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THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL POLICY IN EUROPE: AN ANALYSIS OF ATITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL WELFARE

Abstract

One of the tasks of social policy is to support economic development. Governments invest in social policy to protect citizens from social risks (for instance, in the labor market). In this sense, economic policy and social policy are strongly linked. The different choices governments have with respect to social policy lead to variations in welfare states. Typically, scholars have divided welfare states into three groups: social democratic, liberal, and continental countries.

This study examines citizens' attitudes toward social policy in 23 European countries, and especially within the three groups of welfare states. Attitudes toward social welfare are divided into two parts: respondents' opinions regarding national policy and their attitudes toward poverty. The study focuses on the connections between the type of welfare state and its citizens' attitudes toward social policy. The study also examines whether so-called situational factors (e.g., the level of income inequality, social expenditure, and social insurance) influence the social welfare attitudes of citizens. The data, which were gathered in 2012, are based on the European Social Survey's (N = 43,897) sixth round.

The results show that the situational factors have an important role, especially in how citizens evaluate national social policy. However, simultaneous analyses of all the situational factors and social welfare attitudes suggest that the situational factors have only an indirect influence on attitudes toward poverty, such that respondents' opinions of national policy have a mediating role. In this sense, the results support a weak interpretation of the influence of situational factors on attitudes toward social welfare.

Furthermore, the results show that attitudes toward social welfare are connected to the types of the welfare states, in this analysis, especially in the Nordic (particularly Finland, Norway, and Sweden) and liberal countries (particularly Great Britain and Ireland). In these countries, unlike others, respondents' opinions regarding national policy and attitudes toward poverty are positively related. However, according to a more detailed analysis, the Nordic and liberal countries can be separated from each other. The group of continental countries was excluded from the final analysis because it seemed not to be a coherent group, as the original welfare-state typology indicated.

Keywords

social policy, socal welfare attitudes

1. Introduction

One of the tasks of social policy is to support the economic development to which it contributes, for instance by optimizing the relationship between the citizens and the labor market. Attitudes toward social welfare indicate how citizens appreciate social policy in

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general, and especially how they evaluate the government's social-policy measures. In a well-functioning society, citizens' opinions are taken into account in governmental policies. To be effective, social policy must be accepted by the citizens it is meant to serve. For this reason, scholars have focused their attention on attitudes toward social welfare (Ervasti, 2012; Gërxhani, Koster, 2012; Larsen, 2008; Salmina, 2014; Svalfors, 1997; van Oorschot, 2006).

Attitudes toward social welfare are connected to the level of national social policy. For instance, Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003) emphasize the idea that situational factors influence public attitudes toward welfare-state policy. Situational factors refer to the level of national social policy that can be expressed by various social-policy indices (for instance, those related to social expenditures and income inequality).

The study examines citizens' attitudes toward social welfare in 23 European countries and whether situational factors (the level of income inequality, social expenditures, and social insurance) influence these attitudes, which, in this case, are those focused on poverty and income inequality. The analysis is performed using the framework of the welfare-state typology (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

2. Concepts

2.1. Attitudes Toward Social Welfare

Although an attitude is often understood to be a personal trait, some researchers emphasize it as a social and contextual construct (e.g., de Rosa, 1993). According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), the various definitions of attitude feature two common properties. First, an attitude refers to an object; this object can be concrete or abstract, specific or general, but in any case, an attitude always has a target. The second aspect of attitude is evaluative; the evaluation can have various dimensions, such as good or bad, harmful or beneficial, pleasant or unpleasant, and likable or unlikable (Ajzen, 2001).

The concept of attitudes toward social welfare has referred to the responsibility of the state (Valdimarsdóttir, 2010), to attributions for poverty (e.g., Blomberg, Kallio, Kroll 2010), to attitudes toward welfare policy (Bullock, 2004), and to opinions regarding social welfare services and social security benefits (Muuri, 2010). In this study, attitudes toward social welfare focus on those related to poverty and income inequality. Attitudes are studied in two forms: as respondents' opinions regarding national policy and as a general attitude toward poverty.

