

Public Attitudes toward Welfare State Policies: A Comparative Analysis of 24 Nations

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This paper investigates public attitudes toward welfare state policies as a result of both situational, i.e. unemployment, and ideological factors, i.e. egalitarian ideology, at both the individual and national level. The dependent variables are public support for the sick and the old as well as for the unemployed as target beneficiaries of welfare state policies. Data from the ISSP study *'Role of Government'* are analysed using a multi-level regression technique. Findings indicate that the National level is important in shaping public attitudes toward welfare state policies in industrialized nations, and that both situational and ideological factors play a role. Apparently, various nations generate different public beliefs about national social problems and about the relationship between individuals, the state and other institutions. Eventually, these understandings and beliefs influence popular attitudes regarding what kind of policies the state should pursue, and who should benefit.

Traditionally, attitudes toward welfare state policies have been studied at the level of individuals with research focused on how the characteristics of individuals affect attitudes toward social programs. In these studies, individual level characteristics are sometimes viewed as indicators of self-interest in regard to a given welfare policy, or as a reflection of the political ideology that these policies either represent or challenge (Sears *et al.*, 1980; Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Andress and Heien, 2001). The predominance of individual level studies has not only been motivated by theoretical concerns, however, but also by the lack of national level datasets, which have either been unavailable, or not available in sufficient numbers to conduct systematic analyses.

There is reason to believe that public attitudes toward the welfare state are not only individual-level phenomena, but also collective phenomena, i.e. they are held not only by individuals, but also by collective groups like nations. Typically, collective attitudes are viewed as a product of the institutional characteristics of welfare policies in different countries, which form distinct 'regime' types (Korpi, 1980; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

However, the institutional approach is not without problems. In this paper, alternative collective/contextual level explanations are presented that depart from the standard individual level self-interest and political ideology arguments. We employ a multi-level methodology to examine public attitudes toward welfare state policies by comparing responses of individuals in 24 nations as well as the national contexts themselves. Specifically, we compare individual level and national level attitudes toward public support for the sick and the old as well as for the unemployed as target beneficiaries of welfare state policies.

Welfare State Controversies

The Individual Level

At the individual level public attitudes toward welfare policies may be influenced by self-interest and by ideological preferences (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Groskind, 1994). According to the self-interest

argument, those who are recipients of welfare state benefits/programs, or are at risk of becoming recipients, are more likely to hold positive attitudes to these benefits than those who are less likely to receive them. Thus, for example, one might expect conflicting opinions regarding the welfare state between those who pay the highest taxes and are unlikely to receive these benefits and those who pay few taxes. Similarly, young adults should favour benefits for children, young families and the unemployed, while the elderly should be more likely to favour benefits and services for the old and the sick.

Empirical studies of attitudes toward the welfare state provide some support for the 'self-interest' argument in regard to the contributor/recipient factor. For example, Hasenfeld and Rafferty (1989) found that those who are economically most vulnerable and thus most likely to benefit from welfare state benefits/programs also tend to be most supportive of such benefits. In their study, support for the welfare state was highest among those with low income and among young adults. In a comparison of four nations, Svallfors (1997) also found persistent evidence of class and status group differences in attitudes toward the welfare state. Similarly, Edlund (1999) found differences in support for the welfare state among occupational and income groups in Norway and in the USA. Finally, in an analysis of US public opinion data, Cook and Barrett (1992) found that high income respondents were less likely than the poor to support public assistance benefits.

The self-interest argument also implies that the elderly or older middle-aged population should be more likely to support public programs for the elderly but less likely to support programs for children. Ponza *et al.* (1988) tested this argument using public US opinion data coupled with a series of vignettes. The survey data provided some support for the hypothesis that the elderly respond in ways that promote their own interest. The aged were least likely to support more spending for education and least likely to say that too much is being spent on pensions (Social Security). In responding to the vignettes, however, the elderly were slightly more supportive than people of other ages of transfers to low-income families with children and less supportive of transfers to low-income members of their own age group. Pettersen (2001) and Goul Andersen (2002) studied public opinion data from Denmark and Norway, respectively.

Both studies found some age differences in support for more specific services like rest homes for old people (favoured by old adults) and child care institutions (favoured by young adults), but hardly any age difference in support for health services and old age pensions. That people of all age groups favour generous transfers to the elderly does not contradict the self-interest argument because everyone can expect to grow old. That age-specific services are more popular in age groups of likely beneficiaries may reflect self-interest considerations, but also age-related awareness of the need for the services in question.

