Considerable convergence: opinion formation in European welfare states

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For a long time, comparative research on welfare attitudes has sensitized us to stable country differences rather than similarities. For sure, there are good theoretical and empirical reasons for this. Richard Coughlin concluded almost 30 years ago that mass publics differ from each other with respect to generalized, ideological welfare state support, with citizens in low-spending countries being more generally suspicious towards spending, taxation, and redistribution. Ideological preferences match to a significant extent the overall welfare state effort in a country.

More recent research has examined whether countries might even cluster in ways consistent with the “three worlds of welfare framework.” Are there distinct groups of countries with distinct patterns of public opinion? This literature has arguably had somewhat less success, or at least results seem to vary a lot depending on data source, country selection, dependent variable, model specification etc. At the end of the day, however, this research has at least supported the more general contention that attitudes and institutions go together in some way. Therefore, this literature has also reinforced our attention to country differences.

This differentiated picture is valid and well-documented. My argument, however, is that the picture has emerged at the expense of country similarities, certainly the possibility that such similarities grow over time. We have simply become better at theorizing and documenting variation than overall essence. This is a pity as essence—if it can be theoretically understood and empirically demonstrated—is as interesting and thought-provoking.

To be fair, some similarities have always existed and were in fact revealed as soon as comparative research got under way. One example is what I would like to call a “universal pecking order of welfare support”. Wim Van Oorschot (2006) in Journal of European Policy concluded that Europeans
distinguish between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor in similar ways across different welfare states in Europe. He analyzed twenty-three countries from Western as well as Central/Eastern Europe. He found that the old are universally perceived as the group most deserving of public welfare, followed by the sick and disabled, and then come the unemployed. Immigrants are universally seen as the least deserving of all.

In the rest of this short talk I’d like to go beyond these well-known exceptions to our obsession with variation. I’d like to draw your attention to three forthcoming studies. They are quite different from each other, but they all hint at more recent and perhaps more surprising, signs of commonalities, and sometimes even outright convergence in attitudes and in the causal forces creating them.

Overall, they suggest that the processes of unification and integration in Europe—and that were just described by Steffen Mau—have indeed left imprints of on mass publics in the welfare state area.

The first study concerns Germany. The core case which we’re to here to discuss. It is authored by Stefan Svallfors and is forthcoming in European Political Science Review;

Svallfors examines the relation between institutional and attitudinal change, using reunified Germany as a case. Eastern Germany, he notes, constitutes something like a ‘natural experiment’ for the social sciences, being twice the receiver of externally imposed institutions. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to analyze long-term institutional effects on attitudes, since in this case the time order of institutional and attitudinal change can actually be decided. Using data from the ISSP, attitudes to government responsibilities are compared in Eastern and Western Germany, in comparison with other countries. Results show a considerable convergence between Eastern and Western Germany, in that attitudes in Western Germany are completely stable, at the same time as attitudes in Eastern Germany become more similar to those found in the West. Furthermore, comparisons of birth cohorts show that while attitude differences between Eastern and Western Germany are still found in 2006 among those who had their forming experiences before the wall came down, differences are virtually nil among those who were still children in 1989. This points to socialization and generational replacement as a mechanism in translating institutional change into attitudinal change.

I gotta say, I couldn’t see this coming. I don’t think I’m alone. Both academic and political debates throughout much of the last twenty years have emphasized remaining differences, again at the expense of
similarities and convergence. Just to mention one powerful result, Edeltraud Roller found in the 90s that East Germans’ comparisons between the communist and postcommunist welfare state was unflattering for the latter. Such negative evaluations were correlated with mistrust in the political system of the Bundesrepublik.

I’m also surprised on a more personal note, having lived in Berlin for a couple of years at the end of the 90s. Certainly the joint experience of knowing, working, living with people from both sides of the divide always suggested remaining differences rather than similarities, certainly not convergence.

Overall, the results provide unusually direct support for feedback-type institutionalist predictions. As already alluded to, we have known for a long time about the correspondence between policy and opinion. But it has proven difficult to be precise about causality, or whether both are in fact both governed by some third master variable, like modernisation.

More specifically, the German experience conveys a lesson relevant to our discussion here: To the extent that Central and Eastern European countries have, or will, adopt some sort of more Western-style welfare state, then such institutional changes will probably be reflected in attitudes. Especially in the attitudes of new generations that are socialised from day 1 into the reformed order.

Let me immediately add some caveats. For example, I think feedback effects in other countries are likely to be both weaker AND slower than in the German case. After all, the German experiment involved a very quick and almost maximal shift from a communist to a conservative world of welfare. Elsewhere, as Steffen discussed, it’s an ongoing process which itself is an ambiguous mix of stability and change.

