant by supporting more spending in the area of pensions. She may have interpreted state spending in the area of pension as the state's contribution to cover the deficit in the pension system or the level of indexing that decided upon politically from year to year. Again, it is difficult to distil what the item is actually measuring here.

4.6 A Critical Review of the Evidence

Before turning towards some suggestions for better survey instruments, let us review our findings from a critical point of view. The analysis of our focus group data juxtaposed with the findings from the standardised questionnaires cast some shadow on the validity of the most prominent indicators of welfare attitudes, namely those on state spending. Their validity may be compromised because (a) they hide inconsistency in attitudes that are brought to light in the more dynamic group discussion; (b) these items may neglect the uncertainty that is associated with attitudes. Like the standard error in a sample-based estimate, attitudes towards the welfare state seem to have more uncertainty than survey items suggest; (c) they undervalue the existence of non-attitudes. Even though, respondents in standardised surveys often have the option "don't know", more may choose to give a concrete answer than what is latently existent; (d) respondents have different kinds of understanding of these items. For example, they can view questions about spending as indicating the salience they see in these policy areas (even though a policy can be very salient, but not costly) or they can actually think that it is only the government's responsibility to administer a scheme rather than actively driving it.

There are a number of arguments that critical readers could put forward against our analysis. It could, for instance, be argued that the measurement problems that we encounter only pertain to a small fraction of the overall populace. This could be true, but it could also NOT be true; and we are unable to tell from the focus group analysis. In a theoretical sample, it does not matter whether one individual or several individuals show the same characteristics. Since the sample is not representative of any underlying population in the statistical sense, numbers from the theoretical sample cannot be used to infer about any population. What we show is that these measurement problems are multi-faceted and serious. The instruments that we propose in Section 5 are much better suited to give an indication about the level of occurrence across the populace than the qualitative analysis.

Another argument could be that the measurement error may be prevalent across the population, but the measurement error is randomly distributed, i.e. uncertainty, inconsistency etc. are randomly distributed across the population and do not correlate with predictors of interest. If this was the case, it would statistically not be necessary to have better data (especially in regression analysis). However, phenomena such as the inconsistency of attitudes are unlikely NOT to correlate significantly with predictors of welfare state attitudes of interest. Take education as an example, a variable that features, for instance, prominently in Iversen and Soskice (2001). More educated people can be expected to be more unlikely to have a non-attitude towards the welfare state (Narayan and Krosnick 1996). Those people who do not have an attitude have a tendency to give higher values on the dependent variables (state preference for more spending) (Jackman 1973) because they have a positive affective response to "the welfare state", not because they actually believe that the state should spend more. By neglecting such measurement issues as non-attitudes, Iversen and Soskice as well as many other researchers imprecisely estimate the effect of education because they will capture a lot of such correlated measurement error in their coefficients of education. Therefore, this assumption of random distribution is unrealistic.

A third aspect may be to observe that many empirical analyses of welfare state attitudes, such as the ones reviewed in the introduction and Section 2, demonstrate consistent correlations between various items measuring welfare state attitudes as well as between these items and many predicting variables. It could be said that these analyses yield that, for example attitudinal measures towards welfare state spending reflect an underlying universe of few consistent dimensions (such as intensity and extensity of spending preferences [Andreß and Heien 2001; Andreß et al. 2001; Roller 1992]). Also, the robust correlations between these approximated dimensions and many predictors reveal that these underlying dimensions are consistently related to individual-level characteristics. So why should we bother with caring about measurement error if the external validation is so strong? One could answer that social science is primarily interested in understanding social reality. Stopping at the point where such analyses are at would be a serious disregard of clues and evidence from existing studies about the complexity of public opinion towards the welfare state. Even though the inclusion of measurement issues in such analysis reduces the parsimony of models, a clearer picture of what people think about the welfare state in all its complexity should be welcomed. In conclusion, our findings are far from non-trivial and measurement problems with regard to the conventional items of welfare state attitude measurement.

