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Welfare state attitudes

Characteristics associated with individual support
for governmental redistribution

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Over the past two decades income inequality has been rising in most industrial democracies (OECD, 2008; Smeeding, 2005; Stefán Ólafsson, 2006). The gap between poor and rich countries has also increased since the 1980s (Galbraith, 2002), but in the last few years that gap has been narrowing again, mainly as a result of the economic growth in China and India (OECD, 2008).¹ There is evidence suggesting that the economic growth experienced in the years preceding the financial collapse mostly benefited the already rich (OECD, 2008; Ravallion, 2003).

In the last two decades Iceland has also seen an increase in economic inequality (Stefán Ólafsson, 2006, 2008). As in other countries, this development is a consequence of several related factors, e.g., increased emphasis on free markets and globalization (Stefán Ólafsson, 2008).

Through tax policies, social spending and overall-regime type governments can influence the distribution of income. Empirical analysis has shown that changes in tax laws and various welfare programs can reduce inequality (Kelly, 2005; Palme, 2006). Countries around the world differ widely in their redistributive policies, or the extent to which they assume responsibility for supporting the standard of living of disadvantaged or vulnerable groups. For the OECD countries, in 2005, the social expenditure, which is measured as the social support in gross public social expenditure relative to GDP, ranged from 29.4% in Sweden to 6.9% in South Korea. In 2005, the public social expenditure in the OECD countries was on average 21% of GDP, and 16.1% in Iceland (OECD, 2010). A comparative study of 39 countries showed that countries with the highest public social expenditure have the lowest inequality and poverty rates (Stefán Ólafsson, 2010).

In liberal democracies, public support is an essential part of the legitimacy of governmental redistribution. Furthermore, governmental policy is, at least to some degree, driven by public opinion and the choices citizens make in elections (Kelly, 2005). Studies on welfare state (WS) attitudes, i.e., the attitudes towards state redistribution, have a somewhat long tradition in sociology, political science, and economics. However, the political and academic debates in Iceland have mostly rested on untested assumptions about public opinion. The aim of the current research is to assess Icelandic WS attitudes and to study which individual characteristics are associated with these attitudes.

There have mainly been two theoretical threads in the research literature. The first, based on rational choice theory, is that WS attitudes are influenced by self-interest, and the second is that it is determined by political ideology.

¹ It is worth pointing out that there have been intensive debates between scholars on inequality within and between countries. Some researchers have shown decreased inequality in recent years. Different research findings are due to different conceptualizations of inequality (see discussion in Palme, 2006 & Ravallion, 2003).

In line with the self-interest view, it is hypothesized that high-income groups, who bear the tax burden of the WS and are unlikely beneficiaries, have negative attitudes towards the WS (Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995). Education could have both negative and positive effects on support for the WS. Educated people have a strong job market position, lower risk of unemployment, and therefore less need for governmental redistribution. Furthermore, a long and successful education might conduce to the attitude that people's "achievement is rewarding and should be rewarded" (Andress & Heien, 2001, p. 341). However, education is likely to socialize egalitarian values (Pfeifer, 2009), and thus increase support for the WS. Most prior research findings indicate a negative relationship between education and WS support (Andress & Heien, 2001; Jæger, 2006; Linos & West, 2003; Pfeifer, 2009), but findings have also found a positive relationship (Gelissen, 2002, as cited in Pfeifer, 2009).

It has been argued that women support the WS more than men because of their weaker position on the labor market, their socialization as caregivers, and because they are more likely to be employed in the public sector (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Svallfors, 1997). Young people are expected to support WS policies for two main reasons. According to scholars (see Ervasti, 2001, p. 12), there has been a generational change in attitudes because young cohorts have lived at higher levels of material well-being than their parents and grandparents and therefore have stronger egalitarian values. Second, young adults can be expected to gain more than the middle aged from benefits for children and young families and unemployment policies. Likewise, the elderly should gain from benefits for the old and the sick (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003). Thus, the relationship between age and WS policies is expected to be u-shaped, i.e., the young and the old have more support for WS policies than the middle aged.

