

1. Citizens, policy feedback, and European welfare states

Staffan Kumlin and Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen

In democracies, citizens' attitudes and behaviour should influence future public policies. In practice, however, the reverse may also be true: attitudes and behaviour can be results of past policies. This book brings together a group of political scientists and sociologists developing and testing propositions about such *policy feedback* in European welfare states. The welfare state domain has long been of great significance in these countries; it has occupied roughly half of state expenditures, generated visible political conflict, and been clearly present in many people's lives. Equally important, of course, there are well-documented and long-standing country differences in spending patterns, benefit generosity, and redistributive impact, such as those captured by terms like welfare state "effort" (Wilensky 1975) or "regimes" (Esping-Andersen 1990). In fact, as we shall see, one of the earliest questions asked by comparative research on citizens and the welfare state had to do with possible feedback effects of such long-standing, slowly accumulating policy legacies (e.g. Coughlin 1980).

More recent impetus for studying feedback and citizens comes from the fact that welfare states are changing. The expansionist "golden age" of the first post-war decades is often said to have been succeeded by a more sinister "era of permanent austerity" (Pierson 2001), spurred by some combination of external and internal reform pressures (i.e. sluggish growth, structural unemployment, international competition, population ageing, immigration, and European integration). While apocalyptic "race to the bottom" scenarios have clearly not materialized, the "old" politics of welfare expansion appears transformed into a "new politics of the welfare state" (Pierson 2001) with a focus on cost control, resource efficiency (Taylor-Gooby 2001; Palier and Martin 2007), coupled with moderate cutbacks of entitlements and services in the face of the multiple pressures (Korpi and Palme 2003; Scruggs 2008). These slow processes were recently accelerated in several countries by "the great recession" and the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis with its associated austerity packages.

Austerity-driven retrenchment, however, is not the "only game left in

town” (Vis et al. 2013). Some scholars highlight a more subtle “dualization” process where benefits and services remain rather stable for “insiders,” but where growing groups cannot access them due to part-time, fixed-term, or otherwise non-standard employment patterns (Emmenegger et al. 2012). By the same token, the notion that welfare states are being “recalibrated” has gained currency (Ferrera 2008). This entails a re-balancing of policy activity in which “new” risks (Bonoli 2005)—examples include work–life imbalances and skills obsolescence—receive more attention and resources, resulting in expansive reforms in family- and active labour market policy. Relatedly, scholars have identified a partial shift from traditional welfare state goals such as income security and equality to a “social investment” oriented welfare state (Morel et al. 2012), geared towards the creation, preservation, and efficient use of human capital. Finally, Europe’s welfare states have become increasingly affected by “multilevel governance” and European integration, which challenges national social protection and public services in multiple ways (Scharpf 1999; Ferrera 2005). Multilevel complexity, however, also emanates from regionalization and decentralization processes, where lower level actors have a keen eye for welfare responsibilities as a vehicle for gaining legitimacy (McEwen and Moreno 2005).

In conclusion, the long-standing country variation in policy legacies, as well as more recent policy change along several and intertwined dimensions call for a better understanding of how welfare states shape the attitudes and behaviour of the democratic public. This volume, of course, can only address a fraction of the questions raised by such complex patterns of variation and change. On the positive side, however, all chapters in this book analyse policy feedback and citizens in ways that connect with one or several of the broader debates and processes hinted at above.

In this introductory chapter we first consider the background and possible meaning of policy feedback. We then discuss past research on the three “dependent variables” around which the volume is organized (political participation, voting behaviour, and political attitudes and evaluations). A subsequent section samples the book’s methodological approaches, before we briefly tour its sections and chapters. We end with a brief appetizer for some of the broader themes that tacitly evolve throughout the book, and which will be explicitly revisited in the concluding chapter.

BROAD CONCEPT—SCATTERED RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

There is hardly an available standard definition of policy feedback. Following Theda Skocpol (1992:58), we define it in broad and simple

terms; that is, as the many ways in which “policies, once enacted, restructure subsequent political processes” (cf. Béland 2011). Such a general definition naturally opens up for many types and targets of feedback. As Skocpol points out, policies may transform both structural factors like state capacities and administrative arrangements, but also identities, goals and capabilities of elite actors and citizens.

