

# **The Dynamics of Welfare Attitudes in Times of Welfare State Retrenchment**

Dissertation thesis

written at the Center for Doctoral Studies in the Social and Behavioral Sciences (CDSS)  
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by

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## **Preface**

The following paper is the framework paper of the dissertation “The Dynamics of Welfare Attitudes in Times of Welfare State Retrenchment”. It aims to provide a coherent research agenda in which the contribution of the four papers can be located. I will introduce the main arguments and summarize the main findings of the four papers.

- (1) Naumann, E. (2014). Increasing conflict in times of retrenchment? Attitudes towards healthcare provision in Europe between 1996 and 2002. *International Journal of Social Welfare*.
- (2) Jensen, C. & Naumann, E. (2014). Ideology and Preferences for Public Health Care in Europe. *European Sociological Review*, under review.
- (3) Naumann, E. (2014). Raising the retirement age: retrenchment, feedback and attitudes. in Kumlin, S. & Stadelmann-Steffen, I. (eds.) (2014). *How Welfare States Shape the Democratic Public: Policy Feedback, Participation, Voting, and Attitudes*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 223-243.
- (4) Naumann, E. (2014). Do Increasing Reform Pressures Change Policy Preferences? An Experimental Study on Population Ageing, Pension Reform Preferences, Political Knowledge and Ideology. *Journal of European Social Policy*, under review.

The four papers are attached to this framework paper as published / as submitted. Consecutive page numbers can be found in the top right of each page to allow for easy and unambiguous referencing. For the already published papers these page numbers thus complement the journals’ page numbering at the bottom of each page.



## 1 Introduction

Population ageing and its consequences for society are a recurrent issue in the political and public debate. Increasing costs are one consequence for the welfare state and in particular for health care and pension systems. At the same time the aftermath of financial crises restricts financial resources and further increases the reform pressure on social systems. What are the implications of the current socio-economic changes for social welfare? Most experts in the political debate call for far reaching reforms to adapt to the societal changes and consider retrenchment and restructuring necessary. Yet, public opinion is one of the crucial factors in the welfare reform process and the popularity of the welfare state makes retrenchment a risky reform for politicians and might block retrenchment efforts. For example, Boeri and Tabellini (2012: 327) conclude that it is so “difficult to reform the unsustainable and overly generous European pension system [since] a majority of elderly European voters want to gain at the expense of younger or future generations”. Thus, it is a crucial issue for our understanding of the current and the future reform process whether changing socio-economic conditions lead to changes in public attitudes towards welfare policies (Rehm et al. 2012).

More specifically, does public support for governmental provision of health care and pensions increase in periods of population ageing and economic strain? Do people want to be protected against the ‘hard times’? The socio-economic changes might also have resulted in an erosion of public welfare support if people follow a classical economic logic and accept retrenchment when faced with budgetary constraints. Regardless of the potential of public opinion to block retrenchment, reforms have taken place that restructured social systems and cut back social expenditures. Again it is of high relevance for subsequent reform processes how these policies feedback in the political process. “Do these policies tend to foster egoism [...], or do they tend to nurture [...] concern for others?” (Svallfors 2010: 242).

When we aim to answer these questions we have to link factors on the macro level (i.e. socio-economic developments and retrenchment) with the micro level (i.e. individual attitudes towards welfare policies). The theoretical approach of historical institutionalism is particularly suited to examine the research questions for at least two reasons. First, historical institutionalist arguments apply to a broad range of phenomena on the macro level and are not restricted to institutions as the only explanatory factor. To put it in the words of Hall & Taylor (1996: 942), “historical institutionalists rarely insist that institutions are the only forces in politics. They typically seek to locate institutions in a causal chain that accommodates a role for other factors, notably socioeconomic development and the diffusion of ideas“. Second, theoretical models that explain welfare attitudes on the individual level are closely linked to historical institutionalism and propose self-interest and values as determinants of individual welfare attitudes (Larsen 2006, Wendt et al. 2011). The basic claim of self-interest arguments is that individuals favour policies that bring material benefits for them. Also, welfare attitudes are ideologically motivated, and normative beliefs about justice (e.g. equality, equity or need) shape welfare preferences. These values are institutionalized in modern welfare states. The idea that both self-interest and values determine welfare attitudes has been well established empirically (Kumlin 2007, Svallfors 2007, van Oorschot et al. 2012).

Being criticized for its too static approach an important agenda within institutionalist scholarship is how institutional change can be explained (e.g. Steinmo 2008, Thelen 1999). Welfare attitudes research faces the same challenge and this applies to its theoretical arguments and to its methodological approach. On a theoretical level, self-interest and values are useful determinants when explaining the current 'state' of attitudes (i.e. the level and the pattern of support), but they seem to be less appropriate when explaining welfare attitude change.<sup>1</sup> A mechanism how societal change affects self-interest and values and in turn leads to attitude change is still missing. In this respect welfare attitudes research has inherited the neglect of historical institutionalism that "has devoted less attention than the other schools to developing a sophisticated understanding of exactly how institutions affect behavior, and some of its works are less careful than they should be about specifying the precise causal chain through which the institutions they identify as important are affecting the behavior they are meant to explain" (Hall & Taylor 1996: 950).

The explanation of institutional and attitude change is also a methodological challenge. Hedström (2005: 14) succinctly contrasts epistemological aspirations and research reality: „Most philosophers of science insist that causes and effects must be events, while sociologists and other social scientists refer to social states and various individual attributes as potential causes and effects. [...] It is difficult to see how change can be brought about except by another change, which suggests that causes are events too.” Relying mainly on cross-sectional data welfare attitudes research has difficulties to establish causality between institutions and welfare attitudes and therefore follows standard sociological terminology and refers to states and other non-events as potential causes and effects as well. It is of course preliminary evidence for how individuals change their welfare attitudes in respect to the institutional design of the welfare state when, for example, individuals in a generous welfare state are more supportive of the welfare state. However, the essential question is how people change their welfare attitude after the welfare state has changed.

This dissertation will add to our understanding of how societal change (i.e. increased reform pressures and retrenchment reforms) affects self-interest and values and how people change their welfare attitudes as a consequence. To address the theoretical challenge outlined above I propose three main mechanisms of how socio-economic developments and policies affect self-interest and values. Self-interest related incentive effects are distinguished from interpretative effects that affect values and ideologies. As a third mechanism I propose information effects.

How do socio-economic changes and retrenchment affect the self-interest related process of attitude formation? We know that welfare policies provide resources and incentives to individuals directly affecting their self-interest (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990). For example, health care systems provide care for

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<sup>1</sup> Attitudes have been defined in a variety of ways, but at the core is the notion of evaluation (Petty et al. 1997). For example attitudes are defined as „likes and dislikes“ (Bem 1970: 14) or „a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor“ (Eagly & Chaiken 1993: 1). Fishbein and Ajzen review the conceptual difficulties in defining attitudes but “note that the major characteristic that distinguishes attitude from other concepts is its evaluative or affective nature. [...] attitude may be conceptualized as the amount of affect for or against some object” (1975: 11). Accordingly, welfare attitudes can be defined as the general and enduring evaluation of the welfare state (e.g. how it should be organised or how its outcomes are evaluated), and welfare attitude change is the modification of an individual's evaluation of the welfare state.



the sick and mainly redistribute resources from the healthy to the sick. Depending on their health status or their individual health risk individuals thus should have varying interests in the public provision of health care. I argue that the mechanism that lead to welfare attitude change is not directly related to individual's self-interest – their interest in being protected in case of illness should remain the same – but to the way in which people perceive risks and how they evaluate potential gains and losses. Studies in behavioural economics have shown that people perceive gains and losses quite differently and claim that losses affect the utility much stronger than do gains (Kahneman et al. 1991, Kahneman & Tversky 1979). Based on prospect theory Pierson (1996) convincingly argued that attitude formation in times of retrenchment follows a quite different logic than in times of welfare state expansion. Self-interest and the preference for the status quo become much stronger and people are more willing to take risks when faced with potential losses.

The second mechanism I propose takes the value-related explanation of welfare attitudes as the starting point. Welfare attitudes are shaped by values and norms that are part of the institutional environment. Socialization is assumed to be the mechanism that links institutions and individual welfare attitudes (Larsen 2006, Wendt et al. 2011). These explanations fall short on understanding short-term shifts in attitudes towards welfare policies as a function of societal changes. I argue that our understanding of the process of individual attitude change could be considerably improved with a specific mechanism that explains how socio-economic developments and social policy reforms affect values and norms.

I suggest information effects as a third mechanism. For example, one consequence of population ageing might be that healthy, elderly people will be increasingly present and visible in the daily environment. Increased information about older people and an increased awareness of population ageing might change the perception of the deservingness of older people to get publicly financed pension benefits and the perception of an appropriate retirement age. These normative implications of population ageing could then also lead to changes in welfare attitudes before other, more substantial, self-interest related aspects of population ageing such as financial problems of the pension system or an increased burden to the health care system come into play. While recent advances in institutionalism stress the importance of ideas and discourse for successful welfare state reforms (Schmidt 2010), welfare attitude research has largely neglected information effects (for an exception see Boeri & Tabellini 2012). To get a better understanding on exactly how individuals process information and form their attitudes I rely on a model of attitude formation proposed by political psychologists. Zaller (1992) describes the process of attitude formation in three steps: people receive information, they accept them (or not), and when finally forming their attitude they rely on a sample of related evaluations, considerations and attitudes already stored in their memory. In contrast to socialization such a model of attitude formation might be better able to accommodate also short-term, value-driven attitude change.

The main contribution of the dissertation is threefold. On an analytical level I provide a thorough theoretical micro-foundation of existing welfare attitude research by paying explicit attention to the individual mechanisms that link the macro level (i.e. increasing reform pressure and retrenchment reforms) to the micro level (individual welfare attitudes). How do individuals react to increased reform

pressure? How are well-established determinants of welfare attitudes such as self-interest and values affected by societal changes? Relying on established findings from neighbouring fields, in particular from political psychology and behavioural economics, this (sociological) dissertation strongly benefits from its interdisciplinary approach. On a methodological level I will contribute to welfare attitudes research by complementing the standard approach in the field – i.e. the estimation of multilevel models – with three innovative research designs: a difference-in-differences-estimation, a natural experiment and a survey experiment. These research designs help to overcome the methodological challenges linked to multilevel models (such as small N and endogeneity) and get closer to establish causality between institutional and socio-economic changes and welfare attitudes. Combining all four papers in one coherent framework of the political process promises a third contribution. This framework aims to locate public opinion in a causal chain that accommodates a role for institutional change and policy reform but also for socio-economic developments and for the role of discourse and information. By elaborating how the findings fit into the political reform process it moves the field of welfare attitudes research from a rather static to a more dynamic perspective.

I will use two specific social policy fields as an empirical test case and examine health care and pension preferences instead of more general attitudes such as redistribution (e.g. Blekesaune 2007, Dallinger 2010, Jæger 2006) or spending preferences for overall social welfare (e.g. Soroka & Wlezien 2009). In doing so I follow recent trends in welfare attitudes research that moved towards the separate examination of more specific attitudes in each policy field acknowledging that the “welfare state is an umbrella term covering a range of governmental activities that have distinct characteristics” (Pierson 2001: 11).<sup>2</sup> Reform pressures, their perception and their consequences are specific to each policy field. Ageing, demographic change and the resulting imbalance between the working and the retired population are the main challenges for pension policies. Ageing, new diseases but also technological change increased the financial burden for health care systems. The same argument also holds on the individual level where increased risks due to the reform pressures are policy specific. Self-interest is related to different individual traits such as old age, (risk of) illness and (risk of) unemployment. Moreover, people’s basic values, their understanding of how welfare should be organized might differ between policy fields even within the same country. For example, equal access to health care in case of sickness might be the dominant value in health care, whereas merit-based pensions in old age according to one’s previous earnings might be the common value behind pension preferences.

These arguments strongly support the examination of each policy field separately. I chose pensions and health care since they are the most relevant fields of the welfare state in terms of social spending. On average 18.8% of the GDP of OECD countries is spent on pensions and health care. Around three quarter of this is public spending: 82% in pensions and 72% in health care (OECD 2013). Moreover, both policy fields are heavily affected by increasing reform pressure related to long-term population ageing. Reforms aimed at retrenching benefits or services are high on the political agenda such

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<sup>2</sup> For empirical evidence of this claim see Busemeyer et al. 2009, Svallfors 2008, and Wendt et al. 2011.

as increasing the retirement age or prioritization in medical care. Thus, it is of high political relevance to understand how reform preferences in these two fields develop in times of austerity.

This dissertation presents the results of my research on the dynamics of welfare attitudes in times of welfare state retrenchment. Four studies are the empirical basis of this dissertation, two are concerned with health care attitudes and two with pension reform preferences. In the first paper I show that, even in times of austerity, support for public health care remains high and stable and that people are not merely self-interested in their attitudes towards public health care. Instead, ideology and values also shape attitudes towards public health care. While the results of the first paper are based on Eurobarometer data and a multilevel model (cross-sections from 1996-2002 in 15 countries), I increase the empirical scrutiny of these findings and focus in particular on the robustness of the effect of political ideology in the second study. Relying on a natural quasi-experiment that exogenously manipulates the increased reform pressure due to the onset of an influenza epidemic (17 countries in 2008) and data from the European Social Survey (ESS), results of the second study confirm the assumption of a strong and universal support for public health care. Even an external shock (i.e. the influenza in 2008/2009) does not show any support eroding effect. Moreover, the effect of political ideology is extremely weak and disappears when respondents are exposed to increased risks due the influenza epidemic. No matter their ideological views, all citizens generally tend to support public health care in times of austerity.

The third and the fourth study are concerned with pension reform preferences. The third study uses a difference-in-differences approach to provide evidence that there is a feedback effect of socio-economic developments and of policy reforms on public attitudes towards pension reforms (cross-sections from 2004-2009 in 25 countries). Employing data from the Eurobarometer survey series along with institutional data on reform pressures and pension reforms from the OECD, I am able to show that population ageing leads to an increased acceptance of retrenchment efforts such as of a reform raising the retirement age. Still, once enacted a reform increasing the retirement age reduces reform acceptance in the following year. This is strong evidence of a saturation effect and that people react against the reform direction. As for individual differences I find that both self-interest-related and value-related factors shape pension reform preferences. They remain important determinants of the pattern of reform preferences and seem to be unaffected by increasing reform pressure. Political ideology is the only exception in this respect and the results provide initial evidence that the difference in reform preferences between the left and the right decreases with increasing reform pressures. The fourth study uses novel data from the German Internet Panel (GIP) from 2013 and a survey experiment to proof the feedback effect of population ageing on reform preferences using a stricter empirical test. As suggested by the analyses of the third paper, detailed information on and increased awareness of population ageing weakens the opposition against raising the retirement age. Moreover, the conflict over pension reform proposals between left and right voters – the left tend to support the status quo or even expansion of expenditures, the right is more willing to accept retrenchment – disappears when both groups are made aware of increasing reform pressures due to population ageing.

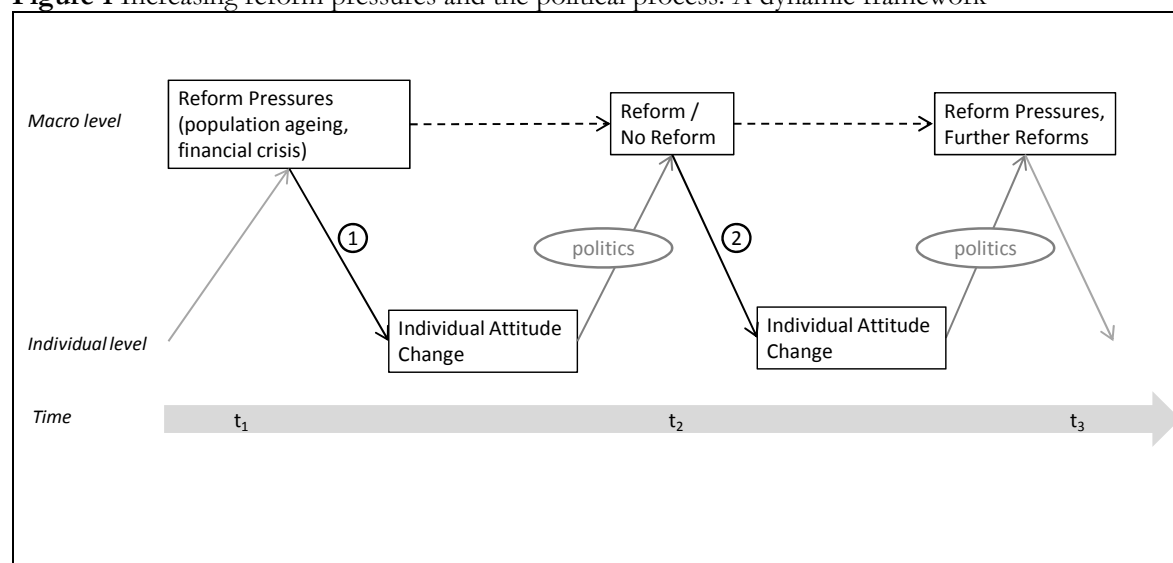
The purpose of this framework paper is to combine the findings of the aforementioned papers into a coherent story about socio-economic developments, social policy reform and individual welfare attitudes. Section 2 “Attitudes and the political process” tries to build a causal chain that provides a dynamic model of the political reform process accommodating socio-economic developments and rising reform pressures, public attitudes towards the welfare state and reform preferences, and policy reform and institutional change. Section 3 provides the theory for this dissertation. It starts with a review of existing theoretical explanations of how institutions and attitudes are linked and identifies the lack of precise causal mechanisms through which institutions are affecting welfare attitudes as a gap in the existing literature. Relying on established findings from neighbouring fields (i.e. behavioural economics and political psychology) I propose three mechanisms how socio-economic and institutional changes might affect the formation of welfare attitudes. Based on these mechanisms the hypotheses are deducted. Section 4 is concerned with the state of welfare attitudes research and summarizes our knowledge on health care and pension attitudes. It shows that we are in particular missing longitudinal analyses of welfare attitudes. Accordingly, section 5 starts with describing the standard methodological approach to analyse the usually available cross-sectional data, i.e. the estimation of multilevel models. The difficulty to establish causality with this methodological approach is discussed as a major challenge for the research field. I then propose new research designs that come closer to the idea of an ideal, experimental design. I describe the three innovative research designs and discuss how they can help to complement existing research. Section 5 concludes with data sources and how welfare attitudes are measured. Section 6 summarizes the main findings of the four papers. The final section of this framework paper is the conclusion where I discuss policy implications and focus in particular on elaborating a research agenda for the next years of research.