Another theory suggests that support for welfare benefits is predicated on an individual's ideological beliefs. The ideology argument presumes that attitudes toward the welfare state are rooted in more general value systems regarding the proper relationship between the individual, the state and other institutions such as labour markets and voluntary organizations (Feldman and Zaller, 1992). These contradictory values and beliefs, which have been labelled achievement and equality (Lipset, 1963), capitalism and democracy (McClosky and Zaller, 1984), or economic individualism and social equality (*ibid.*), can provide the ideological justification for either supporting or opposing welfare benefits/programs. In support of the welfare state is the belief that all citizens have basic social rights including the right to an acceptable level of economic welfare and security and the right to live according to prevailing social standards (Marshall, 1964). In opposition to the welfare state is the concept of economic individualism, which assumes that each person is responsible for his or her own welfare, and which understands individual well-being to be an outcome of hard work. According to this view, citizens are expected to do what they can to be economically self-sufficient. The welfare state undermines this principle by excusing some citizens from their economic responsibilities and by fostering inappropriate behaviour among recipients of benefits.

Several studies support the thesis that attitudes toward the welfare state are linked to more general ideological dispositions. Jacoby (1994) found a more coherent structure in public attitudes toward social welfare expenditures than other governmental expenditures, which he hypothesized reflected stronger ideological conflict over this issue. Both Sears *et al.* (1980) and Hasenfeld and Rafferty (1989) found that endorsement of the concept of social rights was a key

predictor of welfare state support. Similar findings were reported in open-ended interviews conducted by McClosky and Zaller (1984).

Empirical studies have also shown that women are more supportive of welfare state policies than men (Svallfors, 1997; Edlund, 1999). The reason may be that men and women have different interests related to welfare state provisions, with women being more likely to be recipients of benefits as widows or single parents and more likely to be employed by the welfare state (Hernes 1984; Sainsbury, 1996). Alternately, women may hold different values than men regarding welfare state benefits/programs. Arts and Gelissen (2001) argue that women seem to emphasize equality and need principles, while men emphasize the merit principle. Similarly, Svallfors (1997) finds that women are more likely than men to favour government redistribution. Thus, it may be that gender differences are grounded both in values and in situational factors reflecting self-interest.

The National Level

Comparative research on public attitudes toward the welfare state has typically employed only one nation-level characteristic as an explanatory variable: the institutional structure of the welfare state (Korpi, 1980; Svallfors, 1997; Edlund, 1999; Arts and Gelissen, 2001). In these studies, variations across nations in the configuration of social programs are viewed as a product of the history of class coalitions, which create various regime types of welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The institutional structure of these regime types, in turn, shapes public attitudes toward social welfare programs and the articulation of social solidarity. Although institutionalists recognize that the structure of the welfare state may be a product of ideological-based conflicts and preferences, the main research focus has been on how 'different types of welfare state regimes...generate different attitude patterns' (Edlund, 1999: 342). Thus, the institutional characteristics of the welfare state are assumed to influence attitudes and opinions at the individual citizen level.

There are several problems with this line of research, some empirical and some conceptual. A theoretical problem concerns the interpretation of the causal relationship between attitudes and program structure. While it may be true that program structure influences

attitudes toward the welfare state, an equally plausible argument is that collective values are a motivating force in determining the institutional structure of the welfare state (Hicks, 1999). This idea is implicit in various discussions of welfare state regimes. Thus, according to Esping-Andersen (1999: 27, 81), in corporatist welfare states early social policy was often inspired by Catholic social teachings, which made them 'strongly committed to the preservation of familyhood'. Social democratic welfare states, by contrast, are derived from an ideology that emphasizes de-commodifying welfare and minimizing market dependency (Huber and Stephens, 2000: 326). Finally, liberal welfare states are characterized by an obsession with 'market efficiency and commodification' in which 'the minimalist social policy of *laissez faire* was in keeping with its ideals' (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 27, 62).

A correlation between institutional arrangements and welfare state attitudes may reflect that successful politicians consider, or are otherwise influenced by, public attitudes when making policy proposals/decisions. If so, public attitudes should influence institutional arrangements. Empirical studies have shown that public attitudes do influence the behaviour of politicians, as changes in public opinion tend to precede policy changes (Page and Shapiro, 1983; Burstein, 1998). On the other hand, politicians may also seek to influence public attitudes to promote their favoured policy proposals, at least in the USA (Zaller, 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000).

