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2 Welfare State Attitudes

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5 **Synonyms**

6 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

15 **Definition**

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

Description

25

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

42 The extensive modern welfare state is almost
43 omnipresent in everyday life, even though it is
44 not always salient in citizens' minds. The modern
45 welfare states can complement and substitute
46 individual behavior as well as behavior by families
47 and other more formally organized groups,
48 such as churches, trade unions, and parties. To
49 understand how individuals assess the welfare
50 state is critical for understanding modern societies
51 at large. It is also relevant because what
52 citizens think about the welfare state matters to
53 policy-makers in democratic systems. Indeed, it
54 has been shown that public support for redistribution
55 influences social spending (Brooks &
56 Manza, 2007). Another example is the finding
57 that social groups that are most to benefit from

58 a social assistance policy could be shown to be
59 the ones least likely to develop a consistent atti-
60 tude toward that policy – in other words, those
61 benefitting most were least likely to have a clear
62 assessment of that policy (Berinsky, 2002).

63 Welfare state attitudes cover a wide array of
64 government activities and rules. There are several
65 basic types of differentiation to structure this
66 attitudinal universe, which can be used in con-
67 junction (see Andreß & Heien, 2001; Sihvo &
68 Uusitalo, 1995): (a) attitudes toward the extensity
69 or intensity of the welfare state: extensity means
70 the extent of governmental functions that citizens
71 desire or perceive the status quo to be, and intensi-
72 ty refers to the desired or observed intensity
73 with which the welfare state is active in
74 a certain domain; (b) attitudes toward output or
75 input: individuals can assess either the outcome,
76 such as welfare state policies or institutions, or
77 the level or type of financing that goes into wel-
78 fare state activities; and (c) attitudes about what
79 should be or what is: measures of welfare atti-
80 tudes are either about the status quo as observed
81 by the individual, about the desired state of
82 affairs, or about an assessment of potential
83 reforms. In addition to these basic ways of struc-
84 turing attitudes, measures of welfare state atti-
85 tudes can be broad, such as the support for
86 redistribution by the state to reduce income dif-
87 ferences, or specific, such as the attitude toward
88 a limited social policy program.

89 Collecting data on welfare state attitudes com-
90 monly draws on interview data and most impor-
91 tantly ► [closed-format](#) answers in standardized
92 surveys. From the early days of this research in
93 the 1970s on, survey researchers, especially com-
94 parative survey researchers, were at the forefront.
95 What people think about the welfare state is not
96 always easy to retrieve because ordinary citizens
97 do not think about the welfare state or even about
98 individual programs very much (Goerres &
99 Prinzen, 2012). This is very surprising because
100 in the modern welfare states of the advanced
101 industrial world, almost everybody benefits
102 from welfare state activities at least at some
103 point in their lives. Also, research on welfare
104 state attitudes struggles with measuring the target
105 concepts properly (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012). It

106 is difficult, for example, to delineate welfare state
107 from non-welfare state activities. A classic exam-
108 ple is education policy. It is a very powerful set of
109 policies that decreases but also exacerbates socio-
110 economic inequality and does thus not fit unam-
111 biguously in common definitions of welfare state
112 activities. Moreover, it is statistically demanding
113 to reveal the dimensionality of the universe of
114 welfare state attitudes, especially in
115 a comparative study including several nations
116 (Andreß & Heien, 2001; Jaeger, 2006; Linos &
117 West, 2003).

118 Like other research on political attitudes, 118
119 repeated measures of welfare state attitudes are 119
120 suspected of respondents remembering their own 120
121 answers from the last question round rather than 121
122 being the manifestation of a latent dimension. So 122
123 ► [panel studies](#) do show a high level of 123
124 intraindividual stability on general measures of 124
125 welfare state attitudes (Andreß & Heien, 2001). 125
126 This stability could be due to panel and ► [sam-](#) 126
127 [pling problems](#), but it could also be explained 127
128 very well by a general political ideology that 128
129 implies certain functions of the welfare state in 129
130 a modern society. Other measurement concerns 130
131 include non-attitudes (namely, that individuals 131
132 have explicitly no directional opinion about an 132
133 aspect), the level of inconsistency (the extent to 133
134 which attitudes logically contradict each other), 134
135 the level of uncertainty (the extent with which 135
136 individuals are certain of their assessments), and 136
137 the level of ambivalence (the simultaneous posi- 137
138 tive and negative evaluation about a welfare state 138
139 aspect) (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012). 139

140 Two grand stories dominate the classic 140
141 approaches about interindividual differences in 141
142 attitudes toward the welfare state. The regime 142
143 thesis implies that individuals grow up in 143
144 a certain political-institutional environment with 144
145 a clear set of welfare state activities (Jaeger, 145
146 2006; Svallfors, 1997). Individuals learn through 146
147 their own experience and through important 147
148 socialization agents, such as their families, 148
149 peers, school, and the media, what a welfare 149
150 state looks like. For example, even more than 150
151 a decade after unification, Germans socialized 151
152 in the GDR were still much more likely to support 152
153 public childcare provisions by the state, a feature 153

154 of the Socialist system, than their age peers from
155 the West or younger cohorts (Goerres & Tepe,
156 2012). The individual learning process of
157 a welfare state regime is only mediated by
158 ► **social class** defined by education, income, and
159 occupation.