## 2 Attitudes and the political process

### 2.1 A dynamic framework

Although socio-economic changes, reform pressures, institutions and policy reforms are all phenomena that occur on the societal level they refer to different aspects of the reform process. Nonetheless, in the following I will show that the same mechanisms can be used to explain how they affect individual level attitudes.<sup>3</sup> Despite the conceptual similarities socio-economic developments and reform pressures on the one hand and institutions and policies on the other hand are distinct and are examined in different literatures. Therefore I will distinguish between both in this general framework. In a nutshell, current socio-economic developments increase pressure to reform and increased pressure can lead to reforms that alter welfare institutions. Welfare institutions can then moderate the effect of socio-economic developments on reform pressures. This kind of argument highlights the temporal dependence of factors in the reform process and is in line with historical institutionalist understanding that “history is not a chain of independent events” (Steinmo 2008: 126). In this section I outline the different relationships between reform pressures, individual attitudes and reforms in order to provide a dynamic framework of the political reform process (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Increasing reform pressures and the political process: A dynamic framework



Socio-economic changes seem to be a good starting point for the description of the political process since, at first glance, they seem to be exogenous to attitude formation. Most prominently in the welfare state literature Pierson (2001: 410) states that “contemporary politics of the welfare state take shape against a backdrop of both intense pressures for austerity and enduring popularity”. The ‘New Politics of the Welfare State’ approach claims that interest formation in times of welfare state austerity follows a quite different logic when compared with times of welfare state expansion. As long as the

<sup>3</sup> Although historical institutionalism is mainly concerned with the role of institutions for politics other factors such as socio-economic development and the diffusion of ideas are easily accommodated in historical institutionalist arguments (Hall & Taylor 1996).

welfare state was expanding reforms were basically aiming at distributing additional benefits. Even if benefits were not distributed equally and interests might be conflicting, opposition to reform is assumed to be less pronounced as people usually agree with a reform if they at least benefit to a certain degree. In contrast, in times of austerity reform is about retrenchment, about cutting back benefits or at least recalibrating the welfare state (Pierson 2001). Opposition to such reforms is assumed to be much stronger when groups who benefit from the welfare state will defend ‘their’ programmes and acquired rights.

Previous research in political science suggests the potential of public opinion to block reform. This might be the result of democratic responsiveness: citizens’ preferences shape their vote choice and the election outcome that determines the formation of government (Powell 2004). Parties and politicians that propose welfare state retrenchment might just not be (re-)elected.<sup>4</sup> Also, politicians anticipating the electoral consequences of retrenchment might not propose such reforms in the first place avoiding blame for unpopular actions (Weaver 1986). Following this kind of argument, the increased opposition to retrenchment in times of austerity could block subsequent reforms. Nevertheless reforms take place even in times of austerity (see Häusermann 2010, Palier 2010 for examples of pension reforms). Somehow the relationship between public opinion and policy reforms has to be more nuanced. The question arises how public opinion and policy reforms are linked. This is a prominent and widely researched topic in political and social sciences. Theoretical and empirical research support the claim that it is, in fact, an interrelationship: public opinion affects policy making (Brooks & Manza 2006, Burstein 2003, Page & Shapiro 1983, Stimson et al. 1995) and policies affect public opinion (Burstein 2006, Mettler & Soss 2004, Pierson 1993). These policy feedback effects then alter attitudes again, and a new ‘period’ of reform making starts – be it an electoral cycle or a period of one year.

Figure 1 illustrates the role of individual attitudes in the political process. Let me briefly demonstrate the usefulness of such a framework with a half-imaginary, half-anticipated example of pension reforms. Population ageing (the reform pressure) might increase the awareness of the financial unsustainability of a pay-as-you-go pension system. This might increase the willingness to accept retrenchment such as increasing the retirement age and eventually such a reform might get enacted. Then policy feedback effects come into play: people might experience the positive consequences of such a reform (or the absence of negative ones) and further increase their willingness to accept retrenchment. As a ‘side effect’ reforms also affect the behaviour of individuals – for example people change their retirement behaviour in reaction to reforms (e.g. Hofäcker & Naumann 2014, Hofäcker et al. 2014). This change of behaviour might even dampen reform pressures, starting the process from anew. This short illustrative example suggests that reform pressures – even such seemingly ‘exogenous’ pressures as a financial crisis or population ageing – are partly the result of previous political reform processes.

This framework puts a strong focus on the dynamic character of the reform process. Each paper of this dissertation examines one part of the process at a time. The focus is either on the effect of reform

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<sup>4</sup> I am aware that the degree of democratic responsiveness and hence also the potential of public opinion to block reforms depends on the political system (e.g. Lijphart 1984).

pressures and increased risks on attitudes (① in Figure 1) or on the effect of reforms on attitudes (② in Figure 1). However, all papers are embedded in and make reference to this idea of a dynamic process. Such a dynamic framework highlights the idea that even small and seemingly insignificant changes can have a relevant impact in the reform process. The concept of path dependence is of particular relevance in this respect.

Path dependence is used in several ways in the social science literature. I focus on those definitions that see path dependence in terms of positive feedback.<sup>5</sup> Path dependence occurs when a phenomenon has positive externalities (i.e. beneficial side effects), such that the value of the phenomenon increases as it spreads. For example, small increases in reform pressures might continuously alter the functioning of existing institutional arrangements. This leads to small changes in attitudes that in turn lead to minor recalibration attempts of existing policies. If people experience positive consequences due to a policy change they may want to have ‘more of the same’ assuming that further policy changes in the same direction will have further positive effects. These policy changes then feed back into the political life and might again change the policy preferences (of some people). For example, an existing status quo bias might be steadily reduced by the introduction of several smaller changes. These incremental changes can nevertheless add up to big transformations over time: if policies and public opinion move persistently into the same direction a significant and visible policy change becomes apparent in the long run.

## **2.2 The political relevance of welfare attitudes: the level and pattern of support and opposition**

When elaborating the framework I mainly referred to attitudes as the level of attitudes, i.e. the extent to which the population as a whole supports or opposes a reform proposal. This seems to be the first starting point when answering questions such as whether solidarity erodes in times of austerity. This is motivated by theoretical and empirical research in political science that stresses the importance of the median voter, of the overall ‘policy temperature’ (Soroka & Wlezien 2009) or of the ‘policy mood’ (Page & Shapiro 1983, Stimson 1999) to explain reform politics. In a nutshell, what determines the success of a reform is not how different groups within society change their preferences but whether the population as a whole changes its preference.

Of course the focus on aggregate public opinion might hide changes. Even when the overall level of support does not change and one would observe a stable support for the welfare state, what might nevertheless have changed is the pattern of attitudes. Some groups might have withdrawn their support whereas others are even more in favour of a strong welfare state. Consequently, I put an additional focus on the pattern of attitudes and the question of whether groups within society react to societal changes in the same way. This seems to be equally relevant for the political process for one major reason. When

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<sup>5</sup> In economics, this approach has been widely used to explain how early and idiosyncratic advantages for technologies cause actors to adapt in ways that strongly reinforce the initial advantage (see for example the famous case of the QWERTY typewriter keyboard (David 1985)). These ideas have also been extended to the study of institutional and organizational change in political science and sociology (Ebbinghaus 2009, Mahoney 2000, Pierson 2004).

social groups within society react differently to reform pressure a conflict between these groups emerges, or if already there increases.

Conflict is a recurrent issue both in the sociological and in the political science literature to explain the emergence of the welfare state. A large body of sociological literature is concerned with social class, and power resources theory convincingly shows what impact the labour movement had on the emergence and the expansion of the welfare state (Korpi 1983). Partisan cleavages and their impact on the politics of (welfare) state development are a classical topic of political research. Theoretically, the left-right ideological dimension maps onto the state-market cleavage (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). Left parties mainly representing the interests of working classes prefer a strong state whereas right parties want the market to solve social problems and are seen as the opponents of a strong welfare state.

With the rise of new societal issues – such as political participation, environmental protection or immigration that do not follow along ‘classical’ conflict lines (Deegan-Krause 2006) – new cleavages such as gender or educational differences emerged (Brooks et al. 2006, Inglehart 1977). Most discussed in the current public debate is the looming generational conflict (Busemeyer et al. 2009, Naumann et al. 2014). The emergence of new cleavages is also a central claim of the new politics approach (Pierson 2001). One of Pierson’s argument why retrenchment policies are difficult to enact states that they lead to concentrated losses and diffuse gains. Accordingly, new conflicts should become apparent between those (comparable) few people that loose from retrenching reforms (for example pensioners, or people with a bad health) and the majority of people that are rather unaffected by the possibility of diffuse gains. As Dahl (1956) argued, democracies are often characterized by ‘minorities rule’, in which small intense groups tend to hold sway. These minorities can be committed opponents to welfare state retrenchment from our example above, but also committed opponents to the welfare state such as neoclassical economic elites. “Thus distribution of opposition to or polarization regarding social policies may well be as pivotal as overall public support in explaining policy reforms” (Rehm et al. 2012: 387). Given their relevance for the reform process all four papers of this dissertation focus on both the level and the pattern (i.e. the polarization) of attitudes. Moreover, I complement existing studies that predominantly focus on welfare state support with an explicit examination of reform opposition.



### 3 Theory – How institutions and welfare attitudes are linked

Institutional theories aim to explain how institutions change. Institutions can be incentive structures, macro-historical regularities or cultural norms. The new institutionalism emphasized that all kind of groups, not just elites or the state, are actors in the process of institutional change. At the core of each institutional theory is the explanation of how institutions affect the behaviour and the attitudes of these actors. Behavioural or attitudinal change of the actors can then lead to a change of these institutions.<sup>6</sup> Institutional theory thus provides a theoretical foundation to explain how institutions and attitudes are linked. “It can be argued that major welfare institutions are likely to be of relevance for the formation of values, attitudes, and interests among citizens” (Korpi 2003: 598).

In the following I start with summarizing the three main traditions of new institutionalism: rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and historical institutionalism (Hall & Taylor 1996). In line with previous welfare attitudes research I consider historical institutionalism as the most appropriate explanation to link institutions and attitudes (Larsen 2006, Wendt et al. 2011). Still, these theoretical accounts seem to have inherited a weakness of historical institutionalism: “they have devoted less attention [than the other schools] to developing a sophisticated understanding of exactly how institutions affect behaviour” (Hall & Taylor 1996). This dissertation tries to fill this gap by specifying mechanisms through which institutions affect attitudes. Acknowledging the complexity of this process I aim to develop middle range theories and propose three different mechanisms (instead of one parsimonious theory): interpretative feedback effects, incentive effects and information effects.

#### 3.1 The macro-context of welfare attitudes – New institutionalisms

Rational Choice institutionalism evolved from economic studies that examined how organizations, or more general, social norms and cooperation, help to increase the efficiency of transactions between self-interested, rational actors (Coase 1960). A basic assumption is that people have fixed preferences and seek to maximize their utility. Organizations are then the result of voluntary agreements between rational actors that help to reduce transaction costs in situations of strategic interaction and help to overcome collective action dilemmas (North 1990, Williamson 1981). In this understanding institutions exist because they help to reduce the uncertainty about others’ behaviour and to maximize the utility of all actors. The focus of rational choice institutionalism is thus mainly on how institutions emerge. Still, once in place institutions affect attitudes by providing incentives and constraints. So their effect on behaviour works through the strategic calculus and the self-interest of people.

Sociological institutionalism questions the basic rational choice argument that institutions emerge and exist because they increase the utility and serve the self-interest of actors. Instead scholars in this

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<sup>6</sup> This kind of argument follows the basic explanatory model in sociology (Coleman 1990) which is also the framework of this dissertation (Figure 1). Of course, the three traditions differ in which part of the explanation they stress the most. Whereas historical and sociological institutionalism take the existence of institutions as given and try to explain how new institutions are created or adopted in a world already replete with institutions, rational choice institutionalism is rather concerned with how institutions and norms (as a pareto superior equilibrium to the existing condition) can emerge from the rational calculus of actors.

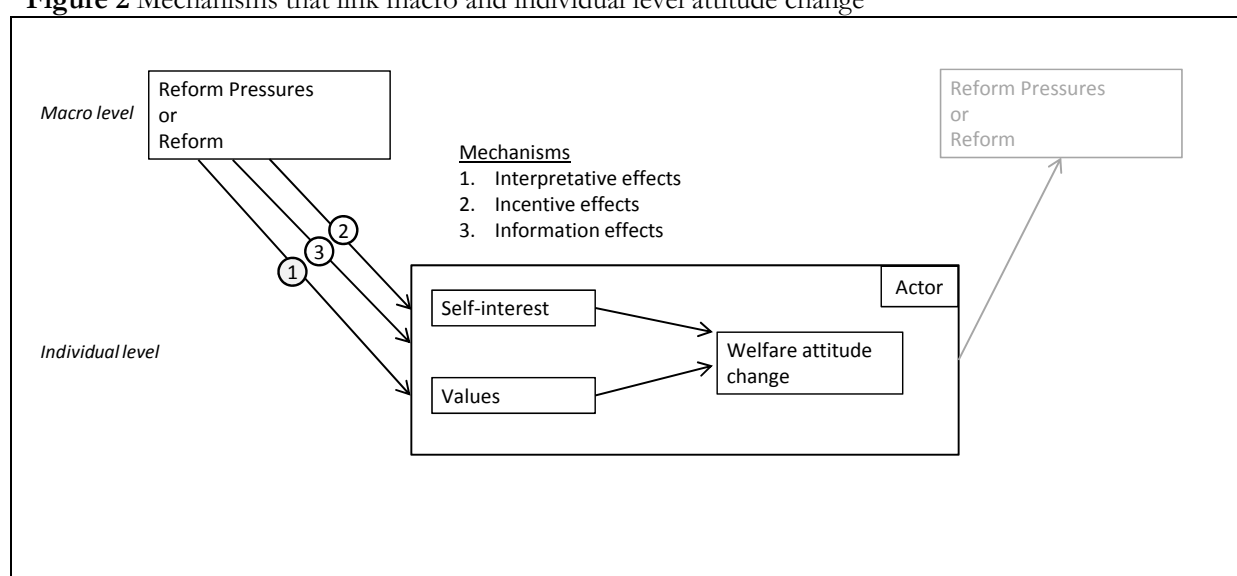
tradition emphasize the importance of culturally framed rules and take for granted scripts and norms (DiMaggio & Powell 1991). Sociological institutionalism has a much broader understanding of what institutions are. In addition to rules and norms also symbol systems, cognitive scripts and moral templates are part of the institutional environment that provides orientation how to act in a socially meaningful way. A central element of this approach is that social action is tightly bound to interpretation (Berger & Luckmann 1991). People might still act rational but what they perceive as a rational action is socially determined and not only the result of the objective facts of the situation. Such a broad conception of institutions blurs the distinction between institutions and culture, between incentives due to institutional constraints and shared values that are linked to cultural socialization. “It follows that institutions do not simply affect the strategic calculations of individuals, as rational choice institutionalists contend, but also their most basic preferences and very identity.” (Hall & Taylor 1996: 948).

The focus of historical institutionalism is primarily on how institutions shape political and economic decision making. “After all, it is through the actions of individuals that institutions have an effect on political outcomes” (Hall & Taylor 1996: 939). Institutions are defined as norms and conventions, as the formal and informal procedures and routines of organizations. Compared to the other two approaches historical institutionalism has a broader understanding of how individuals are affected by institutions. Both ‘calculus’ and ‘cultural’ explanations are proposed and self-interest and values work together in determining individual action. Of course, historical institutionalism is not just a combination of the two other approaches. For example, Thelen and Steinmo insist that “one, perhaps *the* core, difference between rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism lies in the question of preference formation, whether treated as exogenous (rational choice) or endogenous (historical institutionalism)” (Thelen & Steinmo 1992: 9).

Like previous theoretical models of welfare attitude formation (Larsen 2006, Wendt et al. 2011) I consider historical institutionalism to be particularly suited to analyse how institutions affect attitude formation. Historical institutionalists’ understanding of individual action includes both self-interest and values as important explanatory determinants. This view of individual action and preferences is in line with current research in micro sociology that proposes a broader understanding of rationality (Kroneberg 2011, Lindenberg et al. 2006). In this wide version of rational choice theory, preferences can encompass such diverse motivations as altruism, fairness or, more generally, the desire to act according to one’s identity, values, and internalized norms (Kroneberg & Kalter 2012). Such a broader understanding is better able to explain preference formation and change and thus overcomes the difficulties of rational choice theory that is criticized for its economic determinism (Mansbridge 1990). Still, in contrast to sociological institutionalism the basic analytical distinction between institutions and culture on the macro level, as well as between self-interest and values on the individual level is maintained. This distinction is necessary to account for the different mechanisms that link institutions to self-interest and values (see below).

Whereas self-interest and values are useful determinants when explaining the current level and pattern of attitudes, they seem to be less appropriate as explanations of attitude change. Instead of mechanisms linking the institutional context and individual attitudes, self-interest and values are rather determinants of attitudes on the individual level. Both, historical institutionalism and the two theoretical applications to welfare attitudes would strongly benefit from a specific mechanism linking societal change to self-interest and values and in turn explaining attitude formation. “Although much macro-historical work was already implicitly sensitive to these issues, articulating the micro-foundational logic of the arguments offered was not top priority” (Thelen 1999: 370). In the following I propose such mechanisms that bridge the macro and the micro level and add a more dynamic perspective to historical institutionalism (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Mechanisms that link macro and individual level attitude change



### 3.2 Mechanisms linking the macro and the micro level

The rise of historical institutionalist research directed political scientists' attention to Schattschneider's (1960: 23) statement that "new policies create new politics". As defined by Skocpol (1992: 58) policy feedback refers to the ways "policies, once enacted, restructure subsequent political processes." The basic aim of the policy feedback literature is to explain "why some policies draw citizens into public life and others induce passivity. We should have a sense of how living under a given policy regime affects citizens' goals, beliefs and identities – and hence the possibilities and limits for future political action" (Mettler & Soss 2004: 46). In the welfare state literature Esping-Andersen's (1990) famous contribution can also be understood in terms of policy feedback since he was interested in how social policies affect class stratification, new kinds of equality and inequality, and citizens' dependence on states and markets. Subsequent studies in the welfare attitudes literature then examined whether his regime typology is linked to (or feed back into) welfare attitudes and thus promote solidarity (e.g. Andreß & Heien 2001).

Policy feedback affects both citizens' attitudes and their behaviour. In this dissertation I focus on feedback effects on attitudes, i.e. on goals, beliefs and identities. In his summary of the research field Pierson (1993) distinguished two main types of feedback effects. First, resource and incentive effects link policies to the self-interest of people since they determine how resources are distributed, provide incentives and thus shape the costs and benefits of actors. They strengthen the rational choice elements in my argument. Second, interpretative effects provide a mechanism to link policies and attitudes via values since they serve as sources of information and meaning. Interpretative effects can be understood as a mechanism in the sociological tradition.

As a starting point these two broad categories of feedback effects are very helpful since they provide a bridge between macro oriented historical institutionalist ideas and micro-oriented theories of attitude and preference formation: both use self-interest and values as their basic concepts. Nevertheless Pierson's description of the mechanisms that link policies and in particular public opinion remained rather unspecific. He acknowledges that there is a need to further "develop middle-range theories that acknowledge both the complexity of feedback and its context-specific qualities" (Pierson 1993: 625). The elaboration of such middle-range theories that can be used to explain welfare attitude change is the aim of the following section. Interpretative effects that affect values and ideologies are distinguished from self-interest related incentive effects. As a third mechanism I propose information effects acknowledging that "the informational content of public policies deserves particular attention. There has been growing attention to the ways in which institutional structure facilitates or impedes information flows" (Pierson 1993: 626).

### 3.2.1 *Interpretative effects*

The policy feedback literature provides several mechanisms how policies affect values and identities of people (Mettler & Soss 2004).<sup>7</sup> First of all, policies define membership and determine who belongs to the political community. Moreover, policies set rules about what rights but also what responsibilities are linked to membership. In addition to the most obvious case of migration policies this applies also to welfare policies. For example, pension policies define who belongs to the group of pensioners, what kind of benefits pensioners can expect and what responsibilities they have (Do they have to pay taxes? Do they lose their rights when they work for pay?). The mechanism of defining group membership does not necessarily affect the values of people. Nevertheless it is a necessary condition for a second mechanism – delineating groups– that is directly related to interpretative effects.