Another problem is that there is only mixed support for the institutional structure hypothesis, even under the assumption of only one-way causation from policies to attitudes. Svallfors (1997) grouped eight countries into four pairs of 'regime types' to determine whether different welfare state regimes promoted different attitudes regarding the redistributive function of government. He found no support for the argument that different regime types create different value cleavages. Gelissen (2000) did find a correlation between regime type and popular support for the welfare state in a 14-country comparison, but not in the expected direction. Popular support was highest in liberal regime type countries, not in the social democratic welfare states, which theory would predict should show high levels of support.

A methodological problem with the research that examines the relationship between institutional

structure and attitudes toward the welfare state is that empirical tests of national level factors are unconvincing when each institutional characteristic is only represented by a small number of countries. In Svallfors (1997) four-country comparison, each country (Norway, Germany, Australia and USA) represented one institutional characteristic; Edlund (1999) applied a two-country comparison (Norway and USA); Arts and Gelissen (2001) analyzed 14 countries, divided first into four and then six groups according to the institutional characteristics of their welfare states. Country level differences may be due to the institutional characteristics measured, but also to a number of other unmeasured characteristics. Comparing two countries is no more convincing than comparing two individuals, say, one wealthy and one poor.

The national level approach utilized here is based on a different line of reasoning. First, it assumes that the formation of public attitudes toward welfare state policies is both an individual-level and a country-level phenomenon. Public attitudes are measured at the level of individuals, and they are expected to vary not only between individuals, but also between nations. Further, national variation in attitudes is presumed to reflect national differences in both individual- and nation-level characteristics. Second, it recognizes that these hypotheses can only be tested on a large number of national contexts in which the explanatory variables are tested at both the individual and the nation level. As noted above, self-interest and ideology are two standard explanatory variables employed in studies of public attitudes toward welfare policies, but both are typically used at the individual level only. When applied at the nation level, the definition of 'self-interest' no longer refers solely to the interests of the individual but also to public interests/goods.

We hypothesize that the more people who are unemployed within a nation, the more positive attitudes the public will have toward social programs for the unemployed, controlling for unemployment at the individual level. High unemployment is likely to increase public empathy for the unemployed through several mechanisms. One is the risk of becoming unemployed oneself. The greater the number of people who are unemployed, the more people are confronted with the possibility that they may become unemployed themselves and thus be more supportive of

welfare state policies for the unemployed. Another is the concern for those who are unemployed. When people have unemployed friends or relatives or encounter the unemployed regularly they are more likely to be concerned about their economic welfare (Plotnik and Winters, 1985). This may be labelled humanitarianism (Feldman and Steenbergen, 2001) or interdependent preferences/utility (Orr, 1976). A third reason is that politicians and other elites tend to place unemployment on the national political agenda in situations of high unemployment. This is likely to improve public attitudes toward welfare policies for the unemployed (Sears *et al.*, 1980; Mutz, 1994).

We hypothesize that the stronger the egalitarian ideology, the more positive will be public attitudes toward welfare policies. We hypothesize that egalitarian ideology contributes to the formation of welfare state attitudes at the level of both individuals and of nations. The impact of ideological beliefs is supported by cognitive consistency theory, which assumes that most people will strive to keep their beliefs and attitudes internally consistent. Holding inconsistent beliefs/attitudes toward different policy issues will lead to psychological stress, which may be reduced only by modifying some of these beliefs/attitudes (Osgood, 1960). Apparently, this is an individual-level process. However, identifying inconsistent beliefs/attitudes may involve asking individuals which beliefs/attitudes go together. This may be done by each of us individually and it may be done collectively through public debate and political discussion. Beliefs and attitudes about the role of the (welfare) state may be organized by dominant political ideologies whose formation reflects national historical experiences and is embedded in national symbols and institutions such as the partisan political system. As Feldman and Zaller (1992) found, Americans typically apply values and principles found in their national political culture when discussing attitudes towards the welfare state.

In this paper egalitarian ideology is measured as attitudes toward redistribution between the rich and the poor. It seems reasonable to assume that egalitarian ideology is a more stable trait than attitudes toward specific welfare policies. However, this causal relationship may work both ways. As such, we investigate the extent to which attitudes toward different welfare policies are part of a broader ideology and the extent to which they are based on other rationales.

In the following analysis, we will investigate the following questions: How large is the national variation in attitudes towards the role of the welfare state? Can national variations in attitudes be explained by national variations in both situational and ideological factors at the nation level?