Of course, this book limits itself to welfare state policies and citizens. But which attitudes and behaviour could and should, in principle, be studied? In the course of editing this book it has sometimes been suggested to us that the concept of policy feedback should be reserved for processes that fundamentally reshape the political “playing field”. From this vantage point, the dependent variables of interest are usually patterns of participation and deep-seated norms and values. Thus, policy feedback would refer to consequences of especially overarching and enduring relevance for future political behaviour and processes, while effects on more concrete and seemingly fleeting phenomena, such as party preferences, or very specific policy opinions and evaluations, are less worthy of the feedback label. Still, we would like to retain the broad scope of Skocpol’s definition. As we hope to demonstrate in the concluding chapter, it is in fact fruitful to *simultaneously* consider policy consequences for seemingly different aspects of citizens’ relationship with politics.

Our reasons can be explained by briefly considering how the concept of policy feedback found its way into research on citizens. On the one hand, the very idea is certainly an “oldsaw in political science” (Soss and Schram 2007:212), traceable through the intellectual history of this and neighbouring disciplines. On the other hand, it was only in the last two decades that it received more systematic theoretical and empirical attention. It was first reinvigorated theoretically by the broad “neo-institutionalist turn” in social science. Influential scholars associated with various brands of neo-institutionalism such as March and Olsen (1989), Pierson (1993), and Rothstein (1998) have analysed how past public policies can become part of the enduring institutional landscape that structures future politics and policy. While most work in this vein concerns elite-level change and stability, these scholars frequently rely also on far-reaching auxiliary assumptions about reactions of ordinary citizens, many of which are examined in the empirical contributions of this book.

As stimulating as such macro work can be, however, it has rarely been rooted in individual-level empirical knowledge about citizens. To be fair, there was at the beginning of the 1990s not all that much systematic research that macro theorists could have consulted. Even some ten years ago Mettler and Soss (2004:1), in their programmatic article on citizens and feedback, argued that “aside from some notable exceptions, political

science has had little to say about the consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship.”

This has clearly begun to change. A more recent review article points to “great strides in a few short years” at the same time as “outstanding questions linger as to the mechanisms and conditions under which feedbacks emerge” (Campbell 2012:334). Specifically, as the next section illustrates, various feedback-inspired hypotheses have been examined in empirical studies employing a host of dependent variables. More often than not, however, these studies have been pitched as contributions to research on these particular variables. Relevant findings are therefore scattered over these large and self-contained research communities. While this is understandable, policy feedback understood as the broad phenomenon defined above has become less visible. A contribution of this book, then, is to bring together scholars and studies from three important subareas of the vast political behaviour field. As we hope to eventually demonstrate, this yields mutual profit and analytical leverage in understanding overall democratic and political repercussions of welfare state stability and change.

AREAS OF RESEARCH: PARTICIPATION, VOTING AND ELECTIONS, ATTITUDES AND EVALUATIONS

The increased empirical attention to policy feedback came first to the study of *welfare state-related attitudes*. Specifically, it started with studies on whether cross-national differences and similarities in attitudes conform to the “regime” clusters Esping-Andersen (1990) and others discerned for policies, politics, and policy outcomes. The causal mechanisms identified in this literature are usually twofold. One entails a psychological *adaptation* to institutionalized realities; taking a simple example, support for redistribution and social protection should be more developed in social democratic institutional settings than in liberal ones. The other mechanism has to do with how policies structure material *interests*. For example, in social democratic regimes, where the welfare state more clearly protects also the middle classes, the impact of structural factors like class on welfare support might be diluted.

The jury still is out on many of these issues (for overviews, see Mau 2003; Kumlin 2007b; Svallfors 2010). While some authors have indeed discerned regime-consistent country differences in welfare state support there is much variation also among countries belonging to the same regime. Moreover, effects of socio-economic characteristics on attitudes vary tremendously, but only sometimes in ways suggested by regime classifications. In the face of such inconsistencies, Svallfors (2003) suggested

that policy feedback might be best captured by “unpacking” welfare regimes, i.e. by analysing policy effects and attitudinal reactions specific to key policy areas. As we shall see, several chapters follow down this path.

Most research in this vein has analysed normative support, whether for concrete policy areas or more generalized support for spending and redistribution. Less attention has been reserved for evaluations and perceptions of how the welfare state actually functions in practice (short-hand: performance evaluations). This imbalance is especially apparent in comparative research where normative support measures are abundant in most available data sets, whereas performance evaluations are not. This has now begun to change, however (e.g. Edlund 2006; Kumlin 2007a; Wendt et al. 2011). A key finding so far is that while normative support is rather strong and stable, concrete performance assessments are considerably more lukewarm all throughout Europe (van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012). Against this background, several chapters seek to fit performance evaluations into a policy feedback framework. Are such evaluations affected by actual policy variation and change? Do performance evaluations in turn affect the attitudes and behaviour of the democratic public?

