Preface

It is commonly acknowledged that contemporary European welfare states are subjected to long-term structural and ideological challenges, such as globalization, the restructuring of economic processes and labour markets, individualization, population ageing, and increasing cultural and ethnic diversity. Such challenges were exacerbated by the shock of the banking crisis in 2008, which was quickly followed by an economic recession in 2009. This, in turn, invoked a longer-lasting fiscal and debt crisis in many European states. As a reaction to these interconnected crises, governments in some European countries implemented far-reaching fiscal consolidation programmes, including significant welfare retrenchment and labour market reforms. Other countries launched general austerity programmes. In this same recent period, worldwide political instability and military conflicts set off sizeable refugee and migration movements towards Europe, thereby placing extra strain on welfare systems. This combination of challenges has resulted in a precarious political context, which in many European welfare states has been marked by an intensification of critical social and political debates about the necessity and fairness of redistributive, solidaristic relationships that have been organized through existing welfare arrangements, or that should be organized anew, in the light of social and economic challenges.

Amidst this social, economic and political turmoil of especially the past decade, and considering the intensified political debates and evolving policy reforms, it is imperative to have a broad and deep insight into the social legitimacy of European welfare states and their (reformed) policies. This social legitimacy, indicated by the degree to which the general public supports the welfare state and its provisions, is recognized as playing a role in the democratic politics of the welfare state. Either as an ex-ante factor informing policymakers about the welfare preferences of citizens, which they then can anticipate, or as an ex-post factor informing them about citizens’ evaluations of policies, to which they can react with adaptations. More recently, various volumes have addressed the social legitimacy of European welfare states by analysing and comparing the welfare attitudes of European citizens, mostly based on data from the first ‘welfare attitudes’ module of the European Social Survey 2008 (ESS wave 4) (see Chapter 1). This means that all these analyses are confined to a single year, 2008, in the case of studies...
analysing the module mentioned. However, given that the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath of economic downturn has intensified the pressures that were already resting on the shoulders of European welfare states, it has become pertinent to know how Europeans’ welfare attitudes have developed since then. This important question can be addressed using the recently released data from the ESS 2016 repeat module on welfare attitudes (ESS wave 8), which allows for the over-time comparison of European welfare attitudes.

This volume takes advantage of the availability of the two waves of the ESS and aims to shed light on the question of how public opinion about European welfare states and social policies developed between 2008 (the year of the banking crisis, coinciding with the year in which the first welfare attitudes module of the ESS was fielded) and 2016 (the year in which the repeat module was fielded). To this end, the chapters in the current book compare data from these two ESS welfare attitudes modules and focus on one central question: was there change or continuity in popular welfare attitudes in this particular period?

It will be revealed that the answer is not a matter of either/or, but one of both change and continuity. On the one hand, quite a number of changes in the levels and underlying patterns of popular welfare attitudes are noted. Some of the observations that stand out are the increase in overall polarization in terms of socioeconomic and political cleavages, the decrease in feelings of financial uncertainty and employment insecurity, and the cross-country convergence in popular attitudes. On the other hand, it is important to note that the observed changes are often marginal, and that a large number of continuities are also noted. It is found for example that welfare nationalism did not increase in Europe, despite the increased refugee influx, that religion did not become a more (or less) important explanatory factor for welfare attitudes, despite the ongoing secularization trend, and that popular preferences regarding old-age pensions were not affected by demographic ageing, despite the fact that the crisis had exacerbated its effect on welfare state sustainability. Although many European citizens experienced major shock events, such as the economic crises, welfare state reforms and migration inflows that followed after 2008, the findings overall indicate stability in the levels and underlying patterns of the welfare attitudes of Europeans between 2008 and 2016. By paying careful attention to both change and continuity in popular welfare attitudes, this book avoids ‘being obsessed with differences and change, to the expense of noting continuity and similarities’ - a mistake that is all too often made in social sciences according to Stefan Svalfors in his 2012 edited volume, *Contested Welfare States. Welfare Attitudes in Europe and Beyond* (p. 223).