



# The preferred role and perceived performance of the welfare state: European welfare attitudes from a multidimensional perspective <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Welfare state support has two core dimensions: attitudes about what the welfare state should do and beliefs about its actual performance. People can combine any position on one dimension with any position on the other, yielding four opinion clusters: people can combine preferences for a relatively strong role of the welfare state with a perception of a relatively low or high welfare state performance; likewise, people preferring a small role of the welfare state can perceive a high or low performing welfare state. We apply Latent Class Factor Analysis to data of 22 European countries from the 2008/9 European Social Survey. We find that each of the four clusters contains a substantial proportion of respondents that differs between welfare regimes. In addition, cluster membership is also related to covariates that measure people's structural positions and ideological preferences.

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## 0. Introduction

Within the field of study on welfare state attitudes, a strong call has been made to examine such attitudes in a multidimensional perspective (Gelissen, 2000; Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995; Svallfors, 1991; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011). People have different attitudes towards different dimensions of the welfare state, as the role of the state in different policy areas, its efficiency, the amount of presumed abuse of its benefits and services and its intended and unintended outcomes. Empirical evidence confirms that people indeed are positive about some of these dimensions, and more critical about others (Sihvo and Uusitalo, 1995; Svallfors, 1991; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2011). In a recent study a framework was developed that distinguishes these different attitudinal welfare state dimensions and tested it for 22 European countries (Roosma et al., 2013). Results suggested that Europeans generally favor a substantial role of the welfare state, but simultaneously they are more critical towards its outcomes, regarding its efficiency, benefit levels and the quality of its social services. Thus, welfare state support, as well as support for the government in general (see for instance: Gunther and Montero, 2004; Sarsfield and Echegaray, 2006), has at least two main and distinct dimensions: attitudes about what people believe the welfare state should do, and attitudes towards its actual performance. Taking into account that these dimensions are distinct concepts, we are interested in which ways people combine an attitude towards the one and towards the other dimension. As we expect that different institutional designs and country characteristics will influence these combinations of opinions, we are also

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interested in analyzing these differences across European countries. In this paper we therefore investigate for different welfare regime types the combination of attitudes towards what is called the *should* and *is* aspects of welfare attitudes in more detail.

There are only a few studies that simultaneously examine preferred welfare state involvement and its perceived performances (Calzada and Del Pino, 2008; Edlund, 2006; Gevers et al., 2000; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2012; Wendt et al., 2010). Typically, these studies analyze the preferred role and the perceived outcomes of the welfare state from a unidimensional perspective i.e. separately or in a presumed causal connection. In the latter case, preferences for welfare state involvement are analyzed as being dependent upon perceived welfare performances.

Our contribution to the welfare state attitude literature consists of analyzing the combination of attitudes to the preferred welfare state role and the perceived welfare state performance in a multidimensional perspective, in which we take into account possible feedback effects between the dimensions. We use data from the 2008/9 European Social Survey wave 4, and combine both attitudinal dimensions yielding a fourfold classification of attitude clusters. We take a descriptive approach rather than to assess causality between the dimensions. We are predominantly interested in theoretically and empirically exploring the different attitudinal combinations, describe them for different welfare regimes and assess the characteristics of people having a specific combination of attitudes. We aim to answer the following research questions: (1) What are people's attitudes towards the role of the welfare state and its performance? (2) Theoretically, what types of respondents can we distinguish when their attitudes towards these two dimensions are examined in combination? (3) Empirically, how do people actually distribute among these attitudinal clusters, and are there differences in this across welfare regimes? (4) What are the sociological characteristics of people being in a specific attitudinal cluster, and how do these differ between welfare regimes?

## 1. The interplay between the preferred role of the welfare state and its perceived performance

In this field of research it is common to examine welfare state attitudes towards single dimensions of the welfare state. Most studies focus on attitudes towards the role of government, which Roller (1995) defined as the *range* dimension of welfare state attitudes, analyzing this dimension isolated from other welfare state opinions (for instance: Andress and Heien, 2001; Roller, 1995). Fewer studies analyzed perceived *outcomes* of the welfare state (Van Oorschot, 2010, 2012) and even rarer are studies in which several dimensions are examined, yet typically not in relation to each other (Wendt et al., 2010). Roosma et al. (2013) concluded however, that welfare state support has two main and distinct dimensions: attitudes about what people believe the welfare state should do, and attitudes towards its actual performance. Studies that have analyzed support for and evaluations of the government in general argued as well that these dimensions need to be conceptually distinguished (Gunther and Montero, 2004; Montero et al., 1997; Sarsfield and Echegaray, 2006). The interplay between what we call the *should* and *is* dimension of the (welfare) state can be examined from different perspectives: (1) a unidimensional perspective, in which various consequences of evaluations of welfare state performance for the support for the welfare state are examined, (2) a multidimensional perspective where the dimensions mutually influence each other in feedback effects. We elaborate on these perspectives below.

### 1.1. The unidimensional perspective on *should* and *is* dimensions

In the welfare state literature, most studies that examine both dimensions focus on the consequences of negative perceptions of welfare state performance. Van Oorschot and Meuleman (2012) suggest that negative perceived outcomes may lead to lower support for the welfare state in case people *punish* because they are not satisfied with its outcomes. Or, that negative perceptions may also lead to a preference for a strong role of the welfare state, when people evaluate the level of benefits and services as insufficient, and call for a strong welfare state to *improve* them. In the same line of reasoning, Edlund (2006) argues that low trust in welfare state institutions may lead either to lower support for the welfare state (an *abandon* reaction) or to higher support (a *restore* reaction). Calzada and Del Pino (2008), following a perspective of welfare state reform and privatization of welfare, distinguish, firstly, *exit* reactions on negative evaluations of the welfare state: people may withdraw their support from the welfare state when they feel that privatized benefits and services are of better quality and they can afford them; secondly, they point at the opposite reactions: endorsing a strong welfare state out of moral conviction, hoping that the welfare state will perform better in the future, or knowing that they cannot afford private alternatives. Kumlin (2007) also sees positive and negative consequences of negative evaluations of welfare outcomes, but maintains that such evaluations in the end will lead to decreased legitimacy of the welfare state. This legitimacy is decreased directly, that is, it is *undermined* when people withdraw their support as a result of negative evaluations of welfare state performance. But the welfare state can also become *overloaded*, when people, dissatisfied with what the welfare state delivers, demand more from the state. Subsequently this will lead to an *overloaded* government: more and more complex questions need to get addressed by the welfare state and eventually the welfare state will become ungovernable (Kumlin, 2007).

Some studies pay specific attention to the consequences of positive evaluations of welfare outcomes. Edlund (2006) argues that higher trust in welfare state institutions will generate support for the welfare state. Van Oorschot and Meuleman (2012) suggest that positive perceived outcomes can lead to a higher support for the welfare state because people *reward* the welfare state. But higher perceived outcomes may also lead to lower support, because people feel that they pay a too high price for the (too) good welfare outcomes. People feel *overburdened* by the welfare state.

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