A second area of past research concerns *political involvement and participation*. In contrast to studies on welfare attitudes, which grew mainly in comparative politics and sociology in Europe, this area developed primarily in the United States, particularly in the political science subfield of American politics (Mettler and Soss 2004; but see Solevid 2009; Stadelmann-Steffen 2011). Scholars have investigated a number of mechanisms through which the nature and scope of American social policies stimulate or suppress participation. Often, they have analysed policy feedback operating through the standard determinants (i.e. networks, resources, and motivation) identified by Verba et al. (1995). Additionally, several contributions in this field have been guided by Pierson’s (1993) notion of “interpretive” feedback effects through which citizens may learn political lessons that go beyond their immediate self-interest and material resources (cf. Schneider and Ingram 1993). Such lessons can concern deservingness and sense of entitlement, possibilities to influence politics, norms related to participation and policies, as well as views on the functioning and performance of policy areas.

Three influential pieces may illustrate this field. Campbell’s (2005) study on American “social security” and participation of the elderly showed that reliance on this program generally stimulates, but also equalizes, participatory patterns: effects tend to be stronger among those for whom benefits represent a larger share of the total income. Similarly, Mettler’s (2002)

research on the “GI Bill” suggests that this program has increased participation especially in lower socio-economic groups; this was explained by a combination of greater resources (education) as well as a broader interpretive effect having to do with a sense of gratitude to politics and the state. Finally, Soss’s (1999) groundbreaking study compared Americans with experiences of the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and the SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) respectively. Both in-depth interviews and survey data indicated that AFDC experiences had negative effects on electoral participation and beliefs about the responsiveness of government whereas SSDI experiences did not. By giving citizens the feeling of being underdogs in relation to the state, AFDC experiences generated negative attitudes towards public institutions and the political system. A related but broader concept of “institutionalized empowerment” (Hoff 1993) has been successfully applied in the very different Scandinavian setting, in analyses of political trust and ideology (Kumlin 2004), social trust (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005), as well as patterns of participation (Solevid 2009).

A third accumulation of findings concerns *electoral behaviour*. Older research in this area focused on group-specific public service consumption patterns to explain the decline of class voting and the rise of new self-interest-based “sectoral cleavages” (e.g. Dunleavy 1979). More recently, attention has been paid to electoral *accountability*, in particular whether citizens punish and reward incumbents for welfare state success and failure. Often influenced by Pierson’s (2001) *The New Politics of the Welfare State* these studies are concerned with immediate feedback effects on orientations towards the specific parties and governments that are perceived as responsible for unpopular retrenchment. As crucial as the simple accountability model is for democratic theory, however, it does so far not seem to capture the actual nature of feedback in European welfare states. Particularly, cuts in replacement rates and dissatisfaction with public services have appeared to matter little for government survival, except when cuts are very large and recent, and extensively covered in election campaigns (Kumlin 2007a; Armingeon and Giger 2008; Giger 2011; Alesina et al. 2012).

The exact reasons for this seeming lack of accountability in European welfare states are not well understood. However, they echo a general tendency to view both the institutional and informational conditions for accountability as poor (e.g. Powell 2000; Anderson 2007). Partly for these reasons, scholars have begun to examine whether performance and policy dissatisfaction generate frustration with the functioning of democratic institutions and actors more broadly, perhaps exactly because it is hard to hold specific actors to account (e.g. Newton 2006).

METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND PROGRESS

Campbell (2012:343) notes that “[a]lthough the literature on policy feedbacks has made considerable strides, several serious challenges remain for scholars working in this area. First is the question of causality and inference.” Generally, causal inference problems in empirical social science research are increasingly discussed (Rubin 1974; Falletti and Lynch 2009). In research on policy feedback these questions are important since policy can often be construed as both consequence and cause of attitudes and behaviour. What is more, past research on policy feedback has to a rather large extent relied on static cross-sectional/correlational designs (i.e. correlating welfare regimes with welfare opinions or individual-level welfare satisfaction with voting or political trust). The methodological argument of this book, therefore, is that cross-sectional approaches must be *complemented* with designs that provide more diverse and rigorous tests of causality. Still, some chapters continue to test feedback propositions using cross-sectional analysis. We think this is perfectly legitimate; after all, causality implies, among other things, correlation. But above all, the book brings more methodological diversity to the policy feedback field. For example, the chapters are equally divided between comparative analyses and country case studies. Further, some chapters draw on designs such as natural experiments (Chapter 8), difference-in-difference designs (Chapters 2 and 11), time-series or panel data (Chapters 2, 9 and 11), and survey experiments (Chapter 14). While not always strictly identifying causality, these approaches offer—at a minimum—alternative and more rigorous tests (cf. Finkel 1995), compared to the mainly cross-sectional nature of past research. Interestingly, in spite of the methodological diversity the chapters in this book converge in one way or another on the conclusion that welfare policies shape, or can shape, the democratic public. If nothing else, we hope this broad contention will stimulate further debate on repercussions of whatever mix of stability and change the future has in store for European welfare states.

OUTLINE OF THE VOLUME

Part II deals with *participation and involvement*. In Chapter 2, *Jordi Muñoz, Eva Anduiza, and Guillem Rico* investigate whether recent austerity measures in Spain have shaped political involvement. Using primary panel data and a difference-in-difference design they test if those particularly affected by these measures (e.g. recipients and public employees) change their level of political participation relative to citizens that have not suffered as

directly. They conceptualize participation broadly including mainly unconventional forms of participation as well as political interest and internal efficacy.

Jennifer Shore, in Chapter 3, emphasizes ramifications of long-term country differences in welfare state generosity. Using a multilevel design containing 26 countries, she asks how far the welfare state in general affects conventional and unconventional participation and if generous welfare state policy also reduces participatory inequalities in the sense that welfare state effects are stronger among lower income groups.

The last chapter (Chapter 4) of this section by *Marius R. Busemeyer* and *Achim Goerres* examines human capital oriented policies, in particular participatory repercussions of vocational training. Relying on a two-step multilevel analysis of 20 advanced democracies, they emphasize how vocational training experiences interact with broader features of the surrounding “production regime” in their impact on participatory patterns. In contrast to past research, which has repeatedly emphasized the positive association between individual education background and participation, the authors argue that the set-up of the education system—in turn related to “varieties of capitalism”—shape micro-level educational inequalities in political participation.

Part III deals with *voting behaviour and elections*. In Chapter 5, *Jane Gingrich* notes that redistributive policies vary not just in their impact on resources and life chances, but also in terms of how “visible” they are to citizens. Large and direct benefits, she argues, are more visible, whereas policy instruments such as tax breaks and indirect benefits may often pass under citizens’ radar. She measures such variation at the country as well as at the individual level. The question is whether these differences in welfare state design and experiences affect whether distributive attitudinal conflicts among the electorate find an outlet in actual voting behaviour.

In Chapter 6, *Paul Marx* and *Georg Picot* focus on fixed-term workers—a growing and increasingly disadvantaged group in the “age of dualization” (Emmenegger et al. 2012). They argue that labour and social protection jointly influence the composition of labour markets as well as the economic outlook of fixed-term workers. The question is whether this also shapes group-specific patterns of party preferences in four distinct policy settings (UK, Denmark, Germany, and Spain).

Chapters 7 and 8 ask whether and how incumbents are punished at the polls for retrenchment. While previous research has only found limited punishment effects, the two chapters modify this conclusion by showing that punishment exists but is group- as well as context-dependent. *Christoph Arndt* (Chapter 7) studies welfare state reforms in Germany. He argues that the “Bismarckian” nature of the German welfare system poses

a particular threat to parties that break with the “equivalence” and “status maintenance” principles. Such reforms run counter to deeply embedded expectations and norms, especially among the core constituency of the Social Democrats (roughly working class “insiders”).

Anders Lindbom (Chapter 8) advances the theoretical underpinnings of the debate over retrenchment and electoral punishment. He argues that retrenchment will only influence electoral choices if policies, and responsibilities for policies, are transparent, and if a credible political alternative exists, one that is not much involved in retrenchment. Lindbom uses an original data set to investigate whether dramatic hospital closures in Swedish counties have indeed produced electoral punishment at this political level.

Part IV of the book covers different dimensions of *attitudes and evaluations*. The first two chapters address generalized political support and legitimacy orientations (Chapters 9 and 10). The next two chapters study normative welfare attitudes (Chapters 11 and 12), whereas the final two chapters address evaluation of welfare state performance (Chapters 13 and 14).