By defining the membership to a social group (of beneficiaries) policies have the potential to delineate groups. They "influence patterns of group identity [...] and play an active role in constructing and positioning such groups, and infusing them with political meaning" (Mettler & Soss 2004: 61). The definition of a retirement age, for example, not only defines a group of people as pensioners but also might convey the message that these people are not able to work anymore and deserve the support from

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<sup>7</sup> In the following I will use policy to describe what happens on the macro level. Nevertheless, reform pressures such as population ageing or financial crises obviously can have the same consequences (via the same mechanisms) as policies.

society. In contrast when strict control mechanisms and access regulations are added to a policy (for example in health care or even more so in labor market policies) beneficiaries might be seen as less trustworthy and less deserving. In this manner, policies can affect citizens' ideas about which groups are deserving or undeserving (Schneider & Ingram 1993) which has major implications for the formation of welfare attitudes (Larsen 2008, van Oorschot 2000).

Related to this is another policy feedback mechanism. Policies directly frame policy agendas and public perceptions of societal problems. First, the design of a policy can determine the salience of an issue in the subsequent public debate. When, for example, future changes of the retirement age are automatically linked to the development of life expectancy such implicit retrenchment of pension benefits (by automatically increasing the retirement age) gets implemented unnoticed. In such a way existing policies have a direct effect on people's attitudes towards the policy agenda and its salience. And the salience of an issue has not only an effect "on what we think about, but also what we think" (Weaver 1991: 53) and leads to stronger opinions among citizens. Moreover, policies "frame the meaning and origins of societal problems by identifying target groups for government action and defining solutions" (Mettler & Soss 2004: 62). Let us take the labour market and possible reasons for unemployment as an example. When the government promotes job-training programs the focus is on a lack of skills, when wage subsidies are introduced the focus is on the structural limitations of the labour market and potential consequences of globalization, whereas strict regulations of the access to unemployment benefits shifts the focus to individual behaviour and self-discipline (Gusmano et al. 2002). So, policies can alter frames and the way people think about an issue. As framing has been shown to influence individual attitudes (Chong & Druckman 2007), the framing of a policy can heavily affect reform preferences.

### 3.2.2 *Incentive effects*

Behavioural economics is a recent and very popular field of study that has extended the very narrow rational choice perspective. The focus of behavioural economics is on behaviour that seems to be at odds with self-interest: for example, people give away part of their money in completely anonymous, one-shot dictator games or they reject offers in an ultimatum game. Two main explanations have been proposed to account for these 'anomalies': norms of fairness and reciprocity (Bolton & Ockenfels, Fehr & Schmidt 1999) and biased perceptions of gains and losses (Kahneman & Tversky 1979). Prospect theory and the role of biased perception of gains and losses seem to be most promising to explain attitude formation in times of austerity. Of particular interest are the ideas of loss aversion (and linked to it the status quo bias) and context-dependent risk-behaviour (i.e. risk averse behaviour in a gain frame and risk-taking in a loss frame).<sup>8</sup>

Studies in behavioural economics show that people perceive gains and losses quite differently and they claim that losses affect the utility much stronger than gains do (loss aversion, Kahneman & Tversky 1979). "The disutility of giving up an object is greater than the utility associated with acquiring it"

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<sup>8</sup> "The value function is normally concave for gains, commonly convex for losses, and is generally steeper for losses than for gains" (Kahnemann & Tversky 1979: 263).

(Kahneman et al. 1991: 194). Loss aversion is the underlying mechanism that also explains why people prefer the status quo over any equally valuable change or reform. The biased perception increases the disutility of giving up the status quo and makes the status quo more valuable than potential gains associated with ‘acquiring’ a new policy.

Moreover, prospect theory also provides a mechanism for the way people make choices in the face of risk and uncertainty. The basic claim is that people perceive risks differently depending on the context of the decision. When a decision involves potential gains people are more willing to take risks, whereas potential losses induce risk aversion. People “have an irrational tendency to be less willing to gamble with profits than with losses” (Tvede 1999: 94). Take the famous, illustrative Asian disease problem of Tversky and Kahneman (1981). An unusual outbreak of Asian disease threatens a country with 600 people. Two alternative programs are available to combat the disease. In Program A 200 people are saved whereas in Program B there is a 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and a 2/3 probability that no people will be saved. In this gain frame the majority of respondents prefers the risk averse Program A. When the two programs are presented in a loss frame (Program A leads to 400 people that die, Program B has a 1/3 probability that nobody will die, and a 2/3 probability that 600 people will die) the majority of people prefers the risky Program B.

How do loss aversion, status quo bias and prospect theory now help to explain attitude formation in times of increasing reform pressures? First, we can assume that people are biased towards the status quo as a result of their loss aversion but also since every reform is associated with some uncertainty (compared to the status quo). In general, this leads to a stronger opposition to any reform. But this status quo bias should be context dependent. As long as the welfare state was expanding reforms were mainly distributing additional benefits. Opposition to such reform is assumed to be less pronounced as people would agree with a reform if they at least benefit to a certain degree. In contrast, in times of austerity reform is about retrenchment, about cutting back. Opposition to such reforms is assumed to be much stronger as groups who benefit from the welfare state will defend ‘their’ programmes and acquired rights (loss aversion or endowment effect). In contrast the support of those who would benefit from such a reform is comparable smaller because most of the reforms follow a logic of concentrated losses and diffuse gains – but even when those diffuse gains would be accumulated their subjective value would be lower than the disutility of the losses. In sum, behavioural economics provide a context-dependent mechanism to link the macro with the micro level reflecting the rational-choice tradition of institutionalism.

### 3.2.3 *Information effects*

What happens when reform pressure increases, for example when the population is ageing? Are people aware of these societal trends and how do they process the pieces of information they get? Some scholars have noted that people don't know much about current issues and have even difficulties recalling or recognizing the names of their representatives (Converse 1964). Still large societal trends that affect the daily environment of every citizen (such as population ageing or the financial crisis) should get noticed by

every individual although it remains an open question which aspects of these trends are the most salient ones. The term public responsiveness – used to describe that the public reacts to societal trends and policies – already implies that the public responds to some kind of external signal. The mere terminology hints at the importance of (political) communication and information processing for attitude formation. Kuklinski's (1990: 391) prediction that “the idea of information has overtaken political scientists” is reflected in an explosion of studies on information effects in recent years. Yet, welfare attitudes research has rather neglected such effects (see Boeri & Tabellini 2012).

In the political psychology literature several models of attitude formation have been proposed (Achen 1975, Converse 1964, Zaller 1992).<sup>9</sup> At the one extreme some scholars (such as Converse 1964) have argued that people lack an image of the world and that they cannot make reliable predictions about the consequences of their policy choice (i.e. they do not know what consequences a policy reform might have for them). They conclude that low information means that people cannot make reasoned choices and that they do not have any preference at all. In fact, many simply answer survey questions as though they are flipping a coin. No real attitudes exist. At the other extreme scholars argue that individuals do possess a true attitude and attribute the empirical finding of instable individual attitudes to the low reliability of survey questions (Achen 1975). Zaller's (1992) model of attitude formation seems to be a good compromise between these two extremes. Although he rejects that individuals possess a single opinion on an issue he makes a strong argument on how individuals construct their opinion. He thus provides the most substantial insights into the process of attitude formation and the role information plays in this process.

Zaller's model (1992) is based on three assumptions. First, individuals differ substantially in their attention to politics. Therefore their awareness of societal trends and policies varies. Second, people react to political information only to the extent that they are knowledgeable about political affairs. The third point consists of the basic assumption that people rarely have fixed attitudes on specific issues. Instead people usually construct their attitudes when an issue is raised. Zaller's idea of this construction of attitudes resembles cognitive shortcuts: instead of retrieving every possible information to make a reasonable choice (which would be very costly) people are assumed to rely on ideas that are most immediately salient to them. It is much less costly to base attitudes on ideas that have recently been called to mind or thought about. Accordingly Zaller (1992: 118) describes the process of attitude formation in three steps: people receive information or arguments, they accept them (or not), and when finally forming their attitude they rely on a sample of related evaluations, considerations and attitudes already stored in their memory (“Receive-Accept-Sample Model” – RAS model).

According to this model individual attitude change results from a change in the mix of ideas to which respondents are exposed to. Given that they accept new information the distribution of

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<sup>9</sup> Inherently linked to the process of attitude formation are survey methodological questions of how to measure attitudes in a reliable way. One crucial issue in the cited contributions is whether individual attitude change might be a methodological artifact because attitudes vary randomly and are not measured reliable. I will only very briefly elaborate on these methodological issues here. Instead the focus will be on the substantial contributions of these models to our understanding of attitude formation.

considerations and attitudes stored in their memory changes slowly. Thus when sampling their attitude in the final step of the model, the probability to change the preference according to the new information increases. Hence, attitude change can be understood as a change in people's long term response probabilities. Societal changes thus do not cause attitude change by producing a sudden conversion but by producing gradual changes in the balance of considerations that are present in people's minds.

Zaller's model of attitude formation also provides much leverage when explaining why different groups within society react differently to societal changes and why the structure of attitudes changes as a result. There are two reasons for heterogeneous attitude change in Zaller's model. First, groups within society can differ in the considerations they receive. And second, groups can differ in the considerations they accept. First of all, heterogeneous effects might emerge because people that are more cognitively engaged with an issue are more likely to receive information about it – education and political awareness might play a role here. This can cause a group of people that is directly confronted with societal changes to receive more consideration about this issue and thereby gradually change their attitude, while people that are not at all confronted with this issue to stick with the initial held attitude. Second, people might accept different considerations due to political predispositions. According to the idea of motivated reasoning people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predisposition. Partisan cleavages might be in particular affected at the stage of acceptance.

What often is neglected in welfare attitude research is what exactly people perceive and how they process the information about the socio-economic developments that are assumed to affect attitudes. The model of attitude formation further elaborates the interpretative feedback effects. Together with findings from behavioural economics they provide a rich theoretical basis to deduct hypotheses.

### **3.3 Application to welfare attitudes – the general hypotheses**

Although each paper of this dissertation has developed a specific focus on one of the aspects of the reform process they share recurrent issues and arguments. Consequently it is possible to condense some overarching, general hypotheses. The focus of the following section thus lies more on the general deduction of these hypotheses and strong links to the theories outlined above. References to policy field specific examples are used to illustrate the arguments. Still, more refined arguments that make stronger reference to the literature in each research field and that pay attention to the specificities of each policy field can be found in the papers.

The four papers of this dissertation examine the process of attitude formation against the background of increasing reform pressures in times of austerity. These reform pressures and their consequences are specific to each policy field and will be briefly summarized in the following. Another recurrent issue of all four papers is that they examine the aggregate level of support but also the pattern of attitudes within countries (i.e. conflict lines and their strength). As argued above both are important for the explanation of reform success or failure.



### 3.3.1 *Increased reform pressures and welfare state reform*

Increased longevity and the demographic change resulted in an ageing population in western welfare states. The ratio between the young working population and the retired is constantly decreasing so that ever fewer working adults have to finance ever more pensions. The development and diffusion of medical technology not only contributed to this trend but also lead to constantly rising costs of health care. Moreover, health care systems have to cope with an increasing share of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and coronary heart diseases, as well as cancer. Ever more (elderly) people have increasing demands for health care provision. Together these trends put considerable financial pressures on the financing of pension and health care systems that have been aggravated by recent financial crises.

Increased information or an increased awareness of population ageing is possibly one of the immediate consequences of the actual process of population ageing. Elderly people will be increasingly present and visible in the daily environment and the media will broach the issue of population ageing. Information on population ageing will possibly affect attitudes before other, more substantial aspects of population ageing such as financial problems of the pension system or an increased burden to the health care system come into play. Moreover, recent theoretical developments in the institutionalism literature (Schmidt 2010) but also research in political psychology strongly suggests that information effects and framing play an important role in how people perceive and react to reform pressures (Chong & Druckman 2007). Consequently the two later papers of this dissertation extended the focus from the effect of actual reform pressures to how the communication and the perception of these reform pressures affect attitude formation.

Despite the fear of scholars and commentators – for example Esping-Andersen's (1996: 24) description of “a ‘frozen’ welfare landscape” – reforms were possible in times of austerity. Another question of this dissertation is how people react to retrenching reforms. It is of high relevance for the subsequent reform process how these reforms (or first reform attempts) affected public opinion: do feedback effects support further reforms or do they close the window of reform opportunity?

### 3.3.2 *Level of support*

One core claim of the New Politics of the Welfare State literature is that “contemporary politics of the welfare state take shape against a backdrop of both intense pressures for austerity and enduring popularity” (Pierson 2001: 410). The new politics argument states that the basic logic of attitude formation has changed in a context of welfare state retrenchment and increased reform pressure. In times of austerity reforms usually cut back benefits or at least recalibrate the welfare state. Still, groups who benefit from the welfare state perceive acquired rights as granted and will defend ‘their’ programmes. Even when recalibrating reforms would only re-distribute benefits (without retrenching the aggregate level of benefits), the subjective dis-utility of losses is higher than the corresponding utility of gains. Moreover, diffuse and temporally distant gains from retrenchment also do not make up for the immediate losses. This status quo bias suggests a strong opposition to retrenchment reforms in times of austerity. The increased risk (of becoming unemployed in the future or not getting enough pension benefits) might have

even increased the support of those people that do not currently rely on the welfare state. Out of long term self-interest they might support the welfare state even more in order to be ‘insured’ against increased risks (delineating groups effect). Increasing reform pressure can also have interpretative effects that affect individual values. High unemployment rates and rising poverty due to societal changes that seem not to be in the responsibility of each individual might increase the deservingness perception of this group (framing effect). Again this would result in an increased support for the welfare state and strong opposition against retrenching reforms.

H1a When pressures to reform increase, people maintain their high welfare state support and oppose retrenching reforms even stronger.

But there are also reasons to expect the opposite: in line with classical economic thinking and possibly also following a reform minded elite, individuals might withdraw their welfare state support when faced with increased reform pressure. One mechanism that leads to this hypothesis can be derived by assuming that people have a fixed preference on how much the state should spend on social welfare (or a fixed preference on how much they are willing to pay for welfare). Increasing costs to the welfare system would make the welfare state too costly for ever more people, which leads to a downward adaption of welfare support. Another reason for declining support is people’s long-term self-interest. Fearing a complete breakdown of the welfare system without reform, people could accept retrenchment to ensure the availability of some benefits in the future. Moreover, people are not only driven by their narrow self-interest but also by sociotropic motives (Kinder & Kiewit 1981). To ensure the functioning of the economy or the well-being of others, people might be willing to pass on some of their own benefits.<sup>10</sup> A last argument relies on prospect theory and the finding that people show risk taking behaviour in a loss-frame, in contrast to risk aversion when decisions are about possible gains. Assuming that a reform is usually associated with more uncertainty and higher risks compared to the status quo, people should give up their reluctance to reform in times of austerity (i.e. in the societal loss-frame).

H1b When pressures to reform increase, people withdraw their welfare state support and are more willing to accept retrenching reforms.

As the framework of the political process suggests and what empirical studies confirm, reforms take place even in times of austerity (Palier 2010). How policy feeds back into the politics of reform making has gained renewed attention in the policy feedback literature (Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen 2014a, Mettler & Soss 2004, Pierson 1993). Two explanations for the policy-opinion link exist in the literature. Proponents of a negative feedback claim that “in effect, the public would behave like a thermostat; when the actual policy ‘temperature’ differs from the preferred policy temperature, the public would send a signal to adjust policy accordingly, and once sufficiently adjusted, the signal would stop” (Wlezien 1995: 981). The model explains policy preferences as a function of a fixed, individual preference

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<sup>10</sup> Of course this argument depends on what people think the consequences of welfare state spending are: does welfare spending constrain economic growth, or does the welfare state even contribute to economic growth? I will come back to these arguments when I discuss how people of different political ideology react to increased reform pressures.

for an optimal level of policy output (for example spending) and the current level. As a result of retrenchment of benefits and cuts in social spending more citizens than before will report that the new, lower level of spending is below their preferred level of welfare state spending. This leads to a lower acceptance of further retrenchment and eventually to an increased support for the welfare state.

H 2a Retrenching reforms lead to an increased support for the welfare state and a lower acceptance of further retrenchment. (*Saturation hypothesis*)

In contrast, policy may feed back positively on preferences (Baumgartner & Jones 2002). According to this argument retrenching reforms will result in a decreased welfare support and increased acceptance of retrenching reforms. Two explanations support this argument. The first is concerned with the positive consequences of a policy change: If people experience positive consequences from a policy change they may want to have ‘more of the same’, assuming that further policy changes in the same direction will have further positive effects. The second explanation for positive feedback effects claims that people adjust their preferences in reaction to a policy change. The argument supposes that “policies, once established, act as institutions, because they create a framework in which certain resources, rules and norms are imposed upon citizens” (Lowi 1964: 644). Consistent with institutional theory institutions do not directly affect the strategic calculus of actors, they do shape basic preferences and the very identity of individuals (Hall & Taylor 1996). The second mechanism that explains this in more detail relies on the policy feedback argument. In this, a reform cutting back benefits might alter perceptions of deservingness (i.e. people seem not to need these benefits any more) or, when some people are completely excluded from welfare state benefits, reforms change definitions of needy groups and their identities. Then people would not react against a policy but adapt to the policy. “The public will eventually want what the public already gets” (Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen 2014b).

H 2b Retrenching reforms lead to a decreased support for the welfare state and a higher acceptance of further retrenchment. (*Adaption hypothesis*)

### 3.3.3 *Pattern of support*

Scholars agree that self-interest and values are the main determinants of people’s welfare attitudes (Kumlin 2007, Svallfors 2007, van Oorschot et al. 2012). The health status, income, age, and the labor market status are important self-interest related factors that structure individual support for the welfare state. But also value-related indicators such as political ideology or social class show a significant influence on attitudes.<sup>11</sup> How do these cleavages in the attitude structure change in times of austerity, are they affected by the increased pressures?

The new politics argument that the basic logic of attitude formation has changed due to increasing pressures for austerity (see above) can also be applied to the pattern of attitudes. The basic idea illustrating

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<sup>11</sup> There is a clear analytical distinction between self-interest and values. Still it is difficult to find measures that purely reflect the one but not the other. This problem applies to individual factors to a different degree but is most apparent for social class. I argue that social class can be seen as an individual factor that mainly reflects values when controlling for other self-interest related factors such as education or income. A more detailed discussion on this issue can be found in paper 1 on page 2.

the argument follows the saying that ‘charity begins at home’ in hard times.<sup>12</sup> Self-interest is assumed to dominate the process of preference formation leading to new conflict lines within the population. Groups who benefit from the welfare state will defend ‘their’ programmes and acquired rights, whereas the net payers who do not (expect to) benefit from the welfare state are more inclined to accept reforms and cutbacks. This conflict might be even more severe if reform is a zero-sum-game and additional benefits for some groups or social policy programmes are only possible at the cost of other groups or social policy programmes. The generational conflict has gained the greatest attention in this respect but similar theoretical and empirical arguments can be found for gender or insider-outsider divides. Old people are assumed to favour spending on old age whereas the young would rather prefer spending in ‘their’ programmes of education and family policy (Busemeyer et al. 2009, Goerres & Tepe 2010). This kind of reasoning might not be particularly pronounced among the population in the first place, but politicians and elites are known to follow a strategy of blame avoidance when enacting retrenching reforms (Lindbom 2007, Pierson 1994, Vis & van Kersbergen 2007). Part of this blame avoidance strategy might be to frame the issue as a re-distributive conflict in order to divide the opposition against retrenchment and delineating new groups (Vanhuysse 2006).