Data and Variables

The data are from the International Social Survey Programs (ISSP) *Role of government III* (ZA 2900).¹ This dataset contains identical questions on various topics from 23 countries. The Philippines was excluded since, as a developing country, it was assumed to represent a deviant case. East and West Germany as well as Jews and Arabs from Israel were treated as separate samples as they were assumed to represent different historical traditions in nation building (see Falah, 1999), giving a total of 24 national contexts and 26,406 respondents between 20 and 70 years of age. The national datasets were sampled in the years 1995 (1), 1996 (18) and 1997 (5). The participating countries/nations are presented in the Appendix.

The participants were asked the following questions (here being shortened):

‘On the whole, do you think it should, or should not, be the government’s responsibility to ...

- (a) ...provide a job for everyone who wants one
- (c) ...provide health care for the sick
- (d) ...provide a decent standard of living for the old
- (f) ...provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed
- (g) ...reduce income differences between the rich and the poor’

The response categories were ‘definitely should be’, ‘probably should be’, ‘probably should not be’, ‘definitely should not be’, ‘can’t choose’. Two dependent variables were constructed from the first four questions. The first is an index of attitudes towards the sick and the old from questions c and d. The second is an index of attitudes toward the unemployed from questions a and f. The ‘can’t choose’ category was treated as missing data. The two indexes were given values from 1 to 7, with high values signifying positive attitudes (definitely should, probably should).

The explanatory variables are age (between 20 and 70 years), gender (female dummy variable) and being unemployed (dummy variable). We use variable (g) as a measure of egalitarian ideology, with high values signifying egalitarian attitudes.

At the level of the nation, two explanatory variables were constructed. An egalitarian ideology variable was calculated as the national mean of the variable (g). The percentage unemployed was also calculated as a simple national mean of all people between 30 and 70 years of age who say that they are unemployed in the ISSP data. These estimates may differ from official unemployment statistics, in which unemployment is typically calculated as a percentage of those in the labour force. The definition of being unemployed may also vary between self-reported measures and public statistics, as some individuals may define themselves as being unemployed without being registered, and some may be registered without defining themselves as unemployed. The deviance may be related to benefits people may receive (or not receive) while being registered as unemployed. The incentives for being registered as unemployed vary for different groups between countries. As such this measure is probably more comparable between nations than official unemployment statistics. It is also less sensitive to national differences in occupational rates that are inferred in the calculations of unemployment in relation to the size of the labour force. See Appendix for descriptive statistics of the data.

Statistical Methods

The statistical analyses were two-level linear regression models with random intercepts at the level of individuals and nations. Standard methodologies assume that we have a large number of nations, 30 or more. Since our number is smaller (24) we have applied a Markov chain Monte Carlo method with Gibbs sampling as an alternative to normal theory, which should give less biased estimates for the nations. Iterated GLS estimates were applied as starting values. The statistical models were estimated with the MLwiN program. Continuous explanatory variables were centred at the individual (within nation) level. The results were interpreted from regression

Table 1. *Support for welfare policies toward the unemployed and the sick and old as a result of characteristics of individuals in 24 nations (McMC estimates)*

Explanatory variables	Support for the unemployed		Support for the sick and the old	
	Estimate	Standard error	Estimate	Standard error
Fixed				
Intercept	4.875		6.106	
Woman ^a	0.271**	0.018	0.145**	0.012
Age ($\pm 38/10$)	0.041**	0.007	0.041**	0.005
Random				
Individual level	1.911**	0.017	1.002**	0.009
Nation level	0.494**	0.159	0.136**	0.044

^aDummy variable.* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$ in two-tailed tests.

coefficients and random components at both levels. In order to facilitate interpretation, the two nation level explanatory variables were given a standard deviation of one at the nation level.

Regression results

The left hand side of Table 1 indicates that public attitudes toward the unemployed are generally positive. The intercept indicates that a man of 38 has a predicted average of 4.875 on the 1–7 scale. Women are more positive than men, and old people are more positive than young people. (The age coefficient represents a 10 year increase since one year increases would be less visible.) The age effect is somewhat surprising, as in most countries most of the unemployed tend to be young.

The decomposition of the random variance indicates that 21 per cent of this variance is between the 24 nations, and 79 per cent is within the nations after statistically controlling for age and gender. The random effect approach relies on assumptions that the nations studied are a random sample from a hypothetical population of nations. The standard error of the random variance indicates that the national variation in attitudes towards the sick and old is statistically significant.