Previous studies reveal that many factors influence attitudes toward social welfare. Political ideology significantly affects attitudes (e.g., Valmidarsdóttir, 2010). The field of study and level of education also affect attitudes, although the results are contradictory (cf. Pfeifer, 2009). Additionally, studies show that women, more than men, support the welfare state (Blekesaune, Quadagno, 2003). Age is also a significant factor in attitudes toward welfare. (Valdimarsdóttir, 2010). According to Blekesaune and Quadagno (2003), situational (i.e.,

unemployment) and ideological (i.e., egalitarian ideology) factors influence public attitudes toward welfare state policy.

2.2. Situational Factors

Welfare states can be organized into groups according to situational factors. Esping-Andersen's (1990) classic definition divides welfare states into three groups: the *liberal* (Anglophone countries), the *conservative* (continental Europe and Japan), and the *social democratic* countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden). The different groups of welfare states have different strategies for tackling poverty and inequality.

The *welfare state* is a definition that expresses the level and intensity to which the state acts in the protection and promotion of the well-being of its citizens. The social democratic model emphasizes the state's central role in the society, but the liberal model focuses attention on the individuals' own responsibility and tries to limit the state's role as much as possible. The Nordic model is financed mostly by taxes, but the liberal model favors privately financed social security. The conservative model is on a level between the Nordic and liberal models (Powell, Barrientos, 2004; Ferragina, Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011).

In his classic welfare state analysis, Esping-Andersen (1990) uses the concept of *decommodification* to express the extent to which the state invests in its citizens' "immunization from market dependency." Scruggs (2014) uses the concept of *generosity* for the same purpose: to indicate the level of social security. Both concepts are operationalized by measuring situational factors to indicate the level of social security. Esping-Andersen (1990) calls it the "decommodification index," and Scruggs (2014) calls it "the generosity indices." In this study, situational factors focus on social insurance, social expenditures, and income inequality. The factors are viewed as national measures that also indirectly refer to the groups of welfare states: the social democratic model (later in this paper: the Nordic countries), the liberal model, and the continental model.

3. Research question, hypotheses, and method

This study examines citizens' attitudes toward social policy in 23 European countries. The concept of *attitudes toward social welfare* is divided into two parts: respondents' opinions about national policy and their attitudes toward poverty. The respondents' opinions regarding national policy focus on their evaluation of governmental measures against poverty and income inequality. In contrast, the term *attitude toward poverty* refers to poverty and inequality in a more general view, as a democratic value.

The study examines whether situational factors (the level of income inequality, social expenditures, and social insurance) influence citizens' attitudes toward social welfare. Furthermore, the analysis is done in the framework of the welfare-state typology. The analysis is based on the following hypotheses:

H1: Situational factors influence respondents' opinions regarding national policy.

H2a: Situational factors directly influence attitudes toward poverty; (or)

H2b: Situational factors indirectly influence attitudes toward poverty via opinions regarding national policy.

H3: The welfare state models differ from each other on the basis of social welfare attitudes.

The analysis was carried out using normal statistical methods. The sum variables were formed using factor analysis (generalized least squares, Varimax with Kaiser normalization). The reliabilities of the sum variables were calculated using Cronbach's alpha, and the normality of the distributions was examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The distributions of variables were not completely normal; however, parametric methods were used because the distributions were nonetheless close to normal and the size of the data set was sufficient. Pearson's coefficient was used to measure correlations. Statistical analyses were done using linear regression analysis and analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA).

4. Primary data: social welfare attitudes

The primary data, which were gathered in 29 countries in 2012, are based on the European Social Survey's (ESS) sixth round. In particular, the final selection of the countries was matched to the available data on social policy factors; thus, 23 countries were represented in the final data sample (N = 43,897) (see Appendix 1).

The primary data, which focused on individual public attitudes toward social welfare, are divided into two sum variables:

The sum variable of "attitude toward poverty" was constructed from two items: how important it is to a democracy, in general, for a government to (a) protect all citizens against poverty, and (b) take measures to reduce differences in income levels. The sum variable is called "attitude toward poverty."