H 3 Increased reform pressures will lead to the emergence of new attitude cleavages based on narrow self-interest.

Another strand of literature is concerned with how value related cleavages in the attitude structure will be affected by increased pressure and risk (Clark & Lipset 2001). The argument starts from several general trends in the development of modern societies that are said to contribute to declining class cleavages: the development towards a risk society (Beck 1992) and individualization trends and the transition to a postmaterialist, postmodern or postindustrial society (Inglehart 1990). Risk society and individualization hypotheses claim that the issues social policies address, such as unemployment, illness or poverty in old age, are understood as individual risks. Protection against them is a matter of individual responsibility, not the responsibility of social groups or governments any more. These changes are likely to create a society where traditional welfare state solidarities, such as class and political ideology, lose their salience as a base for identities and interests.

The declining relevance of political partisanship for the reform process in an era of austerity is also a central claim of the new politics argument (Pierson 1996, 1998). Constrained by the popularity of the welfare state parties of the right are not able to follow ‘their’ retrenchment policies, whereas parties of the left have to adapt to the reality of economic and demographic pressures and cannot adhere to a policy of welfare state expansion any more. Empirical research has mainly confirmed this assumption (Castles 2008, Huber & Stephens 2001, Jensen 2008; for contradictory evidence, see Allan & Scruggs 2004, Korpi & Palme 2003). The argument is only tested at the macro-level relating comparative spending data or welfare entitlements to the party colour of governments. Still, the argument that left-right ideological

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<sup>12</sup> See also the German saying „In der Not ist sich jeder selbst der Nächste“.

orientation becomes also irrelevant for individual opinion formation can be deduced since parties are assumed to represent their electorate.

H 3a Increased reform pressures will lead to a decline in the association between values (i.e. class or political ideology) and welfare attitudes.

As for the political ideology cleavage previous research also suggests a competing hypothesis. As the policy feedback literature suggests, increased pressures are very often framed in a way that they suggest a specific policy reaction (see also Schmidt 2010 on ideas and discourse): people from the right rather take them as a justification to cut back benefits, whereas for left-leaning individuals they are a good argument to increase welfare state spending. As already mentioned, also the consequences of increased welfare spending on the economy differ depending on the political ideology: right-leaning individuals see a detrimental effect of (welfare) state spending on the economy and tend to oppose it, whereas left-leaning individuals rather see a beneficial effect and tend to support it. Consequently increased reform pressures usually come with a connotation so that they convey a meaning in addition to the mere information. When people receive information that is at odds with their existing attitude, their political predisposition, they are supposed to engage in ‘motivated reasoning’ (Redlawsk 2002): they seek out information that confirms prior attitudes, view evidence consistent with prior opinions as stronger, and spend more time counter-arguing and even dismissing evidence inconsistent with their opinion, regardless of objective accuracy (the step of accepting information in Zaller’s model).<sup>13</sup> We could thus expect that the increased reform pressure reassures left-leaning people in their strong welfare state support by providing new or confirming existing arguments about the increased need and the additional benefits of a strong welfare state. When increased reform pressures are framed to suggest welfare cutbacks left-leaning people should ignore or counter argue this information. In contrast, right-leaning individuals might perceive increased reform pressures as an argument that confirms their opposition against a strong welfare state. When increased reform pressures are framed to suggest the need for welfare state expansion, right-leaning individuals might also start to counter-argue the reform pressures and their consequences or even ignore it. Consequently, the support of the right for welfare state retrenchment might even increase.

H 3b Increased reform pressures will increase the cleavage between reform supporters and reform opponents (i.e. political ideology cleavages).

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<sup>13</sup> The argument of motivated reasoning relies on Festinger’s (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance.

## 4 Welfare attitudes research – a review of previous findings

It is at the core of democratic theory whether public opinion affects policies. Are politicians doing what people want them to do? Consequently this question has gained considerable attention in the scientific debate (Burstein 2003 or Weakliem 2003 provide useful reviews). Historical institutionalism and more recently the policy feedback perspective put attention on the ways in which individual attitudes are shaped by the institutional and policy environment. The socio-economic development (i.e. the reform pressures) is added as an important additional factor that affects public attitudes. Building on these lines of research the hypotheses outlined above ask how increased reform pressures and policy reform affect individual attitudes. I distinguished the overall level of support (i.e. the strength of welfare support) from the pattern of support (i.e. where conflicts and cleavages exist within societies). As for the pattern of support self-interest related conflicts and value related conflicts are distinguished. In the following I will summarize existing findings according to this distinction.

### 4.1 Institutions, policy reform, reform pressures and the level of welfare support

Early attempts to conceptually link institutions and attitudes relied on Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes (1990). For example, a common expectation is that the overall level of welfare support is highest in the universal and highly redistributive Social Democratic regime, somewhere in the middle in the Conservative regime, and lowest in the Liberal regime type. Empirical results on cross-national differences in public attitudes along welfare regime variations are inconclusive (Andreß & Heien 2001, Arts & Gelissen 2001, Blekesaune & Quadagno 2003, Jæger 2006, Svallfors 1997): the overall level of welfare support seems not to be in line with the regime typology and research was not successful in linking welfare support patterns and cleavages to regime types. One reason is that welfare regimes are a very broad conceptualization that does not capture appropriately the particularities of each policy field (Arts & Gelissen 2002, Jæger 2006). Moreover it remains unclear how institutional change can be incorporated in the rather static regime typology. In particular gradual changes within one regime type remain undetected. Another, very similar argument refers to the attitudes that are examined. Again the concern is that overall welfare state support and attitudes towards redistribution are too general and that they hide meaningful individual differences between welfare programmes (Wendt et al. 2011). "One approach to resolving these common methodological problems is to disaggregate the welfare state into different policy areas in order to connect the structure of specific policy institutions to support for those institutions" (Jordan 2013: 138). Continuous variables might prove more promising than categorical classifications of welfare regimes (Jæger 2009, Jakobsen 2010) but this strategy also creates a risk that the large number of available policy indicators makes it possible to construct measures supporting any hypothesis.

I will review the main findings for health care and pension attitudes in the following. As this review of findings will show the research on programme specific attitudes is lacking studies that explicitly examine attitude change over time. The major part of comparative studies has thus far used only data at a single point in time. To infer time trends (or even causality) from these studies is based on strong theoretical

assumptions: correlation between welfare regimes (or indicators) and public opinion reflects that policies affect public opinion, disregarding either the possibility that public opinion also affects welfare policies or the presence of a third variable (e.g. historical experience) affecting both policy makers and public opinion. Nevertheless, a cross-sectional correlation between institutions and public attitudes can be seen as a necessary condition for causality and the results can thus be taken as preliminary evidence to test my hypotheses. To get at least some ideas of whether and how welfare attitudes have changed, I will widen my focus back to more general welfare attitudes in the final part of this section despite the concerns I have outlined above.

In general previous research shows that institutional effects on support for public health care are relatively weak (Missinne et al. 2013, Wendt et al. 2010). Nonetheless, findings indicate that health care attitudes are not completely unaffected by the organization of health care and, to some extent, by the economic and demographic context. The popular expectation that higher support for public health care will be found in countries where there is already generous government spending faces mixed results. Some studies find that people in universal health care systems where the government spends more of its budget directly on health care are more supportive (Gevers et al. 2000, Jordan 2013, Wendt et al. 2010.), whereas others find no relation between spending levels and attitudes toward government's responsibility (Kikuzawa et al. 2008, Missinne et al. 2013). As for the economic and demographic context only an increased financial burden due to new diseases seem to be related to the level of support: citizens living in countries with higher rates of diabetes are less likely to want government involvement in health care (Kikuzawa et al. 2008). Population ageing and the general economic situation is not related to health care attitudes. "Results cast doubt on arguments that increased cost will result in a questioning of the contract between the state and citizens in the social provision of health care" (Kikuzawa et al. 2008: 385).

Increasing costs due to population ageing, the demographic change, and early retirement are the main reform pressures for the pension system. People are aware of these pressures and are found to be pessimistic about the consequences of population ageing (Velladics et al. 2006). The most popular policy response to population ageing in European countries is to raise taxes and to preserve the status quo in terms of retirement age and benefit levels (Velladics et al. 2006). The support for the government's responsibility to provide pensions is strongest in countries with a high coverage and with generous pension benefits (Jordan 2013). In these countries the public also prefers raising contributions and does not want to raise the retirement age (Jaime-Castillo 2013). However, in countries with higher elderly poverty rates, citizens are less likely to support cuts in pension benefits. These findings support a positive feedback of institutions on attitudes and that people seem not to react to increased reform pressures. At the same time, people living in countries with high social security contributions are less likely to support increases in these contributions and in countries with higher statutory retirement ages, citizens are more likely to support a postponement of retirement (Fernández & Jaime-Castillo 2013). In sum, findings relating increased costs and institutional characteristics to reform attitudes support expectations of a strong status quo bias.

However, some of the results seem contradictory suggesting that people might be ambivalent about how the government should react to population ageing. They seem to oppose retrenching reforms such as increasing the retirement age or cutting benefits in general. But when they are faced with the costs of maintaining the status quo, i.e. high social security contributions, their support for the status quo crumbles. Moreover, once a retrenching reform such as a higher retirement age is enacted it seems to gain acceptance (Jaime-Castillo 2013). It needs to be stressed here that these interpretations of existing results are daring since the relationships rely on cross-sectional data with a limited number of countries. Moreover, the reform pressures and the institutional characteristics of the pension system are usually highly correlated and not independent of each other. The same applies to the individual preferences where the support for a specific reform alternative is not independent from the preference for the other reform alternative. These methodological issues will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.

The few studies examining time trends rely on more general attitudes towards the welfare state such as redistribution or spending preferences. They show that aggregate public opinion changes very slowly (Taylor-Gooby 2001) and that attitudinal change over time is rather the result of generational replacement (Svallfors 2011). Nevertheless there is some evidence that individuals also adapt their attitudes in the short run reacting for example to the business cycle (Raven et al. 2011, Soroka & Wlezien 2009, van Dalen & Henkens 2005). Soroka and Wlezien (2009) provide an extensive account of the development of individual spending preferences and actual changes in spending in the US, Canada and the UK from the early 1980s to the early 2000s. In the US an upward shift of one standard deviation in spending on welfare leads to a downward shift in preferences in the following year of an average 26 percentage points (Soroka & Wlezien 2009). Similar results have been found for Canada and the UK and suggest that people might withdraw some of their welfare state support so that the increased spending does not overshoot their preferred level of spending. The results of the two other studies (Raven et al. 2011, van Dalen & Henkens 2005) are contradictory although both studies examine data from the Netherlands between the mid 80s and the mid 2000s. Whereas Raven et al. (2011) find that support for higher social security expenditures increases if the unemployment rate is high, van Dalen and Henkens (2005) find lower solidarity with older workers in times of recession. Examining a pension reform in Germany (the so called “Riester reform” in 2001) Boeri et al. (2002) show that the Riester reform increased the awareness of reform pressures, and link this finding to a reduced status quo bias and a decreased opposition to reform. So it remains an open question whether and how people change their attitudes in reaction to increased reform pressures and retrenchment attempts.

#### **4.2 Institutions, policy reform, reform pressures and the pattern of welfare support**

Research consistently shows that both self-interest and values are important determinants of attitudes towards health care and pension reforms. According to the self-interest argument we expect differences in support between people who benefit directly from the welfare state and the net payers who contribute more than they (expect to) consume.



Several indicators that are linked to an increased need for health care services are positively related to support for public health care. People with a bad health status and people with a higher likelihood to rely on health services (e.g. women) show a stronger support for public health care. Socio-economic status, as indicated by educational level, labour market status or income, is usually associated with a lower health risk and higher contributions or taxes. Socio-economic status is thus usually positively related to support for public health care (Kikuzawa et al. 2008, Missinne 2013, Wendt et al. 2010). A common alternative explanation for attitudes refers to values or ideological dispositions. According to this theory, opinions about health care are embedded within a broad and coherent system of ideological preferences (Feldman & Zaller 1992, Jæger 2006). Since public health care usually involves some redistribution or solidarity people with a left political ideology with stronger egalitarian values should support public health care. Gevers et al. (2000) and Missinne et al. (2013) are the only studies that include ideological indicators in their analysis and support the expectation of stronger support among people with a left or egalitarian ideology.

Age is often claimed to be the most important self-interest related indicator in the field of pension policy. Current pensioners are expected to favour an increase of the retirement age since this stabilizes the level of current and future pension payments without any costs for the retirees. Among the working population, younger employees are expected to be more supportive than older employees. Younger employees have a higher life expectancy, thereby reducing the relative costs of working longer. They would benefit more from a stabilization of contribution rates, as they still have more contribution years to pay. In line with these expectations, previous research frequently finds a U-shaped relationship, with younger and older respondents favouring an increase of the retirement age and middle-aged workers opposing it (Fernández & Jaime-Castillo 2013, Jaime-Castillo 2013). However, the hypothesis that public pension systems create policy feedbacks of purely self-interested pensioners supporting further pension spending is not supported (Lynch & Myrskylä 2009). Further indicators of socio-economic status related to self-interest arguments are education, income, or labor market status. In general they show the expected influence but effects are not very strong supporting the conclusion that “recipients of the most generous welfare state programs appear to be motivated in their policy preferences less by their status as beneficiaries than by pro-welfare state values, partisan attachments, or particular features of the domestic political and policy environment” (Lynch & Myrskylä 2009: 1093). Most studies support this claim empirically and find that political ideology has a significant effect on pension reform preferences: people with a right ideology support retrenching reforms such as raising the retirement age or cutting benefits, but are less likely to support an increase of contributions or taxes (Fernández & Jaime-Castillo 2013, Jaime-Castillo 2013).

But how do these differences change over time, are cleavages affected by increased pressures and institutional change? When longitudinal data is missing one strategy to answer this question is to use the cross-national institutional variation. Very few studies attempt to relate differences in attitudes to institutions or the context of each welfare state. This might be an indication that this strategy does not yield any convincing results. The notable exception in this respect, Kikuzawa et al. (2008: 396),

acknowledge that “we proposed two hypotheses targeting the interplay between national context and individual attitudes. Our results offered no support, but our efforts were clearly exploratory”.

Widening the focus from policy field specific attitudes to more general welfare attitudes provides some leverage due to the availability of longitudinal studies. Jakobsen (2010) provides the most clear-cut results. Analysing the preference for a responsibility of the state to ensure that everyone is provided for in 25 OECD countries between 1990 and 2000, he finds increasing differences between age and income groups and between men and women. Two other studies are examining far fewer countries and generally do not find pronounced cleavages. Soroka and Wlezien (2009: 150) find only a limited heterogeneity in attitudes (between income and educational groups) and show that the preferences of subgroups of society change in parallel over time. Country studies from Sweden, Germany and Canada (Jæger 2006, Roller 2000, Svallfors 2004) ascertain the enduring importance of class and political ideology but find new self-interest related cleavages like gender, age or employment status to be equally relevant. Similar results lead Taylor-Gooby (2011: 159) to the conclusion that “attitudes appear to be more complex and are associated with shared concerns and coalitions across different social groups [...]. Any transition towards a more individualist ‘risk society’ that may be taking place is a slow and diffuse process and one that may recreate solidarities as well as dismantle them.”

## 5 Research strategy

The main theoretical contribution of this dissertation is its attempt to explain individual attitude change as a result of institutional change. Previous research was criticised for its too static approach. This shortcoming of existing research is in part due to the lack of appropriate data. In order to test causal relationships one would need panel data from different countries ideally covering longer time periods. This kind of data is not yet available in comparative international survey research and, as the brief literature review has shown, existing research mainly relies on the analysis of cross sectional data. Consequently, hypotheses are usually carefully formulated in terms of correlation instead of causation. Two of the papers followed the standard approach in the field and analyse cross-sectional data with multilevel models. I start with briefly introducing the ideas of multilevel modelling in the following. A critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this research strategy will show that, as long as panel data is not available, alternative research designs are needed to get closer to establish causality. As a methodological contribution of this dissertation I will propose three innovative research designs that are applied in three of the four papers: a natural experiment, a survey experiment and a difference-in-differences estimation.

### 5.1 Method

#### 5.1.1 *Multilevel models and the problems of cross cultural research*

Cross-cultural research examines attitudes and behaviour of people living in different countries. Differences in the attitudes between countries are related to country characteristics. Przeworski and Teune (1970) propose that the ultimate aim of work in this field should be to replace the proper names of nations (or of countries) with the names of variables. Multilevel models provide exactly this opportunity and have become the standard method in quantitative cross-cultural analysis. These models account for the hierarchical data structure of individuals nested within countries and allow simultaneously assessing the effect of individual characteristics, contextual factors, as well as interaction effects between both levels on individual outcomes (Hox 2002). The advantages of multilevel models are that they correct for biases in parameter estimates and standard errors resulting from such hierarchical data. They take into account the clustering of individuals within a country (i.e. their similarity) and control compositional effects when examining macro relationships. Moreover, multilevel models separate the variance on the individual level from the variance that is due to the contextual level (Guo & Zhao 2000). Both parts of the variance then need to be explained separately what reduces the risk of atomistic and ecological fallacies (Diez 2002).

The main problems of comparative macrosociological research are the small N problem, the Galton problem and the black-box problem (Goldthorpe 1997). They are most apparent in variable-oriented quantitative approaches since they violate the basic assumptions of these models. First, the limited number of countries restricts the number of independent variables. With usually around 20-30 countries one could reasonably test one or two alternative explanations at the same time without running the risk to have “more inferences than implications observed” (King et al. 1994: 119). Statistically, models

become “over-determined“ when there are too few degrees of freedom and in particular inter-correlations among independent variables cannot be adequately captured. As a consequence results may not be robust. A second problem, usually referred to as the Galton problem, is the lack of independence of observations. The assumption of regression models is that nations can be treated as units of analysis unrelated to each other over time and space. This is a very strong assumption in a globalized (or Europeanized) world where countries do not develop independently from one another but are affected by what happens in other countries. This can be a bilateral, and sometimes unconscious process of diffusion or policy learning. But it is recently actively promoted by purposive actions of international organizations such as the European Union or the OECD (see OMC or the effects of the PISA study). The problem is even aggravated since most research has to rely on convenience samples of European countries and countries are not randomly drawn from a sample (Ebbinghaus 2005). “In this way the threat is created that the small N and Galton problems run together, as we do indeed enter into a world in which  $N=1$ ” (Goldthorpe 1997: 7). The black box problem refers to both theory and method used in quantitative macrosociology. It applies to research that focuses too much on variables that account for a significant part of the variation but pays less attention to the mechanisms and social processes that underlie the variables that have been distinguished. This problem might have been less a problem in the original application of multilevel models in educational research where the ‘distance’ between higher level (the class or the school) and lower level units (the pupils) is comparable small. But it is particularly apparent in multilevel models using countries as a second level unit of analysis since the ‘distance’ between the macro level and the micro level is very large in this application. For example several ‘causal pathways’ might link population ageing and individual attitudes that cannot be distinguished empirically. The black box problem is thus addressed only to the extent that such causal pathways and the social processes are spelt out quite explicitly, so as to provide a “causally adequate” account of the empirically observed regularities (Elster 1989).