The right hand side of Table 1 indicates that support for the sick and the old is more positive than support for the unemployed. A man of 38 has an average of 6.106 on the 1–7 scale. Women are more positive than men, and old people are more positive than young people.

A comparison of the gender effect and the age effect between these two models (in the support for the unemployed and the sick/old, respectively) is not straightforward, as support for the unemployed varies more than support for the sick and old (see Appendix). If we believe that this is due to the way these questions and the response categories were constructed, i.e. the response scale gives more space for less positive (unemployment) than very positive (sick and old) responses, then we should control for the difference in variation in the two response variables. If we believe that this is because public attitudes to welfare policies toward these two groups actually do vary, we should not make such a control.

Although women are more positive toward both kinds of welfare policies than men, the gender effect is stronger regarding support for the unemployed than for the sick and old. This finding occurs even if we control for the greater variation in attitudes toward the unemployed more generally. The age effect, on the other hand, appears to be quite similar towards these two groups of recipients. This is somewhat surprising given that old people are likely to benefit from welfare policies for the sick and old in the near future but will only rarely benefit from welfare policies for the unemployed.

The random variance indicates that national variation in support for the sick and old is smaller than similar national variation in support for the unemployed. In relative terms only 12 per cent of the variation in these attitudes is between the 24 nations studied, compared with 21 per cent for the unemployed. In absolute terms it is only 28 per cent ($0.136/0.494$) of

Table 2. *Support for welfare policies toward the unemployed and the sick and old as a result of characteristics of individuals, including being unemployed at both individual and national level (McMC estimates)*

Explanatory variables	Support for the unemployed		Support for the sick and the old	
	Estimate	Standard error	Estimate	Standard error
Fixed				
Intercept	4.877		6.117	
Woman ^a	0.276**	0.018	0.146**	0.012
Age ($\pm 38/10$)	0.052**	0.007	0.043**	0.000
Unemployed ^a	0.551**	0.035	0.110**	0.025
Nation level				
Unemployment ^b	0.369**	0.101	0.171**	0.058
Random				
Individual level	1.892**	0.017	1.001**	0.009
Nation level	0.327**	0.107	0.103**	0.034

^aDummy variable; ^bstandardized variable.

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$ in two-tailed tests.

the similar attitudes towards the unemployed at nation level. Still, the standard error indicates that this national variation can also be generalized beyond the 24 nations studied.

What factors explain national variation in attitudes to welfare policies toward the unemployed and the sick and old? We hypothesize that this may be explained by unemployment at the level of both individuals and nations and by egalitarian ideology, also at the individual and nation level.

In Table 2 we introduce unemployment as a new explanatory variable at the level of individuals (being unemployed) and nations (the unemployed in relation to the population between 20 and 70 years). At both levels unemployment has a strong impact on attitudes toward welfare state support for the unemployed. Being unemployed oneself leads to a 0.551 stronger support on the 1–7 scale. At a national level, an increase of 1.5 standard deviations of the (standardized) national variation in unemployment leads to a similar increase in support for the unemployed as being unemployed oneself (0.551/0.369). Since this makes up only a part of the national variation in unemployment, it may be argued that unemployment at the national level has as strong, if not a stronger, impact on attitudes to welfare policies toward the unemployed as being unemployed oneself. Reductions in the random component (compared with Table 1) indicate that unemployment explains only 1 per cent of the individual level random variation, but 34 per cent of the national variation in these attitudes.

The right hand side of Table 2 indicates that unemployment is associated with more positive attitudes to welfare policies toward the sick and old. This effect is significant at both the level of individuals and nations, and the nation-level effect appears to be stronger than being unemployed oneself. Still, as expected, these effects are not as strong as similar effects on attitudes to welfare policies toward the unemployed. The (individual-level) effect of being unemployed may be explained by self-interest as those dependent on welfare state support today are also more likely than others to depend on the welfare state in the future, when they get older. At the nation level this correlation is less expected. One tentative explanation could be that high unemployment creates more positive attitudes, not only for welfare state support for the unemployed, but also to welfare state policies more generally. The reason may be that high unemployment creates feelings of economic vulnerability, which creates support for the welfare state. A reduction in the random component (compared with Table 1) indicates that 26 per cent of the national variation in support for welfare policies toward the sick and old can be explained by unemployment. A similar comparison indicates that unemployment cannot explain the gender effect on welfare state attitudes.