Chapter 9 by *Staffan Kumlin* builds a link to the voting section by arguing that welfare generosity and performance only occasionally affect which parties citizens prefer, but more consistently impact on generalized political support for politicians and political institutions. However, such processes may also depend on context. Several hypotheses are tested, which suggest that the prevalence and costs of an underlying social risk interacts with generosity in policies insuring against it. Concentrating on unemployment benefit generosity, such propositions are tested in a three-level analysis of 11 countries over a time period of several decades.

Claire Dupuy and *Virginie Van Ingelgom* (Chapter 10) continue the discussion on general political trust and legitimacy. Focusing on regional divergence in attitudes over time in the two Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia, they analyse possible legitimation effects of regionalization of social policy responsibilities. Interestingly, after the federalization in 1993, the two regions have—from once close starting points—seen divergent trends in regional political support. In seeking an explanation, the authors argue that legitimation effects through regional social policymaking depend on three features of institutional and political context (the contrast between old national and new regional policies, actual and perceived performance, as well as the nature of public discourse).

Elias Naumann's Chapter 11 is the first of two that focus on policy variation or policy change effects on subsequent preferences in specific policy areas. Using both a difference-in-difference approach and multilevel analysis, Naumann asks how attitudes towards increasing the retirement age

have changed in recent years and if these were affected by recent reforms. Does raising the retirement age increase acceptance of further reform? Or is there a saturation mechanism so that reforms produce lower acceptance for further raises? Do such processes vary across different groups?

In Chapter 12, *Wim van Oorschot* and *Bart Meuleman* analyse how popular perceptions of the deservingness of the unemployed vary across Europe and whether these are related to policies, economic conditions and cultural context. Similar to Naumann's saturation thesis they argue that the feedback from generous unemployment benefits is thermostatic in nature: in a more generous context the unemployed will be perceived as less deserving. However, such effects on deservingness are also contingent on the saliency and nature of a particular policy measure, for example extent to which short-term and long-term unemployment respectively is covered.

Troels Fage Hedegaard and *Christian Albrekt Larsen* (Chapter 13) use a Danish data set to analyse several claims about how public service experiences and evaluations affect policy-specific spending preferences. Among them is the eternal idea that self-interested service users support spending on their own interests, but also the notion that a saturation effect may lead satisfied users (and other citizens) to not ask for more, while, by contrast, service dissatisfaction may be associated with further demands.

Chapter 14 by *Staffan Kumlin* continues the analysis of performance evaluations. Survey-embedded experiments, as well as natural experiments offered by TV programs from the Swedish 2006 election campaign, are used to investigate reactions to unusually comprehensive performance information. This contributes to the broader question of whether citizens can really evaluate performance in an informed way. Do they perceive welfare realities correctly? Do their current evaluations correspond to those they would have made with more and better information? These are important questions as representative democracy requires citizens to retrospectively hold rulers to account in an informed way, and as the anticipation of enlightened dissatisfaction is believed to force representatives to consider the true interests of the people.

LOOKING FORWARD TO CHAPTER 15

Observant readers will have noticed that the chapter presentations did not reveal actual results and conclusions. For detailed information on this we instead refer to individual chapters themselves. But we would also like to advertise the concluding Chapter 15, which is entirely devoted to discussing how a larger number of key results form a smaller number of broad themes in the study of policy feedback, citizens and welfare states. In so

doing, we will seek to illustrate insights that can be won by adopting an inclusive approach to policy feedback and juxtaposing findings concerning different dependent variables.

Let us offer five sneak previews. First, we will suspect that short-term and long-term participatory repercussions of retrenchment differ. Second, we will note that policies must probably not only structure material interests, but do so in a highly visible manner, in order to impact on political cleavages. Third, we will tell two stories—one democratically appealing, one rather sinister—about the seeming lack of electoral accountability for welfare dissatisfaction and retrenchment in Europe. Fourth, we will tentatively conclude that policy ramifications for generalized orientations towards politics and democracy may dominate those for voting behaviour. Fifth, we note that public opinion not only adapts, but frequently reacts against, the current direction of policy change.

On a higher level of abstraction, we hope to illustrate how a rather diverse menu of theoretical approaches and methodological designs nevertheless converges on the conclusion that welfare states indeed shape crucial facets of the democratic public. Equally important, however, there are several big contingencies and obstacles in such processes. Policy feedback can never be taken for granted but is dependent on the interests, information and evaluations of individual citizens, as well as on crucial features of the political context in which policy feedback may occur.

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