The approach of regression analysis to test causal relationships is to condition on other potential variables that could affect the outcome. As I have just argued this approach very quickly reaches its analytical limits when the number of cases is small. When thinking about alternative research designs “it is essential that we always keep in mind the model of a controlled experiment, even if in practice we may have to deviate from an ideal model” (Stouffer 1950: 356). An ideal design to answer the research question of this dissertation would be to randomly assign increased reform pressures to some countries and have other, non-treated countries as a control group. Alternatively we would like to randomly assign increased reform pressures to one half of people living within a country. The comparison with the counterfactual, i.e. the non-treated country or the non-treated group, would then tell us the causal effect that increased reform pressures have on attitudes (Morgan & Winship 2007). Such an experiment is obviously not possible. In the following I will present three innovative research designs that get very close to the idea of an ideal research design: a difference-in-differences estimation, a natural experiment, and a survey experiment.

### 5.1.2 *Difference-in-differences approach*

The difference-in-differences (DID) approach mimics an experimental design and uses the fact that some countries enact reforms whereas others do not change their institutions. When the outcome of interest is measured before and after the treatment (i.e. the reform) in both the treatment and the control group, a comparison of changes in the outcome can be attributed to the treatment. (Angrist & Pischke 2008). Including countries without a reform as a counterfactual controls for unobserved heterogeneity and period effects. All unobserved determinants that affect every country in the same way are thus barred as potential explanations for the attitude change. The crucial assumption of the DID approach is that nothing else has changed at the same time of the treatment. In most instances this assumption is too strong and not met in reality. To account for these potential confounding simultaneous changes, additional control variables can be included. But then again one is faced with the problem of small case numbers. Moreover, the difference-in-differences approach obviously has its limitations despite its increasing popularity to estimate the causal effect of an intervention or a reform. Most importantly the treatment (i.e. the reform) is not randomly assigned to the countries. The estimation thus faces problems of endogeneity of the intervention itself and serial correlation (Heckman 2000). The most famous study using the DID-approach is Card and Kruegers (1993) examination of the introduction of a minimum wage in the US. To identify the effect of the reform on unemployment rates they compare changes in unemployment rates in New Jersey that introduced a minimum wage with changes in Pennsylvania that did not introduce a minimum wage. I use the difference-in-differences approach to examine the feedback effect of reforms raising the retirement age on pension reform preferences.

### 5.1.3 *A natural experiment*

In the third paper I make use of a natural quasi-experimental setting that externally manipulates risk exposure and increased costs for the health care system. In 2008 and 2009 the fieldwork period of the European Social Survey coincides with the seasonal influenza wave. The logic of the design is that those respondents surveyed before the influenza outbreak serve as the ‘control group’ and are compared with the ‘treatment group’, that is, those respondents interviewed after the influenza wave had started. To maximize the ability to relate changes in attitudes to the influenza outbreak, the sample is restricted to interviews conducted four weeks before and four weeks after the outbreak. The analytical benefit from using a quasi-experimental setup is that we automatically control for unobserved factors that do not change together with the onset of the influenza outbreak. The analytical strategy shares some similarities with a regression discontinuity design. In both cases, an exactly defined cut-off point in a continuous variable  $x$  (timing of the interviews) is used to define treatment and control group. Both designs rely on two assumptions to ensure the ignorability of the treatment assignment: (1) the randomization of the assignment to treatment and control group around the cut-off point and (2) the temporal stability of attitudes in the hypothetical absence of the treatment (see Legewie 2013 for a similar approach).

Assignment to the treatment and control groups around the cut-off point is determined by the timing of the interviews. This assignment should occur by chance and can be assumed to be random when

there are no systematic differences in the reachability of respondents. Yet survey research reports such a reachability bias and that some respondents (e.g. female or unemployed) are easier to interview and therefore more likely to be interviewed early in the field period. To the extent such imbalances actually exist, the potential bias can be controlled for by including covariates related to the reachability of the respondents. The second assumption of the design is the temporal stability of the dependent variable in the absence of treatment. The estimated treatment effect would be biased if attitudes would change, even if no treatment occurred. This might happen if other time-varying determinants of attitudes or events that are causally related to attitudes coincide with the start of the influenza outbreak. For example, a general seasonal trend of attitudes due to Christmas would bias the identified effect. The short time period of only 2 months around the treatment and the absence of notable national events support the plausibility of the assumption.

#### *5.1.4 A survey experiment*

In the fourth paper I examine the effect of population ageing on pension preferences. Again the standard approach of using multilevel models faces the problem of small case numbers, low variation of the independent variable (in a European context) and problems of multicollinearity (e.g. a strong correlation between population ageing, GDP or public deficits). I propose a survey experiment that helps to overcome some of these problems.

Originally survey experiments were aimed at examining methodological questions like question-ordering or question-wording-effects. But they can also be used to examine substantive research questions and have become quite popular in the field of political psychology and political communication (Mutz 2011). They have proved to be very helpful to examine the role of information and interpretation in the process of attitude formation. And since it is information, interpretation and discourse that I identified as important mechanisms that bridge the macro and the micro level, survey experiments are an ideal method to test the hypotheses that follow from these recent developments of institutionalism.

The survey experiment mimics an experiment where one group of people is randomly assigned to a condition in which the perception of reform pressures is higher than in the control condition. The treatment consists of information describing population ageing. By comparing responses to manipulated questions we can identify causal relationships that should also exist in the real world: If mentioning an ageing society lead to changed preferences in the context of a survey, then information on an ageing society and increased pressures to reform in the real world presumably will do the same. Elderly people will be increasingly present and visible in the daily environment and the media will broach the issue of population ageing. Information on population ageing will possibly affect attitudes before other, more substantial aspects of population ageing such as financial problems of the pension system or an increased burden to the health care system come into play. Of course, population ageing, and even more specifically information on population ageing, is only one aspect of increasing reform pressures. Other reform pressures such as the demographic change or the financial crisis might have different consequences on attitudes. Population ageing is thus one reason (among others) to accept (or oppose) pension reforms.

Still, I am convinced that the effort to examine each reform pressure separately will contribute to our understanding of the overall effect of increased reform pressures.

One limitation every study using a survey experiment has to discuss is the external validity of its results: Is the effect we find valid and relevant in the real world? What I use here to examine my research question is the framing of a survey question. Several authors argue that such framing effects are only a temporary “mood change” since they only affect the sampling process by increasing the salience and accessibility of some arguments that already exist. In contrast attitude change is defined as “permanent alterations in long-term response probabilities and arguments” (Zaller 1992: 118). Research in this direction reinforces this concern as effects of political debate (Luskin et al. 2002) or elite framing (Druckman & Nelson 2003) on public opinion vanished after 2-3 weeks. However, the theoretical model of attitude change does not assume that those permanent alterations happen immediately but rather incrementally. Even when an effect vanishes after some weeks the findings would at least provide some hints of the potential of attitude change in the long run – and its direction. In the course of population ageing people possibly do not only get information on increasing reform pressures once but get informed repeatedly. Of course it is an open question whether repeated information has the potential to incrementally change attitudes. Moreover, contradictory frames of the same information or different senders of the information might further complicate the understanding of the overall process in the real world (Chong & Druckman 2010, Druckman et al. 2012). Results of survey experiments should thus be complemented and cross-checked with the longitudinal real-world data. Survey experiments can help us to understand the causal mechanisms while the analysis of repeated cross-sectional data will tell us whether these mechanisms also have some external validity and plausibility. In this respect this dissertation has its strength in the combination of different methods and thus examines the same research questions (and items) from different angles.

## 5.2 Data

The availability of large scale, cross-nationally comparative surveys considerably improved over the last 10 years (Svallfors 2010). Nevertheless, it is still difficult to find repeated cross sectional measurements of the same attitudinal variables covering longer periods of time and several countries. The Eurobarometer survey series (EB) includes some welfare attitude variables that were repeated more than once. As for attitudes towards health care data comes from three rounds of the EB which were fielded in 1996, 1998, and 2002. Data was available for 14 western European countries. Repeated cross sectional data on pension preferences were available for the years 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2009. The respective EB surveys were fielded in 25 EU countries. The second paper on health attitudes relies on data from the fourth round of the European Social Survey (ESS) fielded in 2008/2009. The ESS 2008 includes a special module on welfare attitudes and provides a multitude of established measures for values, attitudes and socio-demographic measures. Data from the fourth round is available for 31 countries. Our research design for paper 2 – the coincidence of field work and the onset of the influenza wave – restricts the sample to 17 countries.

Data for the fourth paper comes from the third wave of the German Internet Panel (GIP) that has been in the field in January 2013. Online panels based on probability samples are a recent advancement in survey methodology (Couper 2002).<sup>14</sup> They are in particular suitable because innovative research methods such as survey experiments, factorial designs or vignette studies are easy to implement. The GIP is a new large-scale online panel in Germany. It is part of the Collaborative Research Center “The Political Economy of Reforms” (SFB 884) at the University Mannheim. Panel households are initially approached offline, with a short face-to-face interview. Subsequently, all household members are invited to complete the bi-monthly GIP questionnaires. To minimize non-coverage bias, households without access to the internet were provided with the necessary hardware and/or a broadband internet connection. The recruitment phase and a first wave of interviews have been completed in September 2012 with 1,468 participants (Blom et al. 2013). Due to panel attrition and item non response 764 individuals took part in the survey experiment in January 2013.

Three papers of this dissertation make use of the institutional variation between countries or the institutional variation within one country over time. Empirical macro-level data on institutions was taken from international governmental organizations and statistical agencies such as Eurostat, EU’s Mutual Information System on Social Protection (MISSOC), data collections of the OECD, and WHO’s influenza surveillance network. Table 1 summarizes datasets, timing of the surveys, and the case numbers.

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<sup>14</sup> See for example the LISS panel in the Netherlands or ELIPSS in France



**Table 1** Measurement of the dependent variables, data, and methods – overview

<b>Paper</b>	<b>(1)</b>	<b>(2)</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>
Short Title	Attitudes towards healthcare provision in Europe between 1996 and 2002	Ideology and Preferences for Public Health Care in Europe	Raising the retirement age: retrenchment, feedback and attitudes	Population Ageing, Pension Reform Preferences, Political Knowledge and Ideology
Measure of individual attitude	Public support for government responsibility to provide health care	Public support for government responsibility to provide health care	Pension reform preferences	Pension reform preferences and opposition
Item	<i>Please tell me if you strongly agree, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree or strongly disagree. The government should only provide everyone with essential services such as care for serious diseases, and encourage people to provide for themselves in other respects.</i>	<i>For each of the tasks I read out please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much responsibility you think governments should have. 0 means it should not be government's responsibility at all and 10 means it should be entirely government's responsibility. Firstly to ensure adequate health care for the sick?</i>	<i>If you had to choose from the following possibilities aimed at guaranteeing the financing of the pension system in (OUR COUNTRY), which one would be most acceptable for you?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Work and contribute for longer</li> <li>– Maintain the retirement age and increase your social security contributions</li> <li>– Maintain the current retirement age and accept that you will receive less</li> </ul>	<i>The ageing of society puts the financing of the state pension at its current level at risk. Which of the following reform proposals would you most likely support? And which one would you prefer the least?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Maintain the retirement age and increase contributions</li> <li>– Increase taxes and keep state pensions at their current level.</li> <li>– Increase the statutory retirement age.</li> <li>– State pensions should be reduced.</li> </ul>
Data Source (Individual Level) (Country Level)	Eurobarometer OECD Health Data	European Social Survey WHO influenza surveillance network, Eurostat 2008	Eurobarometer Eurostat, MISSOC, OECD Pensions at a Glance 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009	German Internet Panel
Time period n individual	1996, 1998, 2002 36,099 (around 900 per country-year)	8,816 (around 600 per country)	2013 764 year)	2013 764
N countries	15 EU Countries	17 EU Countries	25 EU Countries	Germany
Method	• Multilevel Linear Regression	• Natural Experiment • Multilevel Linear Regression	• Difference-in-Differences Estimation (DID) • Multilevel Logistic Regression	• Survey Experiment

### 5.3 Measuring welfare preferences

In this dissertation I focus on two policy fields, health care and pensions, and restrict the analysis in each policy field to one dimension of welfare attitudes. In health care I examine public support for the government's responsibility to provide health care, in pensions I focus on preferences for specific reform alternatives (Table 1). I am aware that welfare attitudes have several dimensions such as the range of government's responsibilities, its degree and how people evaluate the policy output (Kumlin 2007, Roller 1992, Roosma et al. 2013). The focus on one policy dimension in each policy field has some advantages in comparison to an encompassing analysis of all dimensions. First, the results of the two papers in each policy field can be directly compared and provide an added value when put in relation. For example the analysed time period for the health care papers is extended to 2008 by adding the results from the second paper. The same applies to the pension papers where the third paper provides a valuable, European context in which the German case study can be integrated. Second, examining the same dimension of attitudes over different time points, with different datasets and, most importantly with different methods provides an in depth analysis from different angles and considerably contributes to the robustness of my findings. And finally I chose the dimension in each policy field that has already gained some attention in the field (Fernández & Jaime Castillo 2013, Jordan 2013, Wendt et al. 2010). Such a link to existing research is in particular important when proposing a new theory and new methods.

Attitudes towards health care are measured with two different items. In the first paper respondents were asked whether they agree that the government should provide everyone with only essential services such as care for serious diseases, and it should encourage people to provide for themselves in other respects. The answer categories ranged from 'strongly agree' (1) to 'strongly disagree' (5). In the second paper respondents were asked how much responsibility they think government should have for providing health care for the sick. Response options ranged from 'Not government's responsibility at all' (0) to 'Entirely government's responsibility' (10). Both items have already been used in the welfare attitudes literature and higher scores are taken as an indicator for greater support for government health care involvement.

As for pensions people are asked for their preferred reform proposal (for the question wording see Table 1). Answer categories to choose from include raising the retirement age, reducing pension levels or increasing contributions. In the fourth paper a tax increase has been added as a fourth possible reform. The first two reform alternatives are retrenching the welfare state by increasing the retirement age or reducing pensions. Whereas the last (two) reform alternative(s) would preserve the status quo in terms of benefit levels and retirement age and increase contributions (or taxes instead). They would thus lead to an increase of overall spending on pensions and can be perceived as welfare state expansion. Compared to the standard measurement of welfare preferences the question thus has the advantage that it poses a trade-off among specific and realistic policy options.<sup>15</sup> Respondents have to choose one of the alternatives and

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<sup>15</sup> Usually welfare attitudes research relies on questions such as "Do you agree that the age of retirement should be raised so that people work longer and therefore spend less time in retirement?" in order to measure preferences.

cannot oppose every reform. Of course, this question is not as elaborate as the questions used by Boeri et al. (2002) (e.g. “Are you willing to pay x-percent higher contributions in order to obtain y-percent higher benefits?”) but seems to be a good compromise to measure realistic preferences without overburdening respondents (Fernández & Jaime-Castillo 2013).

The measurement of welfare attitudes thus follows the standard approach in the field – with a notable exception. The fourth paper proposes to measure not only the preference for reform but also the opposition to reform. The identification of public opinion as a possible veto player blocking reforms suggests that the success of a reform proposal not only depends on support but is in particular affected by the opposition to a reform proposal (Rehm et al. 2012). Prospect theory also suggests that opposition to reform is much stronger in times of retrenchment than in times of welfare state expansion due to a strong status quo bias. Given its theoretical importance it is surprising that existing research mainly focusses on support (for the welfare state or for a reform) but has neglected an explicit examination of opposition to reform. I address this gap in paper 4 comparing pension reform preferences and pension reform opposition.

## 6 Findings<sup>16</sup>

This section summarizes the findings of the four papers. Two of them – paper 1 and paper 2 – examine support for public health care. Paper 3 and paper 4 are concerned with attitudes towards pension reform proposals. The first papers in each policy field (i.e. paper 1 and 3) mainly follow the standard approach in the field by comparing several European countries. They add a dynamic perspective to our knowledge by relying on repeated cross-sectional data. In comparison to the other two papers they provide a more descriptive account of how attitudes towards the welfare state have changed in recent years and how they might be linked to increased reform pressures. The subsequent papers in each policy field (i.e. paper 2 and 4) put a strong focus on the causal mechanisms that explain the findings of the first two papers. Whereas they provide a more convincing empirical test of the causal mechanisms they might lack external validity. Combining the findings of both papers in each policy field overcomes the weakness of each approach: the first paper provides the external validity for the convincing causal test of the second paper.

A recurrent argument of all papers is that the level and the pattern of attitudes are independent of each other. For example, even if the overall level of support does not change, what might nevertheless change is the pattern of attitudes. Some groups might have withdrawn their support, whereas others are in favour of even more state involvement. Both the overall level of support but also the pattern of support, i.e. where conflict lines are found within society, can be important determinants of the success or the failure of a reform. Therefore, both are analysed.

### 6.1 Welfare state support in times of increasing pressures to reform

My results support the theoretical expectation of enduring welfare state support even in times of crisis. People see a strong responsibility of the government to provide health care. The average support does not significantly change in any country between 1996 and 2002 and remains on a high average level of about 3.5 on a 5 point scale (paper 1).<sup>17</sup> And this support has not been weakened by 2008 when respondents rated the government's responsibility to provide health care in the 25 EU countries on average with a 8 on a 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10. Moreover, even short term external shocks such as increased costs and risks of illness due to the influenza in 2008/2009 did not show any effect on the support for health care (paper 2). A similar picture emerges for pension reform preferences. Increasing contributions as one of the reforms that aims at preserving the status quo remains the most popular reform alternative with a stable support of around 41% in the 25 EU countries between 2005 and 2009. Retrenching reform proposals such as increasing the retirement age or reducing pensions are far from reaching a majority. Even in sum they are only supported by a third of the respondents. Again there are only minor changes in the overall support for retrenching reforms over the four years (additional analysis based on paper 3). The

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<sup>16</sup> In the following I rely mainly on the results as described in the papers. Still, this framework paper aims to provide more insights than just a combination of its main parts. Moreover, in the process of revising papers some results had to be removed since they were not essential for the paper's main argument. But there were some instances where the not published findings are necessary for a convincing argument in this framework paper. Where necessary I add additional results that are not part of the final papers.

<sup>17</sup> All scales are recoded so that high values mean high welfare state support.

success of retrenching reforms might be even more hampered by the strong opposition they face. In 2013 38% of the German respondents explicitly opposed an increase of the retirement age, and 29% opposed the reduction of pension levels. And this overall opposition against retrenching reforms did not weaken in the experimental treatment condition when respondents were exposed to detailed information on population ageing (paper 4). So Pierson (2001) might be right: the high and stable (overall) welfare state support and in particular the strong (overall) opposition against retrenchment block any reform attempt even in hard times when such reforms seem to be needed.

Still a more refined analysis of the different reform proposals casts some doubts about Pierson's claim. Although the overall support for the status quo and the opposition against retrenching reforms remain stable the preference for increasing the retirement age changes. Between 2004 and 2009 support for increasing the retirement age in the EU increased on average from 19% to 24%. Moreover, the opposition against any reform proposal went down from 24% to 18.7% (additional analysis based on paper 3). The DID-analysis suggests that the increasing reform acceptance is related to population ageing (paper 3). The survey experiment in Germany in 2013 confirms this expectation and provides a more convincing test of the causal mechanisms. Whereas the overall opposition against the two retrenching reform proposals – raising the retirement age and reducing pension benefits – is unaffected by the information on population ageing, the opposition against raising the retirement age drops from 38% to 33% as a consequence (paper 4). This attitude change is particularly pronounced among those with a low political knowledge. Their strong opposition against increasing the retirement age (43 %) is significantly weakened to 28% (- 15 percentage points).