The second sum variable focused on respondents' opinions regarding national policy: Specifically, how well do the following statements describe the situation in your country? (a) The government protects all citizens against poverty, and (b) the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels. The sum variable is called "respondents' opinions regarding national policy."

The response categories were based on a 0–10 scale where *0* means "not at all important" and *10* means "extremely important" (77 declined to answer, and 99 stated that they did not know). The reliabilities exhibited a good level for both sum variables. Country-based results in which Cronbach's alpha was below 0.6 were excluded.

5. Secondary data: situational factors

Welfare states have access to various kinds of social policy instruments for reducing poverty and income inequality. Typically, the instruments are based on redistribution, social

insurance, and social benefits. In this study, the following situational factors are used to describe the level of social policy in each country.
Economic equality is a situational factor which typically is measured by the Gini coefficient. It is a relative measure, and its interpretation is therefore controversial; however, it is widely used as an indicator of inequality. The Gini coefficient measures the inequality among values of a frequency distribution (e.g., levels of income). A Gini coefficient of 0 expresses perfect equality, and a Gini coefficient of 1 (or 100%) expresses maximal inequality among values. The data were retrieved from Eurostat (Statistical Office of the European Communities).

Social insurance can be defined as a program by which social risks (i.e., unemployment, sickness, and retirement) are transferred to, and pooled by, an organization, often governmental, that is legally required to provide certain benefits. The measure of social insurance is based on the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Dataset, which provides comparable information about national welfare programs around the world (Scruggs, 2014). In this study, the focus is on the following social insurance programs: unemployment insurance, sickness insurance, and public pensions.

Social (protection) expenditures can be counted in many different ways, but in this study they are defined as a percentage of gross domestic product. The expenditures comprise the following: social benefits, which consist of transfers, in cash or in kind, to households and to individuals to relieve them of the burden of a defined set of risks or needs; administration costs, which represent the costs charged to the plan for its management and administration; and other expenditures, which consist of miscellaneous expenditures by social protection plans (payment of property income and other). The data were retrieved from Eurostat.

6. Results

6.1. Respondents' Opinions Regarding National Policy

The respondents' opinions regarding governmental measures against poverty and income inequality vary significantly between the countries. On a scale of 0–10, the lowest mean of the variable of respondents' opinions about national policy was in Bulgaria (1.175), and the highest was in Norway (6.282). Furthermore, based on all the data, the sum variable of respondents' opinions regarding national policy correlates positively with social expenditures (R = .702**) and negatively with the Gini index (R = -.524*). In this sense, the respondents' opinions are in a logical relation to the country's capacity for taking measures against poverty and inequality. The more a country invests in social policy, the higher citizens assess its ability to implement measures against poverty and inequality.

The respondents' opinions regarding government's ability to reduce poverty and income inequality was examined in more detail by using regression analysis. It was assumed that situational factors, such as the Gini index, social expenditures, and social insurance, influenced the respondents' opinions. According to the regression analysis, the respondents' opinions about government's ability to reduce poverty and income inequality can be explained by the level of social expenditures and by the Gini index, as the following regression analysis shows (see Table 1).

	Model 1			Model 2		
R Square	.645			.642		
F	10.911***			17.911***		
	Beta	t	Sig.	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant		2,066	.054		2,336	.030
Gini	-.402	-2.739	.013	-.395	-2.886	.009
Social expenditures	.620	4.188	.001	.619	4.527	.000
Social insurance	-.019	-.129	.899			

Table 1: Regression Analysis of Opinions Regarding Government

The result is consistent with the theoretical assumption, because the sum variable of respondents' opinions regarding national policy focuses only on the government's ability to reduce economic inequality, which can be measured by the Gini index; furthermore, the sum variable focuses on actions against poverty, which governments can reduce via social investments (expenditures). According to this analysis, social insurance is less important than the other two factors.

