

Abstract

COVID-19 had the potential to dramatically increase public support for welfare. It was a time of apparent increased solidarity, of apparently deserving claimants, and of increasingly widespread exposure to the benefits system. However, there are also reasons to expect the opposite effect: an increase in financial strain fostering austerity and self-interest, and thermostatic responses to increasing welfare generosity. In this paper, we investigate the effects of the pandemic on attitudes towards working-age unemployment benefits in the UK using a unique combination of data sources: (i) temporally fine-grained data on attitudinal change over the course of the pandemic; and (ii) a novel nationally representative survey contrasting attitudes towards pandemic-era and pre-pandemic claimants (including analysis of free-text responses). Our results show that the pandemic prompted little change in UK welfare attitudes. However, we also find that COVID-era unemployment claimants were perceived as substantially more deserving than those claiming prior to the pandemic. This contrast suggests a strong degree of ‘COVID exceptionalism’ – with COVID claimants seen as categorically different from conventional claimants, muting the effect of the pandemic on welfare attitudes overall.

Keywords: welfare attitudes; COVID-19; structural topic models; free-text responses