This attitude change partly contradicts Pierson's claim that a strong opposition against retrenchment blocks any reform attempt in hard times. Although the overall opposition against retrenchment remains stable, people react to increased reform pressures by softening their opposition against a specific reform and are willing to accept an increase of the retirement age. Under the assumption that politicians are responsive to changes in public attitudes, the decreased opposition against a higher statutory retirement age might be part of the explanation why some countries have been successful in raising the retirement age (e.g. the UK, Austria, Denmark, Italy, or Germany, but see also reforms in the opposite direction in Germany and France) or enacting other retrenching or recalibrating reforms (see Häusermann 2010 or Palier 2010 for a more detailed account of pension reforms).

How retrenching reforms such as raising the retirement age affect pension preferences is examined in paper 3. Using a difference-in-differences estimation I find strong evidence for a negative policy feedback and that people react against the reform direction. A reform increasing the retirement age leads to a lower reform acceptance in the following year, the acceptance of increasing the retirement age decreases by 3.4 percentage points (*saturation effect*). Controlling for changes of other important institutional characteristics of the pension system and for period effects I can rule out that these characteristics or the general time trend account for the effect.

To summarize the results I follow the dynamic framework described in Figure 1. I find an enduring popularity of the welfare state in times of increased reform pressures both in health care and in pensions. The support for government's responsibility to provide health care remains high and stable and people strongly oppose retrenching reforms of the pension system. Still, in contrast to health care pension preferences are not completely unaffected by increasing reform pressures. My results provide evidence that people give up some of their reluctance to increasing the retirement age. This attitude change might open the window of reform opportunity. Still, once such a reform is enacted the public is saturated by the reform activity and withdraws its support for further reforms.

## **6.2 The pattern of welfare state support: self-interest, values, and changing cleavages?**

Self-interest and values are the two general determinants of welfare state support. The standard factors that are usually linked to self-interest (e.g. employment status, age, education, income, or the health status) and values (e.g. political ideology or social class) are examined in this dissertation and show the expected relationship with welfare attitudes.

The sick, the unemployed and women are assumed to have a stronger interest in health care provision by the state and are found to be more supportive of the welfare state than their respective counterparts. Finally, there is a U-shaped age effect in that the young and the old give less support to the public provision of health care than the middle-aged do. As for pension preferences age, gender and education are the main characteristics related to self-interest. Again, I find a rather stable U-shaped age effect: The youngest and the oldest favour an increase of the retirement age, whereas the working-age population (25 to 64) opposes an increase in the retirement age. There is a strong and significant gender effect, with men being more supportive of an increase of the retirement age than women. Moreover, raising the retirement age is more acceptable to those with tertiary education than for those with secondary or primary education. This might be the result of their awareness of the reform pressures, but can perhaps be traced back to a greater capability to work longer. They also start working later and thus might have a stronger financial interest in extending their working lives. These reasons make this reform alternative more attractive for the better educated.

In line with the theoretical expectations I find significant differences between social classes. The higher the social class the weaker is the support for public health care and the higher is the support for increasing the retirement age. As for political ideology people with a left political ideology are generally in favour of a strong role of the state in health care and oppose retrenching pension benefits and are against increasing the retirement age. In contrast people with a right political ideology are less supportive of a strong role of the state in health care and tend to support retrenching reforms proposals in pensions. These effects are robust even when controlling for self-interest related determinants and thus support value oriented explanations of welfare attitudes.

In general the pattern of attitudes remains rather stable, and self-interest and values remain important determinants of attitudes (paper 1 and paper 3). My results do not support expectations that self-interest is becoming stronger in times of increasing reform pressures or that social classes are losing

their importance in structuring patterns of welfare attitudes. The effect of political partisanship is a notable exception in this respect. As for the political ideology cleavage two competing expectations exist. On the one hand differences between left and right might decrease. Constrained by the popularity of the welfare state parties (and voters) of the right might not be able to follow 'their' retrenchment policies, whereas parties (and voters) of the left might have to adapt to the reality of economic and demographic pressures and cannot adhere to a policy of welfare state expansion any more. On the other hand arguments following a theory of motivated reasoning (Redlawsk 2002) suggest that partisan differences should increase. Whereas voters of the right might take increasing reform pressures as another supportive argument for their already strong support to retrench the welfare state, voters from the left keep up their opposition ignoring or arguing against the new information that is not in line with their initial reform preference.

The descriptive analysis of how cleavages have changed between 2004 and 2009 already point to a decreasing importance of political partisanship. In 2004 the left and the right differed in their acceptance to increase the retirement age by 6 percentage point. This difference decreased steadily over the next 5 years to 4 percentage points and was the least pronounced cleavage in the attitude structure in 2009 when compared to the other individual characteristics. The experimental study on pension preferences confirms this descriptive trend (paper 4). Whereas the attitude of voters of left parties differ significantly from voters of right parties in the control condition without information on population ageing, these differences almost disappear when both groups are made aware of increasing reform pressures in the treatment condition. Voters of right parties, the initial supporters of retrenching reforms, increase their opposition against retrenching reforms, whereas left voters soften their opposition against retrenching reforms. The two papers on health attitudes point to a similar trend. Although I do not find a decreasing importance of political partisanship between 1996 and 2002, the effect of political ideology is extremely weak in 2008 and disappears when respondents are exposed to increased risks due the influenza epidemic (paper 2). I also provide evidence on the mechanism by which this constraining effect occurs. Individuals that keep themselves updated via the mass media and who previously used to think that the health care system is inefficient are much more likely to change their opinions as a consequence of the epidemic. This is further evidence for the claim that information effects and political discourse should be stronger emphasized and discussed when linking institutional change and welfare attitudes.

## 7 Conclusion

The aim of this framework paper was to provide a coherent research agenda in which the four papers can be located. This research agenda consists of a dynamic political process connecting socio-economic developments, welfare attitudes, and welfare reform in a causal chain. Such a research agenda stresses in particular the political relevance of explaining welfare attitude change. In addition to a mere intrinsic motivation to understand welfare attitude change this research is motivated by the goal to explain welfare state reform and institutional change. Therefore I will conclude this framework paper with discussing policy implications of my findings. In the second part of this conclusion I will discuss aspects of the political process that were not part of this dissertation but that seem to be particularly relevant and worthwhile to examine in future research.<sup>18</sup> These suggestions are first steps to extend the research agenda into a research plan for the next years.

What are the policy implications of this dissertation? In line with theoretical expectations I find a high and stable support for the welfare state even in times of austerity. Conflict between social groups over health care and pension issues exists but it is weak and does not increase when financial resources become scarce. My findings even suggest that increasing reform pressure reduce partisan cleavages between left-leaning citizens that rather support a strong welfare state and right-leaning citizens that are usually more in favour of retrenchment. In general there seems to be a consensus across different social groups and across the electorate to support and maintain the status quo even if this entails higher contributions or taxes. It is somewhat surprising that retrenchment reforms were possible despite this enduring public support for the welfare state.

Successful blame avoidance strategies are one explanation for these reforms (Vis & van Kersbergen 2007). My findings suggest another possible explanation by explicitly analysing reform opposition (in addition to welfare or reform support). I show that opposition against some retrenchment reforms (such as raising the retirement age) is significantly weakened if the awareness of reform pressures increases. This effect is particularly strong among those with a low political knowledge and among the initial reform opponents, i.e. left-leaning citizens. For successful retrenchment or restructuring of the welfare state it might thus be even more important to promote such reforms among the reform opponents and ease their concerns instead of organising majorities among the potential supporters of retrenchment.

Whereas my findings suggest ways how retrenchment is possible and that it becomes more likely in times of austerity there is also strong evidence that concerns of erosion of solidarity and of continuous retrenchment of the welfare state are exaggerated. A majority of voters supports the welfare state and the overall opposition against retrenchment remains strong. Moreover, after retrenchment reforms have been implemented the acceptance of further retrenchment drops again thereby closing the window of reform opportunity. In summary, the public seems to accept reasonable adaptations in response to the increased

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<sup>18</sup> This discussion implicitly acknowledges what has been neglected in this dissertation. A more detailed and explicit discussion of limitations and concerns related to my findings can be found in each paper.



reform pressure including moderate retrenchment, but this does not result in the acceptance of radical restructuring and retrenchment.

The discussion of policy implications already pointed to the relevance of other political actors in the reform process, i.e. the role of politicians, of the government, of parties or of interest groups. Accordingly, Pierson's framework for policy feedback (1993: 626) distinguishes three actors that are affected by feedback mechanisms. In addition to the mass public, i.e. the focus in this dissertation, also government elites and interest groups are affected by policies and societal changes. These three streams of research, those interested in mass publics, those interested in interest groups and those interested in elites and parties, have largely remained separated with some attempts to combine at least two of these strands (e.g. Armingeon & Bonoli 2006, Hoffman 2003). Combining the different strands of research might add valuable insights to our understanding of the political reform process.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Zaller's model of attitude formation that might have been a bit separated from the rest of the theoretical ideas presented in this dissertation turns out to be very useful when the interest is in how government elites, interest groups and mass publics influence each other – since these are core issues of political communication.

In this respect, the increasing availability of individual level panel data (based on representative online panels such as the GIP or the LISS panel in the Netherlands) will provide the adequate data to examine individual attitude formation and, in particular, the role of framing and communication. Online panels provide the opportunity to include elaborate survey experiments that are very well suited to examine the effect of information and political communication (Gaines et al. 2007, Mutz 2011). The challenge that this line of research faces is the external validity of its results: Are findings from survey experiments relevant in the real world? Ideally survey experiments are then complemented with research where the external validity is no concern. (Online) Panels provide that opportunity since they allow following the same individuals over several years. Monitoring individual welfare attitudes over time provides answers to the crucial question whether 'real' individual life course events such as becoming a pensioner, falling ill or losing one's job that alter risk exposure have immediate effects on welfare attitudes.

Although it has become a commonplace in conclusions to suggest the extension of the research to other policy fields this is exactly one of the promising future avenues for this research agenda. Pensions and health care are the two policy fields with the highest popularity (van Oorschot 2000) although most of the benefits are targeted to a specific group (i.e. the elderly). Still, both programs are perceived to be universal welfare state programs since everyone expects to benefit from pensions or health care at some point in one's life. This explains their popularity. Labour market policies, educational or family policies are directed to younger people and might be more contentious in the public, in particular when people would be asked to make trade-offs between policy fields (e.g. one could ask whether people are willing to pass on some of their pension benefits in order to increase child care allowances). Questions asking for such a

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<sup>19</sup> This issue is analysed in an ongoing project at the Collaborative Research Center 884 'Political Economy of Reforms' at the University of Mannheim entitled 'Welfare state support from below – linking organized interests and public attitudes' (<http://reforms.uni-mannheim.de>).

direct trade-off are usually not part of existing surveys. Nevertheless attitudes towards each policy can already be combined on the individual level – instead of comparing the (aggregated) results of each policy field. This has rarely been done but promises new insights on how individuals form their attitudes (for working papers using this approach, see Naumann et al. 2014, Reeskens 2014).

The extension of the analysis of old social risks (i.e. pension and health care policy) to new social risks (i.e. labour market, education and family policy) would not only contribute to cover a ‘complete’ picture of the welfare state but would also provide links to current political debates. The direct comparison and trade-offs between policy fields is a recurrent issue in the political debate. Thus, a more refined, multidimensional understanding of welfare attitudes will be of particular interest when political elites and interest groups are added to the analysis. For example, the idea of social investment strategies is very popular among politicians and high on the political agenda. The European Commission promotes social investment as one strategy to cope with the challenges of economic crises and the demographic change (European Commission 2013). It is an open question whether public opinion adheres to the same idea, namely that investment in education and families is preferable over ‘direct investment’ in pensions since also pensioners might indirectly benefit from such social investment in the long run.

Whether people support or oppose a policy (such as social investment) in any case their attitudes will play an important role in the political reform making process. “There seems little question that welfare states cannot long swim in a sea of public hostility, that widespread support is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for their sustenance” (Rehm et al. 2012: 387). In this dissertation I have shed light on some aspects of the dynamics of welfare attitudes in times of welfare state retrenchment. Still, it remains a highly relevant and topical issue for politicians and welfare state scholars alike to monitor citizens’ welfare attitudes and to understand when and how citizens change their attitudes.

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## **Paper 1: Increasing conflict in times of retrenchment? Attitudes towards healthcare provision in Europe between 1996 and 2002.**

Naumann, E. (2014). Increasing conflict in times of retrenchment? Attitudes towards healthcare provision in Europe between 1996 and 2002. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 23(3): 276-286.

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### Abstract:

Public opinion is considered a major obstacle to changing the status quo of welfare state policies. Yet some far-reaching reforms and gradual changes of European welfare states prompt the reverse question: Have increased reform pressures and restructuring efforts led to changes in individual attitudes? In line with previous research, I found that the strong support for a public provision of healthcare remains unchanged. But what about the structure of attitudes? Testing core assumptions of the new politics theory and power resources theory, I looked at conflict lines within society and how they change in times of retrenchment. Analysing individual attitudes in 14 European countries between 1996 and 2002, I moved beyond static comparisons across countries to provide a dynamic account of trends over time. Observing stability, not change, I found no evidence that the relevance of old cleavages is in decline. Both old and new cleavages shape individual attitudes.

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<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijsw.12067/abstract>

## **Paper 2: Ideology and Preferences for Public Health Care in Europe**

Jensen, C. & Naumann, E. (2014) Ideology and Preferences for Public Health Care in Europe. *European Sociological Review* (under review).



## Ideology and Preferences for Public Health Care in Europe

Carsten Jensen & Elias Naumann

**Abstract:** Countless studies have found that the political ideology of citizens matters for their preferences regarding the welfare state. But there is little work explicitly dealing with the relationship between ideology and public health care in a cross-country perspective. The paper distils two opposing propositions from the existing literature and tests them empirically. The first proposition is that health care is identical to other social programmes in terms of the ideological correlates, meaning that ideologically right-leaning citizens will be significantly less supportive of public provision than the rest of the citizenry. The second proposition is that health care represents a special type of programme, because sickness is a special type of risk, namely one that cuts across the ideological spectrum. This would either imply that there will be no effect of ideology or that it will be small and instable. The two propositions are tested using an innovative, quasi-experimental design.

A large body of literature has found that the political ideology of citizens matters for their preferences regarding the welfare state. Citizens subscribing to a right-leaning ideology tend to be less supportive of government involvement in the provision of social protection and less willing to accept the redistribution of material wealth. This finding has been found to hold across a number of European countries (e.g., Bean and Papadakis, 1998; Gelissen, 2000; Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Jäger, 2008; Reeskens and Oorschot, 2013).

But there is little existing work explicitly dealing with the relationship between ideology and public health care in a cross-country perspective. This is a serious shortcoming for two reasons. First, because of the sheer size of the public health care sector, typically the second biggest social programme in most European countries (after old-age pensions). Second, because new studies of the political dynamics of health care indicate that 'health care is different' (Carpenter, 2012). In a series of articles, Jensen (2008; 2012) and Castles (2008) show that public spending on health care is largely unrelated to the party colour of governments or membership of certain welfare regimes. At the policy level, health care is much more bipartisan and non-salient than other social programmes. According to Jensen (2012), this is because health care is a life-course risk that threatens citizens across the ideological spectrum, whereas most other social programmes protect against risks suffered mostly by those voting on the left (arguably, this is exactly one of the reasons for that ideological orientation).

The paper distils two opposing propositions from the existing literature and tests them empirically. The first is that health care is identical to other social programmes in terms of ideological correlates, meaning that ideologically right-leaning citizens will be significantly less supportive of public provision than the rest of the citizenry. The second proposition is that health care represents a special type of programme, because sickness is a special type of risk, namely one that cuts across the ideological spectrum. This either implies that there will be no effect of ideology or that it will be small and instable.

Using data from the European Social Survey, the paper advances in two stages. First, it explores the overall relationship between right-leaning ideology and support for public health care. It finds that there is an effect, which is strongest in the countries spending most on health care. Arguably, right-leaning citizens are less likely to support public provision where they feel provision is already sufficient. This seems to corroborate the expectation of a relationship between ideology and support. Importantly, however, the attitudinal difference between citizens with a right-leaning ideology and the rest of the public is small. The second stage therefore investigates if the small difference is an artefact of small perceived differences in risk exposure.

There is a potential problem of spuriousity when studying the effect of ideology and health risk exposure on preferences for public health provision. It is plausible, for instance, that unobserved factors such as childhood socialization and upbringing affect both people's ideology and health status. To avoid this problem, we employ a quasi-experimental design. This design allows us to study the effect of ideology within countries before and after an exogenous health 'shock', namely an influenza epidemic that occurred during the collection of the survey. Using this unique survey material, we reach a number of conclusions. The most important is that the effect of ideology is extremely weak. When exposed to the epidemic, the negative effect turns insignificant. We also provide evidence on the mechanism by which this constraining effect occurs. Individuals that keep themselves updated via the mass media and who previously used to think that the health care system is inefficient are much more likely to change their opinions as a consequence of the epidemic. Our results, in short, lend credibility to the claim that health care is indeed different compared to most other social programmes.

## **Political Ideology and Preferences for Social Protection and Redistribution**

It is both well-established empirically and fairly conventional theoretically that right-leaning citizens are more likely to oppose extensive redistribution and generous social policies than are left-leaning citizens. Theoretically, the left–right ideological dimension maps onto the state–market cleavage that emerged with industrialism and had a profound organizing impact on the party systems, political socialization, and public policies of most European countries. Parties and voters wanting the market to solve social problems tend to be located to the right, while parties and voters preferring state solutions tend to be located to the left (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Although both party systems and voters have undergone significant change in recent decades (Dalton, 2002), it remains an empirical fact that voters describing themselves as belonging to the right tend to favour less government involvement. In the European context, this has been documented by, among others, Bean and Papadakis (1998), Gelissen (2000), Jæger (2008), and Reeskens and Oorschot (2013).

As already noted, previous research has tended to focus on either general questions, such as whether or not the government should work to reduce income differences, or more specific questions relating to the standard of living for the unemployed and elderly. Those studying the preferences of European citizens for public health care normally do not include measures of ideological self-placement (e.g. Jordan 2010; Wendt et al. 2010). An exception is Gelissen (2002), who includes left–right self-placement as a control. Gelissen finds a negative effect but does not discuss its size or robustness.