160 The self-interest thesis, as a second grand
161 story, implies that individuals are primarily
162 ► **motivated** by their own ► **material well-being**
163 (Blekesaune, 2007; Fong, 2001; Iversen &
164 Soskice, 2001; Meltzer & Richard, 1981). They
165 support those institutions or policies of the state
166 more that bring them greater material payoff, and
167 reverse, they reject those aspects that are of no
168 benefit to them, but pose costs. This payoff can
169 materialize either directly or in the form of
170 an insurance against personal risks, such as
171 ► **unemployment**. A rational cost-benefit
172 calculation faced with incomplete information
173 lies at the heart of this economic explanation.
174 For example, individuals who are in an
175 occupation with higher unemployment risks
176 have a higher demand for unemployment
177 benefits than other individuals. Political
178 economists were successful in using this thesis
179 in combination with various add-ons, such as the
180 family household or a wider family with several
181 generations as the maximizing unit instead of
182 just the individual (Alesina & La Ferrara,
183 2005; Boeri, Börsch-Supan, & Tabellini, 2001;
184 Goerres & Tepe, 2010).

185 Next to these two grand stories, further causal
186 factors are currently considered widely. There is
187 a lot of evidence that ► **values** or specific beliefs
188 have a strong influence on welfare state attitudes:
189 social and political ► **trust** (Edlund, 1999),
190 different kinds of ► **altruism** (Goerres & Tepe,
191 2010; Lindbeck, Nyberg, & Weibull, 1999), reli-
192 gious beliefs (Scheve & Stasavage, 2006), beliefs
193 about fairness and justice (Hochschild, 1981),
194 beliefs about social mobility (Bénabou & Ok,
195 2001), and the beliefs about deservingness of
196 groups benefitting from a social policy, such as
197 the elderly, the ► **immigrants**, or the unemployed
198 (Van Oorschot, 2006). Whereas it is difficult to
199 summarize all of these findings, these values and
200 beliefs give individuals cues about the need for
201 the welfare state to step in and whether such

202 activities could pay off for a personal or greater
203 good. What is clear, however, is that the founda-
204 tion of attitudes toward the welfare state has
205 a strong social basis.

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

222 Research in this area suffers, in general, from
223 a lack of communication between different disci-
224 plines. Welfare state research is primarily popu-
225 lated by political scientists, sociologists, and
226 economists with further contributions by social
227 psychologists, social work researchers, and
228 others. Thus, it could be a perfect example of
229 interdisciplinary collaboration. Instead, research
230 output is characterized by a divide between econ-
231 omists on the one hand and all other scientists on
232 the other hand. This divide is highly visible in the
233 different disciplinary outlet journals and their
234 citation patterns.

235 Moreover, comparative survey evidence, 235
236 sometimes with weak ► **indicators**, is overly 236
237 used, even though some of these problems are 237
238 difficult to circumvent. For example, one data 238
239 series, the International Social Survey 239
240 Programme, is very often used in a series of 240
241 analyses that confirm older analyses based on 241
242 the same data. Some analyses do not make use 242
243 of proper measurement exercises as there are now 243
244 easily available, for example, in the form of 244
245 multilevel structural equation models. 245

246 There are innovative survey instruments that 246
247 are intended to tackle weaknesses of existing 247
248 instruments (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012). For 248
249 example, with the help of survey vignettes, one 249

250 can try to understand which types of reforms are
 251 desirable in the minds of citizens. Or, by giving
 252 clear alternatives for policy reform, respondents
 253 are forced to ► **weigh** personal costs and benefits
 254 of a reform, thus revealing a clearer picture about
 255 their preferences. Survey researchers are also try-
 256 ing to generate behavioral measures as part of
 257 their surveys that are a better approximation of
 258 actual preferences predicting welfare state pref-
 259 erences. For example, respondents can donate the
 260 money that they earned by participation in the
 261 survey to a certain organization in order to mea-
 262 sure altruism or views of certain social groups.

263 In addition, some researchers fruitfully use
 264 ► **qualitative data collection** and analyzing tech-
 265 niques to get a better understanding about the
 266 communicative group and individual cognitive
 267 construction processes (see Hochschild, 1981).
 268 By using in-depth individual interviews and
 269 focus groups, they complement the quantitative
 270 survey analyses aimed at finding robust causal
 271 effects by emphasizing causal mechanisms.
 272 Experiments are another growth industry in
 273 which interesting findings can be expected. Espe-
 274 cially lab experiments in which welfare state
 275 issues are combined with games played,
 276 according to behavioral economists' insights
 277 can add to our understandings of welfare state
 278 attitudes in the future.

279 **Cross-References**

- 280 ► **Attitudes Towards Government Spending in**
- 281 **the Asia-Pacific Region**
- 282 ► **Belief in a Just World**
- 283 ► **Beliefs About Poverty**
- 284 ► **German Welfare Survey**
- 285 ► **Income Distribution**
- 286 ► **Income Re-Distribution**
- 287 ► **Political Trust**
- 288 ► **Social Policy**
- 289 ► **Social Welfare**
- 290 ► **Welfare Expenditures**

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