Being single, having children, and being unemployed or disabled are all characteristics that are assumed to be associated with positive WS attitudes, as these factors have an impact on the likelihood of becoming poor and being a governmental beneficiary (Linus & West, 2003).

Empirical studies provide considerable support for the self-interest view (Andress & Heien, 2001; Berglind Hólmi Ragnarsdóttir & Jón Gunnar Bernburg, 2009; Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Ervasti, 2001; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Jæger, 2006; Linos & West, 2003; Pfeifer, 2009; Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995; Svallfors, 1997, 2003; Taylor-Gooby & Hastie, 2003).

Political ideology refers to the general political values that influence an individual's attitudes and opinions (Muuri, 2010). This is commonly measured as a subjective position on the left-right continuum, liberal-conservative ideology, or party affiliation. According to prior studies, individuals who position themselves on the left/liberal wing or vote for parties that are identified with left/liberal are more likely to support the WS (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995; Jacoby, 2000; Taylor-Gooby & Hastie, 2003; Rudolph & Evans, 2005; Jæger, 2006). In the current research the relationship between political ideology and WS attitudes will be tested. Also to be tested is whether the relationship between income, a self-interest interest variable, and WS attitudes is moderated by political ideology. High-income groups are expected to be less supportive of WS policies because they do not benefit from these policies. The question being asked here is whether political ideology has an impact on individuals' will to sacrifice their own interest for the sake of others. The author has no knowledge of prior research studying this kind of interaction effects.

The importance of general and political trust is well known in sociology. General trust, also referred to as social trust and interpersonal trust, has been conceptualized as the trust in others and norms of reciprocity (Coleman, 1988; Putnman, 2000), and can therefore reflect a sense of solidarity. It can thus be reasoned that general trust is associated with the feeling of shared responsibility for the disadvantaged. General distrust might also correspond to the view that undeserving people will take advantage

of generous WS policies and thus reduce support for them. One can imagine that if people perceive the government as incompetent or ineffective they might be less supportive of the state redistribution of wealth (Hetherington & Globetti, 2002). Political trust has shown to be positively related to support for redistributive policies (Rudolph & Evans, 2005; Taylor-Gooby & Hastie, 2003). Given the high relevance of general and political trust in the research of WS attitudes, it is surprising how rarely it is included in the studies in the field. In the current study, it is hypothesized that general and political trust are positively related to support for the WS.

Methods

Data

The current analysis is based on data from the Public Health Institute of Iceland (PHI). A paper-based mail survey was sent to a randomly selected sample of 5,294 Icelanders aged 18 to 79 years in October 2009 (responses returned from the beginning of November to early February 2010). The response rate was 77.3%, or 4,092 respondents (additional information at <http://www.lydheilsustod.is/rannsoknir/heilsa-og-lidan-2007/>). After accounting for missing data with listwise deletion the analysis is based on a sample of 2,074 to 2,137².

Measures

The dependent variable *WS attitude* was measured with four survey items: “It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes,” “The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed,” “The government should spend less on benefits for the poor,” “People with high incomes should pay a larger share of their income in taxes than those with low incomes,” The response categories ranged from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree). Items 1, 2, and 4 were reversed so that a high value represents a strong support for the WS. The items were combined into an index by using the mean score of the four items ($\alpha = 0.67$). This measure is roughly in line with most prior research on WS attitudes previously mentioned.

Household income was measured with the question, “In what range has the average total income in your household been in the last 12 months?” The response categories ranged from 0 (under 75 thousand ISK per month/under 900 thousand ISK per year) to 14 (more than 1.5 million ISK per month/more than 18 million ISK per year).

A dummy variable was constructed for *university education*. If the respondent has a university degree the variable was coded “1” and “0” otherwise. The respondent’s gender was measured with a dummy variable which was coded “1” for *females* and “0” for males. In addition to having a variable for the respondent’s age in years, the square root of age was also computed (the age variable was first centered around its mean). This was done to enable the examination of a curvilinear (u-shaped) relationship between WS attitudes and age. If the age² is statistically significant it can be concluded that the relationship is curvilinear. Two dummy variables were constructed for unemployment, one for *short-term unemployment* (six months or shorter) and another for *long-time unemployment* (seven months or longer). If respondents were *disabled beneficiaries* (had a disability rating of 50% or more) they were coded “1” on a dummy variable, otherwise “0.” Individuals who are married or cohabiting were combined into one

² When using listwise deletion only those cases that have no missing data, on any of the variables in the equation, are included.

group on the dummy variable *married/cohabiting*. *Number of children* was measured with the question: “How many children under the age of 17 live in your household?”