5 Suggestions of Different Survey Instruments to Measure Welfare State Attitudes

As a final step, we suggest some more recently developed survey instruments or principles thereof that counter the weaknesses of the conventional ones and that can be employed in order to achieve a better measurement of welfare state attitudes. All in all, we suggest considering these alternative survey instruments instead of 'simple survey questions' when aiming at measuring attitudes towards multi-faceted and complex objects and evaluations of objects respondents are not familiar with as they do not concern with it daily, such as politics. We present six types of survey instruments and illustrate their application for some welfare state attitudes: (a) contingent valuation, (b) factorial survey, (c) open-ended probing, (d) response reaction measurement, (e) special survey questions as measures of ambivalence and (f) meta-measures of attitudinal characteristics, such as ambivalence or uncertainty.

The (a) contingent valuation method elicits people's preferences for public goods. In order to find out the respondents' willingness to pay, hypothetical markets are presented, in which respondents have to construct a trade-off in their minds. The responses to those questions are analysed to determine the sample's average willingness to pay (Boeri et al. 2001; Louviere et al. 2000). A central concept concerning this method is the passive use value which denotes the use value deriving from indirect contact (Carson et al. 2001).

For example, employed respondents that are covered by unemployment benefits could be confronted with the following question: "Suppose that you were offered an unemployment insurance scheme giving you, in addition to what you are already entitled to, the right to receive one extra month of your salary in case of job loss. Would you be willing to give up every month a fraction (ranging from less than 1 to 10%) of your salary in order to be covered by this insurance?" (Boeri et al. 2001: 17). Here, respondents are explicitly confronted with the trade-off between a certain increase in the intensity of the welfare state (unemployment spending) and their own personal income after taxation. Such an instrument would be a much more nuanced measurement of the individual's willingness to support an intensification of welfare state activities. Such an instrument reduces

inconsistent statement from respondents that could be due to the vagueness of the stimuli (see also Boeri et al. (2001) for more examples of the contingent valuation method).

(b) The factorial survey, like the contingent valuation method, also presents the object under study in a specific setting (see for an application in the realm of social care Deeming and Keen 2003). This technique, also called vignette, is a hypothetical description including one outcome and several attributes, which are varied over several vignettes in an experimental manner. The attributes in such a vignette might be for example the amount of former income from employment, number of children raised, years of employment and the number of individuals to be provided with pension and the outcome is a certain amount of pension income. Theoretically, if all dimensions had just three values, $3^4 = 81$ combinations would be possible. But not all would necessarily make sense in reality. Each respondent is asked to evaluate several hypothetical situations on the same scale measuring one dimension (e.g. unjust or just amount of pension). Respondents are forced to ponder the values in relation to each other, i.e. undertake a trade-off. An example of such a vignette is: “Before her retirement, Mrs Smith had a monthly net income of 2000 Euro. She was employed for 30 years, had raised two children and has to provide for herself with her pension. Her monthly pension is 1,000 Euro” (italics indicate the values of the attributes). This method takes into account that an evaluation of a just amount of pension may depend on several attributes (Beck and Opp 2001). Employing statistical data analysis techniques the contribution of each attribute to the global evaluation can be analyzed (Klein 2006). This instrument reveals inconsistent attitudes very well since respondents are repeatedly confronted with situations that only vary by a few dimensions. Another important advantage of the factorial survey is that the object to be evaluated, e.g. the pension income of Mrs Smith mentioned above, is much more concrete than the relatively vague ISSP-question on rising the governmental spending for pensions which could trigger a multitude of different (Veenhoven 2002) and even conflicting as well as uncertain respondents’ considerations.

Another way of a more valid measurement of welfare state attitudes are (c) open-ended probes that follow questions for a random sample survey. The respondents’ answers have to be recorded and coded (Feldman and Zaller 1992: 275–277). An example could be: “We would like you to think about the German welfare state. You know that at the federal, Land and local levels, the state annually spends about a total of 700 billion Euro, which is about 29% of the value of all services and goods produced in Germany. Some people think the German welfare state spends its money sensibly, some people think, it does not spend its money sensibly. Which is closer to your view?” This standardised question is followed by probes such as “Still thinking about the question you just answered, please tell me what ideas came to your mind as you were answering that question”, “Do you see any problems with the [answer given]?”. The probes are intended to elicit the respondent’s thoughts when replying to the standardised question, especially to see how respondents frame issues, which values and considerations they have in the process of answering and how (if so) they experience conflicts between considerations. For the measurement of complex attitudes, this method has the advantage to survey much more information than through closed-ended questions alone and to capture non-attitude, ambivalence and uncertainty since answers reflecting such characteristics can be given in such instruments. In contrast to closed questions, this technique does not make the assumption that errors in understanding questions are randomly distributed.