Table 3 is (also) similar to Table 1, but introduces egalitarian ideology as an explanatory variable. The left hand side of Table 3 indicates that support for welfare policies toward the unemployed is associated

Table 3. *Support for welfare policies toward the unemployed and the sick and old as a result of characteristics of individuals including support for an egalitarian ideology at both the individual and nation level (McMC estimates)*

Explanatory variables	Support for the unemployed		Support for the sick and the old	
	Estimate	Standard error	Estimate	Standard error
Fixed				
Intercept	4.957		6.147	
Woman ^a	0.140**	0.015	0.085**	0.012
Age ($\pm 38/10$)	-0.003	0.006	0.018**	0.005
Egalitarian ideology	0.765**	0.008	0.368**	0.006
Nation level				
Egalitarian ^b	0.355**	0.065	0.066	0.064
Random				
Individual level	1.401**	0.013	0.885**	0.008
Nation level	0.094**	0.033	0.103**	0.035

^aDummy variable; ^bstandardized variable.

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$ in two-tailed tests.

with egalitarian ideology. This effect works at the level of both individuals and nations, but the individual-level effect appears to be stronger than the nation-level effect. In absolute terms the difference is larger than indicated by the coefficients, as the nation-level variable is scaled up by a factor of three to give it a nation-level standard deviation of 1. Changes in the random components (compared with Table 1) indicate that egalitarian ideology explains 27 per cent of the individual level random variation, and as much as 81 per cent of the nation level variation in these attitudes. Controlling for egalitarian ideology, there is little national variation in attitudes toward the unemployed left.

The right hand side of Table 3 indicates that egalitarian ideology is also correlated with support for the sick and old at the individual level. As expected, however, this correlation is weaker than the correlation with support toward the unemployed. Apparently, this ideology effect makes up 12 per cent of the individual level random variation in attitudes toward the sick and old. On the other hand, national variation in attitudes toward the sick and old is not related to national variation in egalitarian ideology.

When comparing Tables 1 and 3, we find that greater egalitarian ideology among women compared to men explains nearly half the gender difference in attitudes toward welfare policies. Further, more widespread egalitarian ideology among the old compared to young people helps explain why old people

are more supportive of welfare policies for the unemployed. After controlling for egalitarian ideology, this age effect disappears. The fact that old people are more supportive of welfare policies toward the sick and old is seemingly a result of their stronger egalitarian ideology.

Several authors (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Emerson and VanBuren, 1992; Andress and Heien, 2001) have assumed that (self-)interest toward the welfare state influences both social equality ideology and support for specific welfare state programs, i.e. that unemployment is more exogenous (i.e. independent of the attitudes studied) than egalitarian ideology (in our terminology). This assumption is even more plausible at the nation level than at the individual level. However, this may work both ways: egalitarian ideology may mediate the impact of unemployment on support for specific welfare state programs, but unemployment may also be a reason why both individuals and nations develop coherent attitudes between (egalitarian) ideology and welfare state support. Table 4 includes all explanatory variables in Tables 2 and 3. In doing so, we are stretching our data, i.e. the 24 national contexts studied, which may lead to less reliable estimates. By comparing Tables 2 and 4, we find the fact that those who are unemployed are more supportive of welfare policies toward the unemployed ('themselves') is partially mediated by support for redistribution more generally, as this effect is one third smaller when controlling for

Table 4. *Support for welfare policies toward the unemployed and the sick and old as a result of characteristics of individuals including unemployment and egalitarian ideology at both the individual and nation level (McMC estimates)*

Explanatory variables	Support for the unemployed		Support for the sick and the old	
	Estimate	Standard error	Estimate	Standard error
Fixed				
Intercept	5.956		7.168	
Woman ^a	0.145**	0.015	0.085**	0.012
Age ($\pm 38/10$)	0.004	0.006	0.019**	0.004
Unemployed ^a	0.364**	0.030	0.025	0.024
Egalitarian ideology	0.759**	0.008	0.368**	0.007
Nation level				
Unemployment ^b	0.161**	0.049	0.117*	0.055
Egalitarian ^b	0.293**	0.057	0.034	0.068
Random				
Individual level	1.393**	0.013	0.884**	0.008
Nation level	0.066**	0.022	0.094**	0.032

^aDummy variable; ^bstandardized variable.

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$ in two-tailed tests.

egalitarian ideology. The fact that this group also tends to be more supportive of welfare policies for the sick and the old is almost totally mediated by this ideology factor. At the national level, egalitarian ideology also mediates some of the impact of unemployment on support for welfare state programs, particularly for the unemployed, but also for the sick and old. In comparing Tables 3 and 4, we find that unemployment does not lead to more coherent attitudes between egalitarian ideology and support for welfare state programs, at least not at the individual level, and only marginally at the national level.