Political ideology was measured with an 11-point left-right scale. The respondents were asked: “The discussion about “left” and “right” is common in politics. Where would you position yourself on the following scale where 0 stands for furthest to the left and 10 stands for furthest to the right?”

General trust was measured with the following six survey items: “Generally speaking, most people can be trusted,” “You can never be too careful in dealing with people,” “Most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance,” “Most people try to be fair,” “Most of the time, people try to be helpful,” “People mostly look out for themselves.” The response categories ranged from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree). Items 1, 4 and 5 were reversed so that a high value represents high general trust. The items were combined into an index by using the mean score of the six items ($\alpha = 0.78$). *Political trust* was measured with one question: “How much or little do you trust the following institutions: the parliament.” The response category ranged from one (very much) to five (very little). The measure was reversed.

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics, after the data has been weighted by sex, age, and residence to correctly represent the population.³ The minimum and maximum scores for the variables are presented in parentheses. The findings indicate a strong overall support for the WS; the mean score is 3.9, on the scale of 1 to 5. The mean for the binomial dummy variables is the proportion in each group. For example, 2% of the sample has been unemployed for six months or less and 3% for seven months or more. On average, the sample is just about in the middle of the political ideology scale, and the variation of the sample is considerable ($SD = 2.36$). The mean score of general trust is higher than political trust, which is just below the middle score of the five-point scale.

³ Weighting the data can be beneficial if some groups are less likely to participate. Weighting helps to correct for non-response. In the present study women and older people had a proportionately higher response rate than men and younger individuals.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean(sd)
Welfare state attitudes 1-5	3.90(0.71)
Household income 0-14	6.86(3.90)
University education 0-1	0.30(0.46)
Women 0-1	0.51(0.50)
Age 18-82	48.77(15.84)
Short-time unemployment 0-1	0.02(0.15)
Long-time unemployment 0-1	0.03(0.17)
Disabled beneficiaries 0-1	0.04(0.19)
Married/cohabiting 0-1	0.48(0.50)
Children (under 17) in household 0-8	1.17(1.16)
Political ideology (left-right) 0-10	5.13(2.36)
General trust 1-5	3.50(0.60)
Political trust 1-5	2.26(1.01)

The main analysis is presented in Table 2. The first model includes the self-interest variables only. The table reports the unstandardized coefficients, and the standardized coefficients in parentheses for the continuous variables. In line with the proposed hypothesis, household income has a negative effect on support for the WS ($b = -0.05^{**}$). Individuals with a university degree are more likely to have negative WS attitudes ($b = -0.07^*$). Women have a stronger support than men ($b = 0.18^{**}$).

Age has a statistically significant relationship with WS attitudes (0.01^{**}), but age squared does not. These findings thus do not confirm the prior expectations of a u-shaped relationship. The relationship is positive, that is, as people get older they tend to have more support for the WS. Interestingly, unemployment is not a determinant of WS attitudes unless individuals have been unemployed for a long time. As was expected, disabled beneficiaries have more positive attitudes towards the WS. When holding other variables constant, marital status and having children in the household is not associated with WS attitudes.