The neglect of the literature is especially puzzling because some authors working on the determinants of public policy – that is, public health care provision – have argued that left-wing governments are more likely to increase health care spending than right-wing governments (Huber and Stephens, 2000; 2001). Since this work argues theoretically that governments in the aggregate represent the preferences of their voters, it would beg to follow that ideology at the



individual level should matter for preferences for public health care. Drawing on these two sets of literature, we deduce the first hypothesis:

*H1: Right-leaning individuals should tend to be less supportive of public health care provision than other individuals.*

This hypothesis is obviously a bit crude. Most importantly, it does not take into account that people do not form their opinions in a vacuum insensitive to the current state of affairs on the relevant policy area. As Wlezien (1995) argues, when spending on a policy area goes up, preferences for increased government involvement will diminish, *ceteris paribus*. He dubs this the thermostatic model. It makes intuitive sense that right-leaning individuals should be particularly unlikely to support (further) health care expansion where a comparably large amount is already allocated to its provision. This is the second hypothesis:

*H2: Right-leaning individuals should tend to be the least supportive of public health care provision in countries where health care spending is already high.*

As mentioned above, recent research by Jensen (2008; 2012) and Castles (2008) points to an entirely different expectation than these two first hypotheses. Studying public policy-making, they conclude that the party colour of governments has little impact on the level of public involvement in health care. Jensen (2012) provides an argument for why this may be so: sickness is a so-called life-course risk that potentially threatens the well-being of everyone, irrespective of social position. In turn, this means that the left–right ideological orientation of citizens becomes irrelevant for their opinion formation. The argument is only tested at the macro-level using spending data, not individual-level data. Still, we deduce the following hypothesis:

*H3: Right-leaning individuals are not less supportive of public health care provision than the rest of the public.*

Like the first hypothesis, this too comes with a potentially conditional factor, namely the awareness of citizens. Among others, Kam (2005) has shown that unless individuals pay specific attention to issues, they are likely to rely on cue-taking; that is, base their opinions on information that is essentially irrelevant for the concrete issue about which they are asked their opinion. From the current perspective, it is possible that right-leaning individuals with low awareness of the potential benefits from health care provision for themselves will align their opinions about public health care with their opinions regarding other social programmes. This is particularly likely to happen in surveys where the respondents are asked about the role of ‘the government’, a powerful signal in a context where respondents have just been asked about their ideological left–right placement. We would therefore expect that partisanship differences exist among respondents with a low political awareness – but mainly as a result of cue-taking or measurement artefact. In contrast, we expect our third hypothesis to hold for respondents with a high political awareness, since they are less affected by the cue-taking bias.<sup>20</sup> This is the fourth hypothesis:

*H4: Right-leaning individuals are as supportive of public health care provision as left-leaning individuals when made aware of the benefits from such provision.*

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<sup>20</sup> We are aware that the difference between left and right might also increase due to an increased awareness of the benefits of public health care. When people receive information that is at odds with their existing attitude, their political predisposition, they are supposed to engage in ‘motivated reasoning’: they seek out information that confirms prior attitudes, view evidence consistent with prior opinions as stronger, and spend more time counter-arguing and even dismissing evidence inconsistent with their opinion, regardless of objective accuracy (Redlawsk 2002). We could thus also expect that the increased awareness of the benefits from public health care provision is particularly reassuring for those who tend to support public provision in their attitude (the left–centre) by providing new or confirming existing arguments. In contrast, those who tend to oppose public health care provision will counter-argue the provided information or even ignore it. Consequently, their opposition to retrenchment might even increase. We do not expect respondents to heavily engage in motivated reasoning when answering the survey question since, although their awareness for the topic might be high, their emotional involvement should be low. Westen et al. (2006) show that ‘motivated reasoning is qualitatively distinct from reasoning when people do not have a strong emotional stake in the conclusions reached’.

## Methods

Testing the effect of ideological self-placement on opinions about the responsibility of governments has been done many times before. Earlier, one worry was that people's ideology did not influence their policy opinions, but rather that their opinions summed up to their reported ideological position. Recently, however, Jæger (2008) has shown this not to be the case: ideology affects policy opinions, not the other way around. Studying the overall effect of right-leaning ideology is in itself therefore straightforward. A bigger problem emerges when we want to examine the role of risk exposure and awareness; the reason being that both ideology and the risk exposure of individuals can be influenced by unobserved factors. Most potently, childhood socialization affects both the ideological orientation of citizens and their life-style choices. Since life-style is possibly the strongest determinant of peoples' likelihood to become ill, there is a danger of spuriousity.

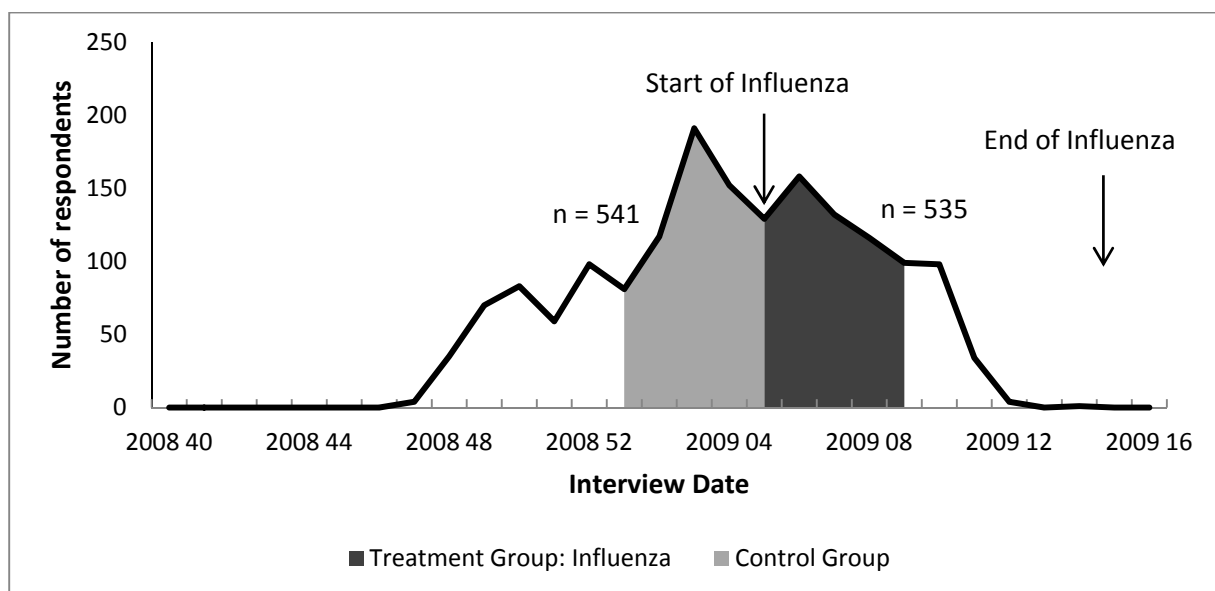
To deal with this spuriousity when examining the support for public health care provision, we use the welfare attitudes module included in the fourth round of the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2008. This international survey was fielded in 2008 and 2009 in 28 different countries. In 17 countries (Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, UK, Croatia, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Sweden, and Slovakia) the fieldwork period coincides with the seasonal influenza wave, thereby providing a unique opportunity for a natural quasi-experiment examining the impact increased risk exposure may have on the effect of right-leaning ideology. To maximize our ability to relate changes in the effect of ideology to the influenza outbreak, the sample is restricted to interviews conducted 4 weeks before and 4 weeks after the outbreak. In total, the analysis is based on 8,816 respondents.<sup>21</sup>

The analytical benefit from using a quasi-experimental setup is that we automatically control for unobserved factors that do not change together with the onset of the influenza

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<sup>21</sup> Israel was also hit by the epidemic, but we lack data on some of the country-level variables used in the analysis, so we have had to drop this case.

outbreak. Childhood socialization, for example, is obviously time-invariant and therefore cannot explain changing effects of right-leaning ideology on support for public health care provision (as long as the respondents before and after the onset of the influenza are similar on all relevant observable characteristics; see below). The logic of our design is that those respondents surveyed before the influenza outbreak serve as the ‘control group’ and are compared with the ‘treatment group’, that is, those respondents interviewed after the influenza wave had started. Figure 1 illustrates the logic, using the Estonian data as an example. The analytical strategy shares some similarities with a regression discontinuity design (RD Design). In both cases, an exactly defined cut-off point in a continuous variable  $x$  (timing of the interviews) is used to define the treatment and control groups. Both designs rely on two assumptions to ensure the ignorability of the treatment assignment: (1) the randomization of the assignment to the treatment and control groups around the cut-off point and (2) the temporal stability of attitudes in the hypothetical absence of the treatment (see Legewie, 2013 for a similar approach).



**Figure 3** Illustration of the research design for Estonia

*Note:* The number of observations is calculated per week. The control group (light grey) includes respondents that were interviewed in the 4 weeks before the influenza outbreak started. The treatment group (dark grey) includes the respondents interviewed in the 4 weeks after the influenza outbreak started and while it was going on.

Assignment to the treatment and control groups around the cut-off point is determined by the timing of the interviews. This assignment should occur by chance and can be assumed to be random when there are no systematic differences in the reachability of respondents. Yet survey research reports such a reachability bias and that some respondents (*e.g.* female or unemployed) are easier to interview and therefore more likely to be interviewed early in the field period. To the extent such imbalances actually exist, the potential bias can be controlled for by including covariates related to the reachability of the respondents. To evaluate the bias, Table 1 presents a regression estimating the likelihood of being in the treatment group compared to the control group given a series of socio-demographic factors. The results of the regression are provided as odds ratios to make presentation easier.

**Table 2** (Im-)balance between the treatment and control groups. Multilevel logistic regression to estimate the likelihood of being part of the treatment group (odds ratios)

Female	1.02
Age (in years)	1.007*
Less than lower secondary education	0.93
Lower secondary education	1.01
Post-secondary education	Ref.
Post-secondary education	0.87
Tertiary education	0.92
Working status: doing paid work	Ref.
Working status: education/military service	1.30*
Working status: unemployed	1.02
Working Status: retired	0.86*
Working status: other	1.08
Subjective assessment of own financial situation	0.98
Subjective health status	0.98
Access to health care when in need	1.02

Note: \* = p-value < .05.

Only very small differences occur when examining the differences between groups. Only three differences are statistically significant. There are slightly more aged and people in education or doing military service, and slightly fewer only with a lower secondary education in the treatment group. These differences are easy to control for statistically by including these variables as controls. Just to be on the safe side, all of the variables reported in Table 1 will be included as controls in the results reported below (for more detail on the coding, see Table A1). Note also

that both the subjective health status of the respondents and their belief that they can access health care if necessary are virtually identical across the two periods. Any impact of the influenza epidemic therefore cannot be explained by an increased level of sickness *per se* or the fear of not obtaining medical treatment.

The second assumption of the design is the temporal stability of the dependent variable in the absence of treatment. The estimated treatment effect would be biased if attitudes would change, even if no treatment occurred. This might occur if other time-varying determinants of attitudes or events that are causally related to attitudes coincide with the start of the influenza outbreak. For example, a general seasonal trend of attitudes due to Christmas would bias the identified effect. The short time period of only 2 months around the treatment and the absence of notable national events<sup>22</sup> support the plausibility of the assumption. Moreover, the start of the influenza outbreak varies from one country to the next, giving some relief as for potential confounding factors influencing all countries in the same way.

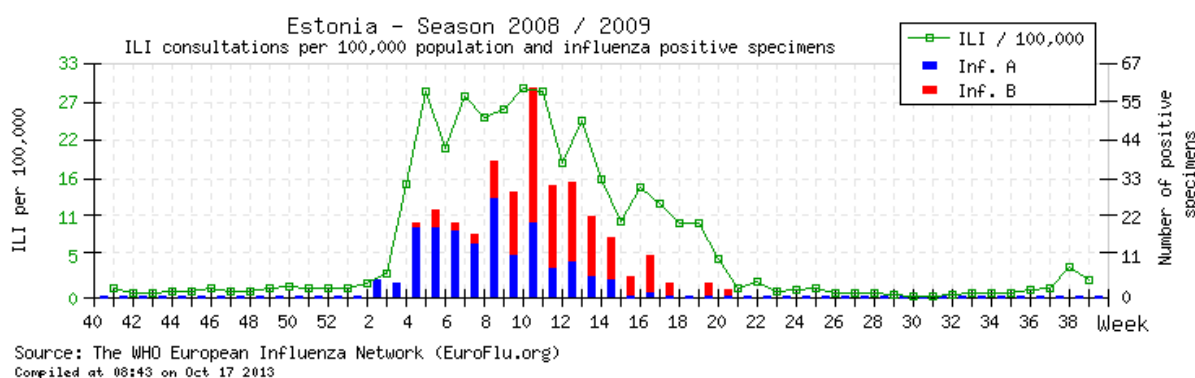
The information on the timing of the influenza outbreaks come from the WHO influenza surveillance network, which collects official data on the influenza incidences submitted by the member states in the WHO European region. Contextual indicators of the economic situation and the health care system are retrieved from Eurostat. The assignment to the treatment and control groups is based on data regarding the WHO influenza surveillance network. The WHO categorizes the intensity of an influenza outbreak as low, medium, high, or very high. The week of the year where the influenza intensity changes from low to medium, high, or very high is taken as the start of the seasonal influenza wave. People interviewed in the 4 weeks before this start are taken as the control group, whereas respondents interviewed in the first 4 weeks of the influenza outbreak are assigned to the treatment group. This range of 4 weeks before and after the start of the influenza wave is chosen to be as short as possible to ensure the temporal stability assumption but long enough to provide a reasonable number of observations.

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<sup>22</sup> The ESS provides a list of national events that occurred during the field work. We checked this list for events coinciding with the start of the influenza outbreak and that might be causally related to welfare attitudes.

Due to data availability, the identification of influenza weeks is based on actual infections, that is, the number of positive specimens. As the Estonian example (Figure 2) suggests, this indicator is highly correlated with an increase in consultations due to influenza-like illness.

Previous research has also shown that influenza-related queries to search engines such as Google are highly correlated with physician visits in which a patient presents with influenza-like symptoms and can thus be used for accurate estimates of the current level of weekly influenza activity (Ginsberg et al., 2009). We can therefore assume that the start of an influenza outbreak leads to increased use of the health care system *and* that at least large parts of the public are aware of the start of the influenza outbreak (we return to this specific point in greater detail below).



**Figure 4** Influenza infections and number of consultations due to influenza-like illness, Estonia 2008/09

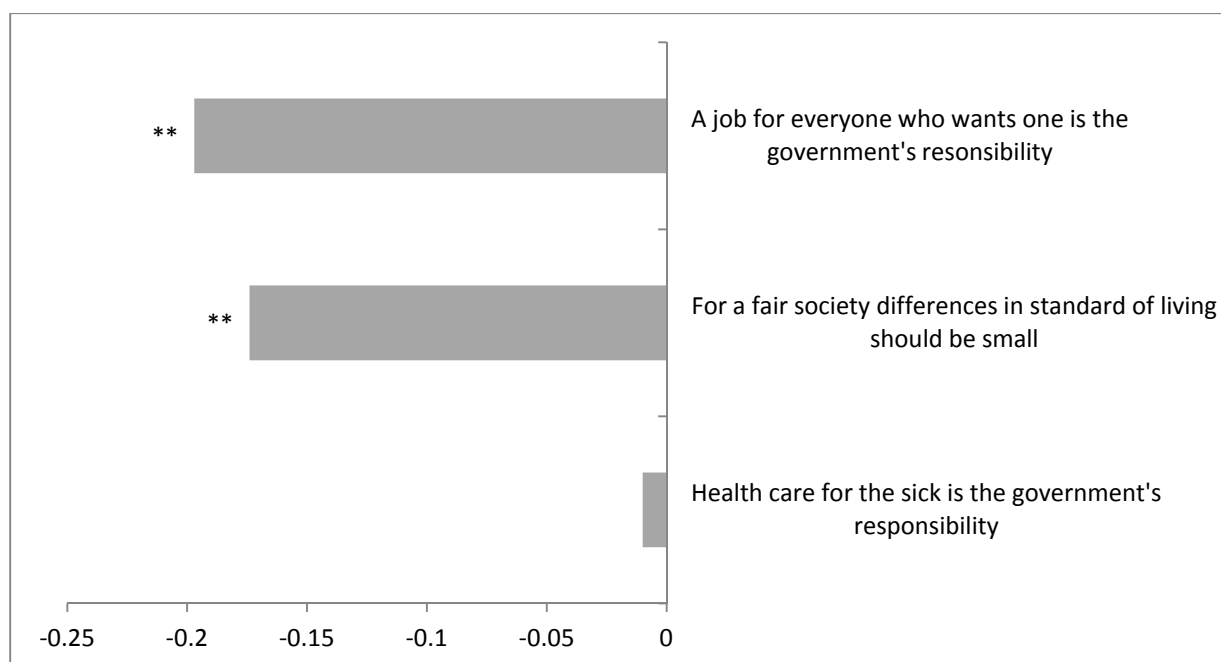
Public support for government involvement in health care is measured using the following item. Respondents were asked how much responsibility they think government should have for providing health care for the sick. Response options ranged from 'Not government's responsibility at all' (0) to 'Entirely government's responsibility' (10). Higher scores indicate greater support for government health care involvement. Right-leaning ideology is measured using the conventional 10-point scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right) and then recoded into a dummy so that individuals placing themselves at 7 or above are coded as right-leaning. Doing so is necessary to compute the interaction models presented below and is a standard procedure in the literature.

At the country level, the H2 test requires a measure of total health care spending as a percentage of the GDP. To factor-out other country-level features that might influence the relationship between health spending and ideology, GDP per capita and old age dependency ratio are included. In richer countries, *ceteris paribus*, right-leaning individuals may be more accepting of generous public health provision. The same applies in countries with relatively large numbers of elderly. Here, it may be more acceptable for the state to play a major role, according to those with a right-leaning ideology. Details on the country-level variables are located in Table A1.

### **Estimating the Effect of Right-Leaning Ideology**

This section begins by estimating the direct effect of right-leaning ideological orientation on support for public health care provision. By way of comparison, two other, but much more widely used, measures of social policy preferences are also shown: the belief that the government should ensure a job for everyone who wants one and that the differences in the standard of living should be small for society to be fair. These estimates include a full set of country dummies, because we are only interested in the individual-level effects and because the relevant country-level controls vary across the three questions. Nevertheless, it does not matter how we exactly treat the country level; the results can be reproduced using the three country-level variables employed in the rest of the paper (or without any country-level controls, for that matter).

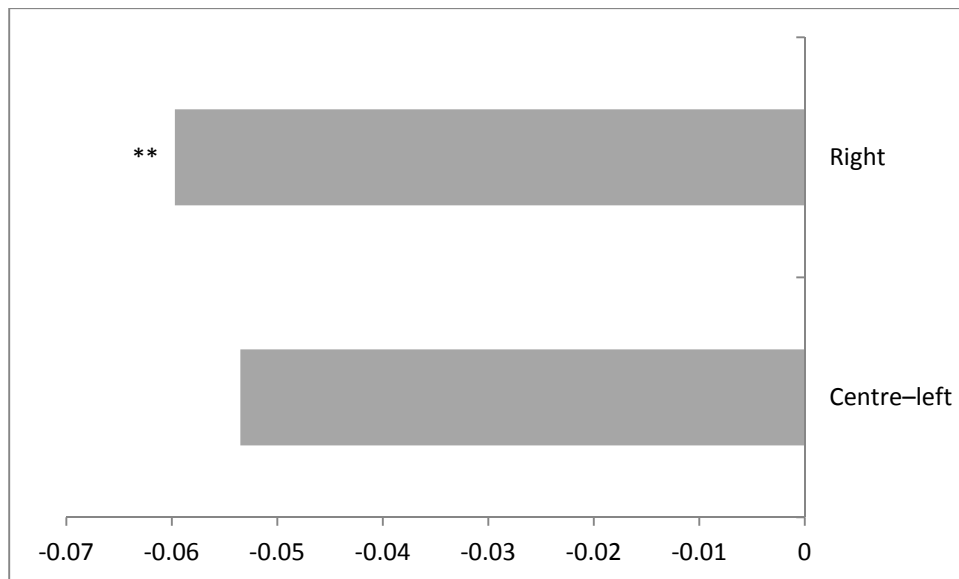




**Figure 3.** The effect of ideology on preferences

*Note:* \*\* = p-value < .01. The regression coefficients are listed on the horizontal axis.

Figure 3 reports the regression coefficients for the three models. The full models are displayed in the Appendix (together with all of the other regression tables used to construct the graphs below). The findings are straightforward. For the classic labour market-related and redistributive questions, being right-leaning has a clear-cut, negative effect. Yet when it comes to health care, the effect turns insignificant, although the coefficient remains negative. Given that there – as expected – are strong negative effects for the other issues, it is evident that the health care finding is not driven by particulars of the data. It would seem possible to reject H1.