6.2. Attitudes Toward Poverty

Throughout European countries, respondents shared the view that reducing poverty is an important democratic value. According to the European Social Survey, the mean of the sum variable of the attitudes toward poverty varies between 7.59 (the Netherlands) and 9.11 (Spain) on a scale of 0–10. Although respondents see measures against poverty as a democratic value, it is interesting to note that they correlates negatively with social expenditures (R = -.427*) and positively with the Gini index (R = .430*). This result indicates that citizens in countries with lower social investments and higher inequality levels support measures against poverty and income inequality even more than citizens in countries with higher social investments and lower inequality levels.

The respondents' attitudes toward poverty were also examined by regression analysis (see Table 2), in which the poverty attitude was explained by situational factors (the Gini index, social expenditures, and social insurance); additionally, the sum variable of the respondents' "opinions regarding national policy" was taken into account in the analysis.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
R Square	.492			.470			.411		
F	4.122*			5.325**			6.976**		
	Beta	t	Sig.	Beta	t	Sig	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant		7.058	.000		17.545	.000		23.242	.000
Gini	.185	.861	.401	.333					
Social expenditures	.270	1.055	.306	.243	1.364	.189	.375	1.558	.135
Social insurance	.272	1.481	.157	.970	1.358	.191			
Opinions regarding national policy	-.744	-2.565	.020	-.880	-3.635	.002	-.846	-3.512	.002

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Attitudes Toward Poverty

According to the results, the sum variable of poverty attitude is the one most influenced by the sum variable of respondents' opinions regarding national policy. The sum variables are tightly connected to each other, but the situational factors do not directly influence attitudes toward poverty.

6.3. Relationships Between the Sum Variables

Based on all the data, the sum variable of respondents' opinions regarding national policy correlates negatively with the sum variable of attitudes toward poverty (R = -.145**). This result refers to a situation in which a government's ability or will to reduce poverty and income inequality is evaluated to be lower than the citizens' own priorities of reducing poverty and inequality.

On the other hand, in the Nordic and liberal countries, the correlation is positive: 0.119*** in Finland, 0.168*** in Norway, 0.115*** in Sweden, 0.127*** in Britain, and 0.076*** in Ireland. From a social-policy perspective, it is surprising that the liberal and Nordic countries belong to the same group with respect to this dimension. For instance, Britain is typically seen as an example country of liberal social policy, which generally differs significantly from the Nordic countries. However, one needs to be reminded that this analysis focuses only on a portion of the Nordic countries and on a few of the liberal countries.

6.4. Relationship Between the Nordic and Liberal Countries

Although the sum variables of respondents' opinions about national policy and attitudes toward poverty correlates positively, the Nordic and liberal countries groups were possible to separate from each other by using variance analysis. In the analysis, attention focused on the sum variable of respondents' opinions regarding national policy. The variance analysis indicates statistically significant differences between the groups (F[4, 10339] = 101.349, p =.000). The Scheffé test was used to find the exact difference (cf. Table 3).

Country	N	Mean		SD
		Subset 1	Subset 2	
Great Britain	2,198	5.131		2.548
Ireland	2,564	5.166		2.772
Finland	2,162		5.969	2.026
Sweden	1,818		6.091	2.572
Norway	1,602		6.282	2.013
Sig.		.995	.002	

Note. The Scheffé test (subset for d = 0.001).

Table 3: Respondents' Opinions of National Policy in the Liberal and Nordic Countries

The liberal and Nordic countries were sorted into separate groups. Great Britain and Ireland formed a coherent group (p =.995), but there were some differences between Finland, Sweden, and Norway although these countries were sorted into the same group (p = .002). Furthermore, it is important to add that Denmark and Iceland, which belong to the group of the Nordic welfare-state group, had already been excluded in the previous phases of the analysis because of weak correlations between the sum variables.

7. Conclusions

The study examined whether situational factors (the level of income inequality, social expenditures, and social insurance) influence citizens' attitudes toward social welfare. Furthermore, the study focused on the connection between the type of the welfare states and citizens' attitudes toward social welfare. According to the analyses, the following answers can be provided in response to the hypotheses.