Discussion

Limitations of the Study

We have studied public attitudes toward welfare policies as a result of situational as well as ideological factors at the level of both individuals and nations. We have utilized a cross-national collaboration of survey data and a multi-level regression method. Unfortunately, these methodologies have limitations that deserve comment.

Results from multilevel regression models are sensitive to the use of explanatory variables at the lowest level, particularly of continuous variables. In cross-national research, strictly comparative individual-level

data may be difficult to find. For this reason, individual-level characteristics have been kept to a minimum, and emphasis has been on national comparisons as well as the level of public attitude formation concerning welfare state policies.

Survey data may have inherent biases that complicate interpretation. This includes the tendency people have to disproportionately select certain response categories, regardless of the content of the question (response style) or the tendency to respond to a question in order to present themselves in a way that doesn't represent their true attitudes (response set) (O'Neill, 1967). Responding that a given policy issue 'definitely should be government's responsibility' may reflect a tendency of 'yea-saying' or acquiescence. Presenting positive attitudes toward the sick and old may be a way of representing oneself as a person of good manners. Even with these reservations, the general picture among the industrialized nations studied is one of overwhelming support for welfare state policies for the sick and old, and generally positive attitudes to welfare policies for the unemployed. The stronger support for programs for the sick and old compared to the unemployed may be due to the perception that the sick and old are clearly deserving beneficiaries and to variations in perceptions of program effectiveness (Cook and Barrett, 1992).

The response tendencies mentioned may, however, also lead to inaccurate estimates of the correlations

presented. A high correlation between egalitarian ideology and support for the unemployed at the individual level may also reflect acquiescence or a tendency to give similar responses when several questions are presented in a 'battery' (Green and Citrin, 1994). A high correlation between egalitarian ideology and support for the unemployed at the nation level may also reflect cultural differences in how people in various nations respond to such questions. In some cultures it may be appropriate to express negative attitudes; in other cultures politeness may repress such representations (Javeline, 1999). Little is known about these cultural differences or their possible effect on response to survey questions. The fact that we find hardly any correlation between egalitarian ideology and support for the sick and old at the nation level suggests that this bias is low.

Some studies indicate that acquiescence may be correlated with age (Andrews and Herzog, 1986; Greenleaf, 1992). In this study, old people express more support toward welfare policies generally, including programs for the unemployed, compared with young people, and they also express more support for an egalitarian ideology. There is a risk that these age effects reflect a stronger tendency to acquiescence among old than young respondents.

Response tendencies may vary according to the data collection methods used, i.e. mailed questionnaires versus in person or telephone interviews. Some studies indicate that this effect is small for less sensitive questions like policy issues compared with more sensitive issues like racism (Hochstim, 1967; Krysan, 1998). Unfortunately, the 22 countries studied varied in the way they collected their data. However, controlling for the survey method applied had no effect on the results presented in this paper, except for a marginal and non-significant decrease in the random component at the nation level.

Main findings

Our main finding is that public attitudes toward welfare policies vary between nations, and this variation is related to both situational and ideological factors. In situations of high unemployment public support for welfare policies is generally higher, and those directed toward the unemployed in particular. These effects appear to be stronger at the nation level than at the individual level, i.e. being unemployed oneself.

Apparently, high unemployment triggers some changes in public attitudes toward the welfare state. One reason may be that unemployment makes citizens of modern industrialized countries aware of the fact that they are vulnerable to risks beyond their control. The welfare state provides economic support for the unemployed and may also provide jobs for those who otherwise would be unable to find work. Thus, unemployment levels public attitudes because they increase recognition of the risk of becoming unemployed oneself, and because of public concern for those who are unemployed.

National differences in attitudes toward welfare state policies for the unemployed reflect similar differences in egalitarian ideology. Egalitarian nations have more positive public attitudes toward active welfare state policies toward the unemployed, but not for the sick and the old. The reason may be that nearly all people expect to be old, and thus face a risk of being recipients of health and care services. Supporting welfare state policies for the sick and old is thus consistent with most people's self-interest. For this reason, these attitudes vary little between individuals and even less between nations. Supporting welfare state policies for the unemployed, on the other hand, reflects ideological position to a greater extent. This effect is apparent at both the individual and the nation level. It is difficult to tell which of these levels is most important. The estimates indicate that the individual level is most important, but this estimate is also likely to be most biased upward due to the way these variables were measured.