(d) The response reaction measurement is another way of capturing the respondent’s uncertainty or ambivalent attitude. By measuring the delay between the end of the interviewer’s question and the beginning of the respondent’s answer, a measure of uncertainty

or ambivalence is created with longer duration representing more uncertainty or ambivalence (Draisma and Dijkstra 2004; for the discussion of a proper application see Sellke and Mayerl 2004). Another advantage of this method is that the data collection is cheap and easy as it can be made nearly automatically when doing a computer-assisted (face-to-face, web-based or telephone) interview.

Also, there are (e) special survey questions for measuring ambivalence (Bassili 1996; for a review and discussion see Gainous 2008). An example for such a measure is a survey question that was tried in a Florida voter survey (Gainous 2008): “[...] I’d like you to rate the statement on a 4-point scale to indicate how *positively* you feel toward it. [...]. Please rate each statement based solely on how positively you feel about it, *while ignoring or setting aside for the moment any negative feelings you may have*. The statement is: the government should provide free education for all young people.” Then the text is repeated this time asking for negative feelings. Interviewers are assigned to repeat the instructions as many times as possible if respondents are confused. Then, researchers can combine the two answers concerning one government action to one measure of ambivalence.

Finally, there are (f) meta-attitudinal ways of measuring attitudinal characteristics (Bassili 1996; Gainous 2008). Those instruments directly ask the respondents to assess e.g. their degree of being torn between positive and negative sides regarding a certain issue on a scale. In doing so, this meta-attitudinal measure is intended to measure ambivalence. Also, respondents can be asked to rate their degree of (un)certainly or attitudinal strength or importance. Meta-attitudinal measures are practical and less costly than some of the above mentioned instruments as they require only one survey question, in comparison to e.g. special survey questions, and capture the respondents’ answer on a scale, in comparison to e.g. open-ended questions that need to be coded. Nevertheless, they firstly rely on the respondent’s subjective assessment which might deflect from the researcher’s definition of e.g. ambivalence (Gainous 2008). Secondly, those meta-attitudinal properties are not easy accessible in memory and are thus vulnerable to contextual influences (Bassili 1996).

In sum, these six instruments suggested here show new avenues for measuring welfare state attitudes that deal head on with the problems of underestimating the inconsistency, uncertainty and ambivalence of welfare state attitudes as well as general problems of validity. Each one of them is, of course, not without its own problems, but in conjunction with each other and the conventional measures, an optimum combination of measures can certainly be found that further reduces the error in the measurement of public opinion towards the welfare state.

6 Concluding Remarks

Can we improve the measurement of attitudes towards the welfare state? The answer is: yes, we can and we should. With original data from twelve focus groups, we question the reliability and validity of established survey items on governmental spending in various policy areas and find plenty of evidence for measurement problems. Our empirical analysis yields a multifaceted picture of welfare state attitudes that contradicts the view of stable and easy-and-ready-to-measure attitudes. Like some existing studies from other areas, attitudes towards the welfare state can be uncertain, inconsistent, ambivalent as well as non-attitudes. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrates that the widely used survey items in the International Social Survey Programme underestimate those characteristics. The suggested new survey instruments to measure welfare state attitudes are likely to overcome some of these problems.

The welfare state is a multi-faceted and complex object. It is likely that attitudes towards it differ in their degree of ambivalence, uncertainty, non-attitude and inconsistency depending on the facet in question. Further research could elaborate which aspect needs which special measurement. Attitudes towards non-intended outcomes of welfare state activities, such as the misuse of social benefits, might be less ambivalent than attitudes towards pensions. For example, a young individual might be torn between norms of supporting the elderly and his/her self-interest for spending scarce governmental money for areas s/he profits from.

Although we acknowledge the argument about re-using the established survey items for longitudinal comparability, we recommend thinking about using the suggested measurement instruments, not only to achieve a better measurement of welfare state attitudes as such, but ultimately to get to a better, more detailed understanding of how the welfare state is perceived in the minds of ordinary citizens.

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