Table 2. Regression on Welfare state attitudes

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	$b(\beta)$	$b(\beta)$	$b(\beta)$	$b(\beta)$
Constant	3.88	4.45	4.40	4.35
Household income	-.05**(-.24)	-.04**(-.17)	-.04**(-.17)	-.04**(-.18)
University education ^a	-.07*	-.12**	-.11**	-.12**
Women ^a	.18**	.11**	.11**	.10**
Age 18-82	.01**(.13)	.01**(.13)	.01**(.13)	.00**(.126)
age ²	-.00(-.01)	-.00(-.02)	-.00(-.02)	-.00(-.02)
Short-time unemployment ^a	.07	.07	.07	.07
Long-time unemployment ^a	.16*	.25**	.24**	.24**
Disabled beneficiaries	.17*	.11*	.12	.12
Married/cohabiting ^a	.04	.03	.01	.02
Children (under 17) in household	-.02(-.03)	-.00(-.00)	.00(.00)	-.00(-.00)
Political ideology (left-right)		-.13**(-.41)	-.11**(-.36)	-.13**(-.41)
IncomeXpolitical ideology (interaction)			-.09**(-.11)	
General trust				.06*(.05)
Political trust				-.02(-.03)
Adj.R ² (F-value)	.12(30.72**)	.28(74.58**)	.29(71.84**)	.28(63.59**)

^a=dummy var. * $p < 0,05$ ** $p < 0,01$ b=unst. coefficient (st.coefficient)

In Model 2 (Table 2) political ideology has been added to the equation. As was expected, individuals who hold a right-wing political ideology are less supportive of the WS. Model 2 also shows the relationships between the self-interest variables independent of political ideology. The relationships that were statistically significant in Model 1 are still so after accounting for political ideology. The difference in size of some coefficients indicates that a part of the difference in WS attitudes between the groups is due to a difference in overall political ideology. For example, the strong support for the WS held by women is in part due to their overall left-wing political ideology.

In Model 3 the interaction between household income and political ideology is tested. The product term of income and political ideology is statistically significant, which indicates that income has a different effect on WS attitudes depending on the political views individuals hold. In order to simplify the interpretation of the interaction effects, the predicted standardized value for four groups was calculated and is graphed in Figure 1 (detailed computations available from author upon request).

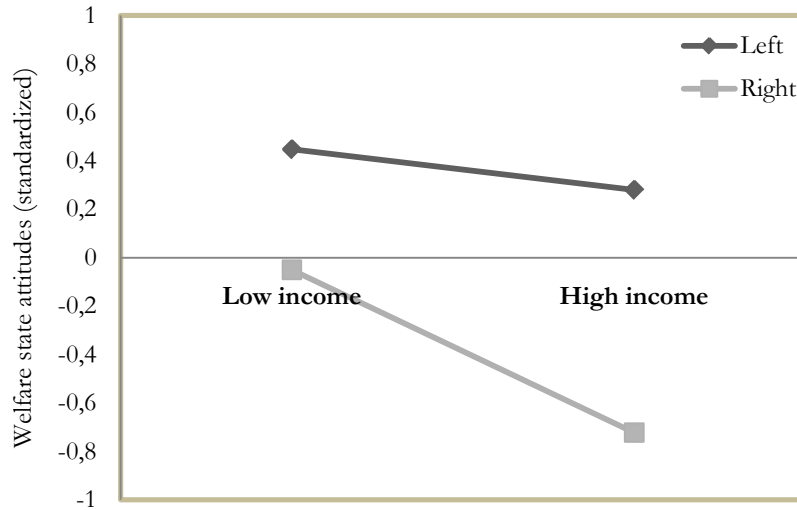


Figure 1. The relationship between income and WS attitudes moderated by political ideology

As the findings in Figure 1 show, income has clearly a different effect on WS attitudes depending on whether individuals hold a left or right political ideology. There is less attitudinal difference between high- and low-income groups that hold a left political ideology than between groups that hold a right ideology.

In the last model, Model 4 (in Table 2), trust has been added to the equation. General trust has a statistically significant positive relationship with WS attitudes. Trusting individuals tend to be more supportive of WS policies. The relationship between general trust and WS attitudes is, however, not very strong. The relationship between political trust and WS attitudes is in the opposite direction expected ($b = -0.02$), but the relationship is weak and non-significant.

Discussion

According to functionalist and neoclassical economics, income inequality is justifiable because it conduces to ambitions and economic progress (see Kelley & Evans, 1993, p. 79). However, strong evidence points to harmful causes of economic inequality. Research findings have shown an association between income inequality and poor public health, e.g., high infant mortality rates and low life expectancy rates (Babones, 2008; Spencer, 2004), and high rates of violence (Blau & Blau, 1982; Krahn, Hartnagel, & Gartel, 1986). Economic inequality also depresses political engagement, such as participation in elections, especially among low-income groups (Solt, 2008). The study of public WS attitudes is important since public support for governmental income redistribution influences governmental policies (Kelly, 2005).