The ideology argument normally assumes that individuals strive to keep their beliefs/attitudes internally consistent, which may imply that some attitudes must be modified to obtain consistency (Osgood, 1960). Apparently, these are both individual- and higher-level processes. At the individual level the explanation is one of reducing cognitive stress related to inconsistent beliefs or attitudes. At nation level it is about developing political beliefs/attitudes that are more or less nation specific. We have hypothesized that this reflects the role of political debates, political cultures, as well as symbols and institutions like the partisan system that are at least partially specific for each nation. Indirectly, this development of national political beliefs/attitudes also reflects national variation in situational factors like the occurrence of high unemployment. Similar

ideas are found in the literature on welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999; Huber and Stephens, 2000), but unfortunately somewhat discounted within comparative research on public attitudes towards the welfare state.

At the individual level, women hold more positive attitudes toward welfare state policies than men. One reason is found in stronger female support for egalitarian ideologies. Our modest application of individual level explanatory variables provides only limited opportunities to identify key situational factors that may also contribute to this gender effect. It is not possible to control for all situational differences between men and women. Women are more likely than men to become disabled and in need of long term care before dying (Romøren and Blekesaune, 2003). Women also have traditionally performed a majority of the unpaid work for the sick and old and are more likely than men to gain paid employment when these responsibilities are assumed by the welfare state. For these reasons, women have greater self-interest in the welfare state than men. On the other hand, men are more likely than women to be unemployed, at least in our data. As such, it is puzzling why women hold more positive attitudes than men in regard to welfare policies toward the unemployed compared with similar policies for the sick and old.

Public support for the age-specific programs in this analysis vary only slightly by age of the respondent. Previous studies indicate that this may be the case for income transfer/security programs, but perhaps not for age-specific services (Ponza, 1988; Pettersen, 2001; Goul Andersen, 2002). The most puzzling finding is that old people are as positive to welfare policies toward the unemployed as young adults. One possible explanation may be that most elderly have children who may be at some risk of becoming unemployed. Another explanation may be that the elderly experienced unemployment at some time in the past and thus are empathetic toward the unemployed.

Taken together, the findings presented in this paper indicate that various nations encounter different kinds of social problems and that the understanding and articulation of these problems influence public attitudes toward welfare policies as well as toward specified groups of recipients. Different countries also generate different public beliefs about the relationship between individuals, the state and other institutions. Public attitudes regarding the kind of policies the state

should pursue and who should benefit are sometimes, but not always, linked to these beliefs. Whereas attitudes toward the unemployed are correlated with ideological beliefs about redistribution via the welfare state, attitudes toward the sick and the old are not.

Notes

1. Data was made available by Norwegian Social Science Data Services. NSD is not responsible for the use of the data material.

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Appendix: Data Description

A description of the ISSP study *Role of government III* (ZA 2900) can be found at <http://www.za.uni-koeln.de/data/en/issp/codebooks/s2900cdb.pdf>. The participating countries were: Austria, Bulgaria, New Zealand, Canada, Czech Republic, Cyprus, France, Germany (the former East and West), Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel (Jews and Arabs), Italy, Japan, Latvia, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and USA. Also Switzerland completed some, but not all, of

Table A1. *Descriptive statistics of the variables*

	N	mean	S.D.	low	high
Support sick and old	26,128	6.19	1.07	1.0	7.0
Support unemployed	24,827	5.04	1.54	1.0	7.0
Woman	26,406	0.51	0.50	0.0	1.0
Age (\pm 38/10)	26,406	0.04	1.35	-2.2	2.6
Unemployed	26,406	0.07	0.25	0.0	1.0
Egalitarian ideology	25,210	-0.03	0.99	-2.0	1.0
National level					
Unemployment	26,406	0.00	1.01	-1.2	2.0
Egalitarian ideology	26,406	0.00	0.98	-1.9	1.8
Self-adm.questionnaire	26,406	0.42	0.49	0.0	1.0

this questionnaire in a 1998 survey. This study comprises all countries but Philippines (assumed to be a deviant case) and Switzerland (missing data).

Table A1 gives descriptive statistics of the data studied. The data include all (26,406) observations between 20 and 70 years being non-missing on both dependent variables. The 24 nations defined range from 300 (Arabs in Israel) to 1561 (Spain) observations, each with an average of 816.

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