Another caveat has to do with politics. Institutions don’t “feed back” onto the public in any deterministic fashion. We know from scholars like Sartori and many others that real-world conditions must be interpreted and politicised, in order to matter. And here it has to be said about Germany that the shift has not been very challenged politically. With the exception of maybe PDS in one part of the country—and perhaps Die Linke in the last couple of years—no national-level parties have criticized the export of the earlier West German welfare state. That could well be different in places, and this may in turn affect feedback effects.
So much for East-West unification. What about convergence and European integration, more broadly conceived? Here I’d like to talk a little about a forthcoming paper of my own. And here the dependent variable is not welfare state support as such, but rather targets for dissatisfaction and processes of accountability, in the EU. The paper is called “Blaming Europe?” and is forthcoming in Journal of European Social Policy later this year (2009).

It has often been said that integration affects national welfare states. These alleged effects are often negative and integration is typically seen as one of several destructive forces in motion. Let me hint very quickly at what I have in mind. A general case in point is that EU legislation takes precedence over national legislation. This has created a constitutional imbalance, which some scholars—Fritz Scharpf and others—find problematic.

For example, member states can no longer use state-protected companies as macroeconomic policy instruments. Also, free mobility of capital and labour may create a downward pressure on taxes. Similarly, “social tourism” on the single market is sometimes said to produce incentives not to offer generous benefits. Such fears are exaggerated to my mind, but have been bolstered by EU enlargement and high-profile ECJ rulings easing access to benefits in other member states. A final point concerns the stability and growth pact of the monetary union. Its emphasis on budget discipline may drive up the short-term risk of unemployment and cutbacks larger.

Now, the impact of all this is very contested, not just academically but politically. Several scholars have noted that parts of the debate can be seen on the public sphere. And it is against that background that I examine the impact of dissatisfaction with national public services on EU trust. Are dissatisfied Europeans prone to blame not only national-level actors—but also the EU-level for failures in these areas.

European Social survey data suggest the answer is yes. However, as I’m sure you can imagine there is much country variation in Europe-blaming. Interestingly, two-thirds of that variation can be explained jointly by two factors: the effect is stronger in larger welfare states for reasons that you can imagine. Likewise, it is stronger in systems where the most eurosceptic parties are also the most welfare state-supporting ones. Under such conditions, it is more probable that citizens receive cues suggesting a problematic EU-welfare relationship.
But hang on a second! Now I’m talking about variation. Did you see the knee-jerk reflex in motion? It’s so easy to miss the cross-country essence in welfare state research.

So here we go: All countries have been subject to an integration process which has affected, or is publicly said to have affected, welfare states. Many of the countries have experienced some degree of retrenchment. In 2/3 of the countries one finds a direct negative effect of national dissatisfaction on EU trust.

Here comes the caveat. I have only looked at EU15 countries. So I can only offer half of the picture. That should change in the future as newer member states are being exposed to the potential impact of Europeanisation. For sure, the dissatisfaction-EU trust relation is likely to be different there. If nothing else because part of the expectations attached to EU membership have concerned improvements in quality of government. Also, the EU has actively tried to reduce public sector corruption in some countries. It will be interesting to know more about what happens in the future depending on whether expectations are perceived to be fulfilled or not.

So far I’ve touched on east-west unification and European integration. Now, students of European politics (myself included) have a tendency to forget about the rest of the world. So let me finish with a study suggesting that the effects of unification and integration are embedded in even broader convergence processes. Ideally, that should be considered when we study these processes so that we don’t attribute to much explanatory power to local factors.

So the third study I’d like to mention is author by Jonas Edlund. Forthcoming chapter in a book about the “International Social Survey Program” edited by Haller, Jowell & Smith, and published with Routledge. The book is I believe modestly called “Charting the globe”

Edlund’s chapter assesses whether attitudes towards state welfare are, or are not, converging across 22 of the societies covered by the ISSP Role of Government modules. Many but certainly not all of these countries are European.

The provocative finding is that public support for the welfare state appears to be converging among advanced industrial countries. Increased opposition towards the welfare state is more common where the welfare state enjoyed very strong support some 20 years ago.
Conversely, increased support has primarily taken place where the welfare state used to be comparatively unpopular.

For sure, we’re a long way from understanding what’s really going on. One objection is that we need more countries and data. 4 countries are available since 1985, and 9 since 1990. Perhaps convergence is just the joint result of brief, idiosyncratic, country-specific blips?

Yet the results are not so easily dismissed. One point is that these data are the most complete picture as of yet.

Moreover, there are several interesting systematic observations that are worth looking more closely at. Specifically, the societies experiencing increased support over time have mainly seen rising demands for income redistribution. This suggests that citizens in those countries are reacting thermostatically to the rise in inequality.

Conversely, where the welfare state has gradually lost some support, the development is driven by scepticism about unemployment policies. This suggests that recent debates about labour market rigidity, and lack of incentives, the importance of “workfare,” and so on may explain part of what’s been going on in the more generous welfare states.

Finally, for some areas—elderly and health care—public support is solid and stable over time across nearly all societies. And that takes me back to where I started. To essence, rather than variation.

THANK YOU!