The aim of the current research was to assess Icelandic WS attitudes and to study which individual characteristics are associated with these attitudes. The main findings are that there is a considerable support for WS policies in Iceland, and that this support, however, differs between groups in society.

Low income, not having a university degree, long-term unemployment, and being a disabled beneficiary are all individual characteristics associated with a support for the WS. Women are also more likely to support the welfare state than men, and as individuals get older their support increases. The strongest predictor of WS attitudes is political ideology, and as expected, the support dwindles to the right. Furthermore, political ideology moderates the association between income and WS attitudes. Low-

income groups that hold a left political ideology have slightly more support for WS policies than low-income groups that hold a right political ideology, but in high-income groups the difference in support is substantial. That is, high income is not associated with as much decreased support for the WS when individuals hold a left political ideology, as it does when people associate themselves with the right. In general, support for WS policies corresponds to interest, but individuals who position themselves politically to the left are more willing to sacrifice their own interest than those who position themselves to the right. In sum, the hypotheses about the association between the self-interest characteristics and political ideology presented in this study have been substantially supported. Furthermore, general trust, i.e., trust in others and norms of reciprocity, positively affects WS support, but political trust has no association with WS attitudes. That being said, it is important to note that this is most likely a simplistic picture of the mechanism of WS attitudes. It is quite rational that attitudes about governmental redistribution of wealth are affected by more explicit individual norms and values than have been included in this paper, as well as by society's culture and norms. For example, studies have shown that the perception of restricted social mobility and social stratification is associated with WS support (Birkelund, 2006; Linos & West, 2003; Berglind Hólm Ragnarsdóttir & Jón Gunnar Bernburg, 2009). That is, if people believe that they live in an equal society, they are, perhaps not surprisingly, less supportive of governmental redistribution. It would thus be interesting for future researchers to study variations in these perceptions. Although family background is among the best predictors of an individual's income and wealth in the U.S. (Pimpare, 2009), only about 30% of Americans agree with the statement that achievement in life depends largely on family background (Smith, 1987).

Furthermore, the current study was restricted to the individual level, and therefore it cannot capture the collective norms that prior research findings (Andress & Heien, 2001; Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007) have confirmed to be associated with WS attitudes.

A further limitation to the findings is the cross-sectional data. The findings are thus limited to one point in time, which has several implications. The first and most obvious one concerns causation. This is especially relevant to the association between political ideology and WS attitudes. It can be assumed that WS attitudes are a view into how people think society should be organized and therefore a part of the overall political ideology. WS attitudes could thus form political ideology or be an expression of deeper ideological orientation (Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995). The strong relationship between WS attitudes and political ideology does show that people's political views are internally consistent.

Second, the exact time point of the data collection could have implications for the relationship between political trust and WS attitudes. Following the financial collapse in Iceland, political trust was at a historical low, and this applied to trust in all social institutions (Capacent, 2010). Furthermore, there was considerable media discussion about the "New Iceland," which was to be characterized by a shift from capitalist ideology towards a more "caring" socialistic society. At the time of the study, the atmosphere in Iceland was characterized by distrust, anger, and a plea for political and social changes. This might have encouraged stronger support for WS policies than usual in Iceland. If this were actually the case it would have suppressed the relationship between political trust and WS attitudes. The impact that recessive economic times have on WS attitudes is not yet clear. For example, a cross-national study (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003) has shown that high unemployment rates, independent of individual unemployment, are positively associated with support for the WS, but a longitudinal study in Finland (Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995) demonstrated a declining WS support associated with economic recession.

However, for the past decades, Stefán Ólafsson (1985, 1989, 1998) has documented attitudes towards inequality and attitudes towards the WS in Iceland. His researches indicate that Icelanders have had a sense of equality for a long time. That is, the strong WS support found in the current study is not necessarily a reflection of new values, in the midst of the economic crises, but mirrors Icelandic attitudes as they have been for decades.

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