First, the assumption that situational factors influence attitudes toward social welfare (respondents' opinions regarding national policy) is supported. In particular, the level of social investments and economic equality directly influence citizens' opinions about national policy. In this sense, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Second, after analyzing all situational factors and social welfare attitudes simultaneously, it seems that the situational factors indirectly influence the sum variable of attitudes toward

poverty, such that the sum variable of respondents' opinions about national policy has a mediating role. Therefore, Hypothesis 2a is rejected, and Hypothesis 2b is supported. In addition, the result emphasizes a weak interpretation of situational factors' influence on attitudes toward social welfare (cf. Blekesaune, Quadagno, 2003).

Third, the welfare-state models differ from each other on the basis of attitudes toward social welfare. In the Nordic and liberal countries, the sum variables of "respondents' opinions regarding national policy" and "attitude toward poverty" were positively related; this was in contrast to the other countries, in which they were negatively related. However, according to a more detailed analysis, the Nordic and liberal-country groups can be separated from each other. The group of continental countries was omitted from the final analysis, since much further analyses are needed before the results can be reported. In this respect, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

In general, situationality influences citizens' satisfaction with governmental measures against poverty and inequality, which is indirectly (negatively) related to the notion on how important the government's measures against poverty and income inequality are viewed among citizens. From a social policy perspective, this presents a positive opportunity: Concrete social problems create dissatisfaction with the government, which increases the citizens' opinion about the significance of social policy. Furthermore, it can be assumed that in a democratic society, citizens' opinions also influence the implementation and practice of social policy. That is, the situationality of attitudes toward social welfare implies a certain kind of self-correction mechanism in social policy. However, the mechanism of self-correction requires a well-functioning democracy, in which citizens' opinions are taken into account in governmental policies; on the other hand, it also requires financial resources, which the government can use for social policy reforms.

Situationality might also mean that citizens' satisfaction with governmental policies may lead to a decline in the significance of social policy and consequently to a gradual reduction of social policy. If social policy is taken for granted, it may become less meaningful among citizens. However, according to this study, satisfaction with governmental policies in the Nordic and liberal countries did not negatively influence attitudes toward poverty; on the contrary, it positively influenced them. Thus, social policy seems to be on solid ground, and citizens' satisfaction does not erode the welfare-state's attitudinal base.

There were some limitations with respect to the results of this study. First, the fact that welfare-state attitudes were approached only on a general level was a limitation of this study. In addition, individual situational factors and analyses were excluded from the presentation. Second, the analysis is based on two sum variables, which are constructed from only two items. Third, the sum variables focused narrowly on poverty and inequality, although social-welfare attitudes can also be seen as a broad phenomenon. There are many other factors that influence attitudes toward social welfare. Therefore, much more research and social analysis is required to demonstrate the relationships between social-welfare attitudes and social factors. However, the data are comprehensive, and their reliability is good.

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Appendix 1. Material: List of accepted countries.

Country	N	alpha >.60 (Sum variables)	Social insurance	GINI	Social expenditure	Accepted
Albania	1200					
Belgium	1859	x	x	x	x	x
Bulgaria	2218	x	x	x	x	x
Switzerland	1460	x	x	x	x	x
Cyprus	1115	x				
Czech	1966	x	x	x	x	x
Germany	2950	x	x	x	x	x
Denmark	1619	x	x	x	x	x
Estonia	2329	x	x	x	x	x
Spain	1853	x	x	x	x	x
Finland	2163	x	x	x	x	x
France	1960	x	x	x	x	x
Britain	2204	x	x	x	x	x
Hungary	1962	x	x	x	x	x
Ireland	2596	x	x	x	x	x
Israel	2507	x				
Iceland	746	x		x	x	x
Italy	947	x	x	x	x	x
Lithuania	2058	x	x	x	x	x
Netherlands	1833	x	x	x	x	x
Norway	1608	x	x	x	x	x
Poland	1873	x	x	x	x	x
Portugal	2137	x	x	x	x	x
Russia	2483	x				
Sweden	1825	x	x	x	x	x
Slovenia	1217	x	x	x	x	x
Slovakia	1824	x	x	x	x	x
Ukraine	2177	x				
Kosovo	1297	x				
Total	54676					43897