**Figure 4.** Marginal effect of health spending on preferences for public health care among two ideological groups

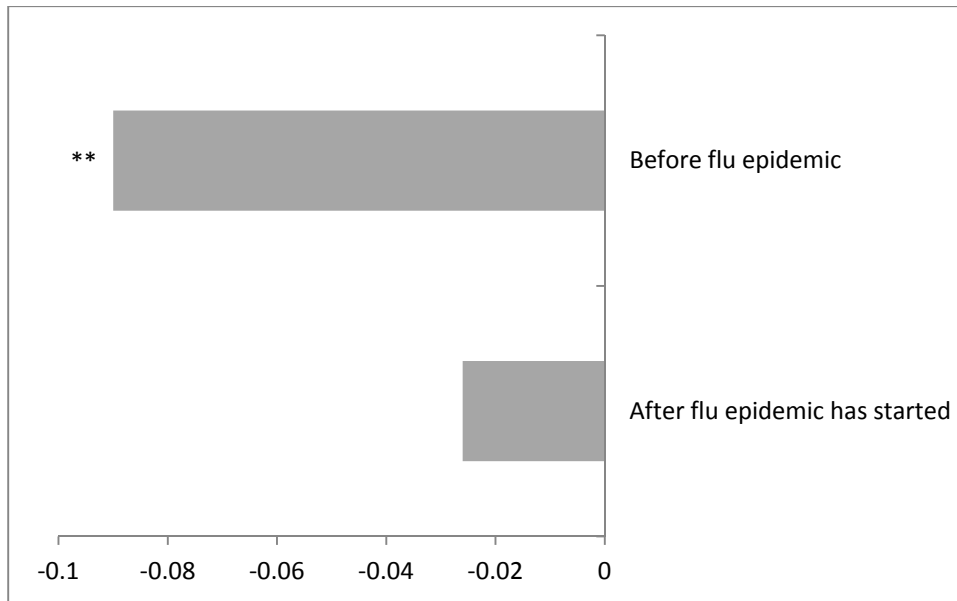
*Note:* \*\* = p-value < .01. The regression coefficients are listed on the horizontal axis.

Moving to H2, we estimate a cross-level interaction with health spending  $\times$  right ideology. For this estimate, the country dummies are dropped and GDP per capita and old age dependency ratio are instead included as country-level controls – together with health expenditure, of course, which is the country-level variable of interest. Figure 4 reports the marginal effect of health care expenditure among those with a right-leaning ideology compared to the rest of the public. Here, a highly significant effect manifests itself with a coefficient of  $-0.06$  with p-value = .008. Where spending is high, right-wing ideology has a negative effect on preferences for public health care provision. It would appear as though those disposed towards the right are guided by the existing levels of health care spending in society when forming their opinions. At the same time, it should be noted that the difference between the right-leaners and the rest is actually rather small, in fact less than .01 on a 10-point scale. Related, the rest of the public also tends towards being more negative when spending is high, although the effect is not significant. In sum, while H2 cannot be rejected, there is good reason to move to the next stage of the analysis in order to test the robustness of the negative effect of ideology.

## Testing the Robustness of Ideology

This section studies the effect of the influenza epidemic on the findings reported in Figure 4. Will the amplifying effect of health spending on right-leaning ideology be influenced by this event? To do so, we test a three-way interaction: health spending  $\times$  right ideology  $\times$  influenza epidemic. The remainder of the paper focuses strictly on those respondents in the sample with a right-leaning ideology and only reports the results for this segment. This makes presenting the results much easier – and since the support of the centre-left is unconditional, there is little lost in terms of substantial information. The interested readers can find the full interaction models, including the effects for the centre-left, in the Appendix.

Figure 5 presents the results, showing a very marked effect. Before the influenza epidemic, the estimated regression coefficient was  $-.09$  with  $p\text{-value} = .001$ . After the influenza epidemic, the effect collapses into insignificance with an estimated coefficient of  $-.03$  with  $p\text{-value} = .452$ . It bears reminding that these different effects cannot be explained by variances across the two sub-samples in socio-demographic composition (sex, age, education, or employment situation), or subjective evaluation of future income, current health status, and ability to obtain medical treatment if needed.



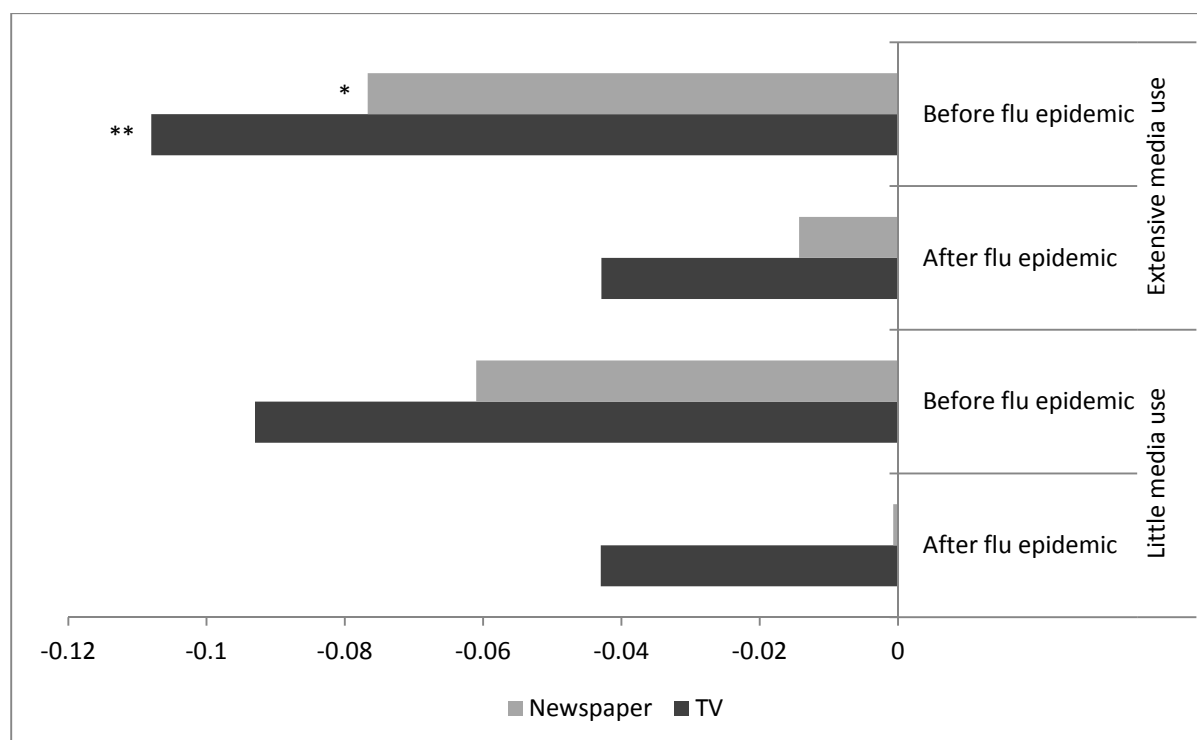
**Figure 5.** Marginal effect of right-leaning ideology on preferences for public health care – the moderating effect of increased risk

*Note:* \*\* = p-value < .01. The regression coefficients are listed on the horizontal axis.

This would seem to corroborate H3 and H4. All people – also the right-leaners – favour public health if reminded of its benefits. But is it really possible that an influenza epidemic can raise awareness like this? To show that this is the case, we need more information regarding the mechanism according to which it happens. For one thing, we would expect the influence to be greatest for those right-leaners who keep themselves updated on current events. This is the segment of people with the best opportunity to be affected by stories about the epidemic. To see if this is what happens, Figure 6 displays a disaggregation of the results in Figure 5. In the European Social Survey, respondents are asked how often they watch current events on television and read about them in newspapers. Based on this, two dummies are created, measuring whether respondents follow current events on television or in the newspaper, respectively. We run two regressions similar to the one used for Figure 5: one using the television dummy,<sup>23</sup> the other using the newspaper dummy,<sup>24</sup> as a way of ensuring that the findings are robust to different measurement choices. In Figure 6, the results using the television dummy are dark grey, while the newspaper dummy results are light grey.

<sup>23</sup> Health spending × right ideology × influenza epidemic × extensive television use.

<sup>24</sup> Health spending × right ideology × influenza epidemic × extensive newspaper reading.



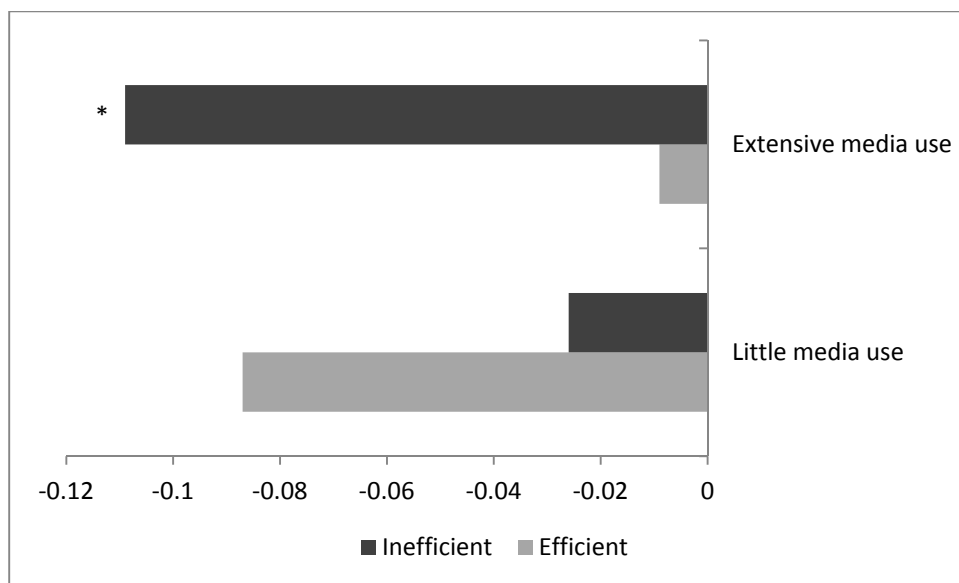
**Figure 6.** Marginal effect of right-leaning ideology on preferences for public health care – increased risk and political awareness

Note: \*\* = p-value < .01; \* = p-value < .05. The regression coefficients are listed on the horizontal axis.

In Figure 6, it becomes apparent that the effect of the influenza epidemic found in Figure 5 is located among those individuals who follow current events closely. Before the epidemic, it was these individuals who hosted the negative view on public health care, and it is these people that changed their minds after the epidemic. Conversely, those who pay little attention to current events are unmoved by the epidemic.

Figure 6 contains a puzzle. Why are the most aware right-leaners negative towards public health care in the first place; that is, before the epidemic? One possible reason is that this segment of people is particularly disgruntled with the health care system as it is or are at least letting their views about the state of the health system have a greater impact on their opinion formations. Fortunately, the European Social Survey includes a question concerning the perceived efficiency of the health care system (ranging from extremely inefficient to extremely efficient), which is ideal for the current purpose. A dummy is created, splitting the variable at the median value. This is done so that it becomes manageable to include it in a five-way interaction

with health spending, right ideology, influenza epidemic, and extensive media use. The last variable is constructed by adding extensive television watching of current events and newspaper reading together into an index. As Figure 6 indicates, the two variables clearly have similar effects and load strongly on a single dimension in a factor analysis. By combining them, we keep things relatively simple.



**Figure 7.** Marginal effect of right-leaning ideology on preferences for public health care – political awareness and beliefs in efficiency of the health care system – before flu epidemic  
*Note:* \* = p-value < .05. The regression coefficients are listed on the horizontal axis.

Figure 7 reports the results for the estimated five-way interaction: Health spending  $\times$  right ideology  $\times$  influenza epidemic  $\times$  extensive media use  $\times$  belief in efficiency. It only displays the results for the pre-epidemic sub-sample, because we first and foremost want to know about the attitudes of the segment of highly aware right-leaners prior to their opinion change: it is these people who appear to be driving the (fragile) negative correlation between right-leaning ideology and support for public health care. It transpires that the negative effect is indeed located in the segment of the right-leaners who perceived the health system to be inefficient. This is important information. It would seem as though the reason why some right-leaning citizens do not support government involvement in health care provision is because they find it inefficient. This is an intuitively plausible explanation and fits well with the fact that the negative effect of right-leaning

ideology is strongest in countries with considerable health spending. In such countries, it is somewhat easier to make the argument that the health system is already sufficiently funded and, partly, that any problems with the system must consequently be caused by inefficiency.

Does this finding imply that this segment has changed its view concerning the efficiency of the system? Might the epidemic have provided an opportunity to learn that the health system is not as bad as previously thought? It would seem so. First, for this specific segment (highly aware right-leaners who think the health system is inefficient), the regression coefficient shifts from  $-.11$  with  $p\text{-value} = .04$  (the one shown in Figure 7) to  $.11$  with  $p\text{-value} = .08$ . It would seem as though believing the health system is inefficient no longer makes people link their ideology to opposition towards public health care. Second, and related, the reason behind this surprising change may very well be that – while some still think the health system is inefficient in relative terms – the absolute level of perceived inefficiency has fallen. Among the highly aware right-leaners, the average score on the efficiency scale was 5.8 before the epidemic but 6.1 after. This is not a big change, but it is statistically significant in a t-test with  $p\text{-value} = .004$ , and the changing effect it is supposed to account for is, as mentioned repeatedly, also small.

## **Conclusion**

Political ideology is an important source in the opinion formation of citizens across a long list of issues related to the welfare state and redistribution from the rich to the poor. This paper has aimed at filling a gap in the literature by studying the role of ideology in opinion formation about public health care provision, a topic receiving scant attention so far. We have shown that, compared to other issues such as the standard of living for the unemployed and the desirability of a low degree of inequality, ideology plays a very modest role when it comes to public health.

It turns out that while there might be a negative relationship between right-leaning ideology and support for public health care, the effect is brittle. It only materializes under certain

circumstances – and then only in some countries (namely those that already have high spending levels). It is telling that something as relatively inconsequential as an influenza epidemic can have the sort of depressing effects we have shown that it actually does. Being reminded via television and newspapers that the health system is less inefficient than previously thought changes the minds of those opposing public health. In all likelihood, this reflects how the negative views are not at all deeply held. Rather, it lends credibility to the argument of Jensen (2012) that the risk of ill health cuts across ideological distinctions in such a manner that ideology *de facto* plays a limited role on this policy area. No matter their ideological views, citizens generally tend to support public health care.

It goes without saying that the depressing influence of the epidemic we have studied here is unlikely to be permanent. After a – presumably – short while, the same small segment of right-leaning citizens will probably return to their relatively negative views on public health care. This relates to a methodological point that will end the paper. As noted, a few authors have examined the effect of ideology on preferences for public health care, although virtually always just as controls. It will be paramount for future research to appreciate just how non-robust this variable really is. Whether or not a significant relationship is discovered can depend on at least two types of biases that are normally beyond the control of the researcher. First, whether the survey was conducted at a time when the salience of health risks was high or low. In the case of the latter, ideology is likely to play a smaller role than in the case of the former. The second bias is the order of questions in the questionnaire. To be sure, this form of bias is well-described (Schaeffer and Dykema, 2011), but not for the particular instance of health care. Take the European Social Survey, for example. Here, respondents are first asked to place themselves on the left–right dimension. After a few other questions, they are then asked about whether they think it is the government’s responsibility to ensure a job for everyone who wants one. As shown above, this exact question is highly partisan – and relates to one of the most controversial distinctions between socialist and conservative parties in the history of the welfare state – and, then,



immediately after this comes the question about whether or not the government shall provide health care for the sick. Avoiding such blatant biases will be an important task for future survey research.

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1.** Independent variables on the individual and country levels

Independent variables	Measurement
<i>Individual level</i>	
Sex	0 Male, 1 Female
Age	Age in years, centred around the mean of 47.2 years
Education	Categorical variable based on ISCED: 1 Less than lower secondary education, 2 Lower secondary education completed, 3 Upper secondary education completed, 4 Post-secondary non-tertiary education, 5 Tertiary education completed
Income	Feeling about HH income: 1 Very difficult on present income, 2 Difficult on present income, 3 Coping on present income, 4 Living comfortably on present income
Working Status	1 Paid work, 2 In education or military service, 3 Unemployed, 4 Retired/Disabled, 5 Other
Political Ideology	11-point Left–Right scale (0 Left, 10 Right): 7–10 Right
Subjective health status	‘How is your health in general?’ 1 = very good, 2 = good, 3 = fair, 4 = bad, 5 = very bad
Access to health	‘During the next 12 months, how likely is it that you will not receive the health care you really need if you become ill?’ 1 = not at all likely, 2 = not very likely, 3 = likely, 4 = very likely
Efficiency of health care	‘Please tell me how efficient you think the provision of health care in [country] is. Choose your answer from this card, 0 meaning extremely inefficient and 10 meaning extremely efficient’.
<i>National Level</i>	
Expenditure on health care	Total expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP in 2008
GDP per capita	GDP per capita at current prices, US Dollars 2008
Old-age dependency ratio	The ratio between the total number of elderly persons of an age when they are generally economically inactive (aged 65 and over) and the number of persons of working age (from 15–64). From the year 2008

**Table A2.** *Multilevel regression – preference for public health care and two other welfare items*

	A job for everyone is the government's responsibility	For a fair society, income differences should be small	Health care for the sick is the government's responsibility
Right Ideology	−0.20** (0.06)	−0.16** (0.02)	0.00 (0.04)
Age	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)
Female	0.27** (0.05)	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.04)
Education: Upper secondary education	ref.	ref.	ref.
Less than lower secondary education	0.18 (0.11)	0.02 (0.04)	−0.07 (0.08)
Lower secondary education	0.14 (0.07)	0.06* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
Post-secondary education	−0.02 (0.16)	0.01 (0.06)	0.21 (0.11)
Tertiary education	−0.48** (0.06)	−0.14** (0.02)	−0.02 (0.05)
Working status: In paid work	ref.	ref.	ref.
In education	0.17 (0.11)	0.10** (0.04)	−0.05 (0.08)
Unemployed	0.37** (0.14)	0.22** (0.05)	0.13 (0.10)
Retired	0.19* (0.08)	0.02 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.06)
Other	0.10 (0.09)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.06)
Subjective financial situation	−0.23** (0.04)	−0.09** (0.01)	−0.05* (0.03)
Access to health care when in need	0.10** (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.04 (0.02)
Subjective health status	0.17** (0.03)	0.05** (0.01)	0.11** (0.02)
Flu epidemic	0.08 (0.05)	0.03 (0.02)	0.00 (0.04)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	7.96** (0.18)	4.00** (0.07)	9.12** (0.13)
<i>N</i>	9627	9595	9670

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table A3** *Multilevel regression – preference for public health care*

	Figure 4	Figure 5	Figure 6a	Figure 6b	Figure 7
Right Ideology	–0.05 (0.05)	–0.06 (0.05)	–0.06 (0.05)	–0.06 (0.05)	–0.05 (0.05)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Female	0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Education: Upper secondary education	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Less than lower secondary education	–0.05 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)
Lower secondary education	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)
Post-secondary education	0.22 (0.11)	0.22 (0.11)	0.22 (0.11)	0.21 (0.11)	0.22 (0.11)
Tertiary education	–0.01 (0.05)	–0.01 (0.05)	–0.01 (0.05)	–0.01 (0.05)	–0.01 (0.05)
Working status: In paid work	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
In education	–0.04 (0.08)	–0.04 (0.08)	–0.04 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)
Unemployed	0.09 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)
Retired	–0.05 (0.07)	–0.05 (0.07)	–0.05 (0.07)	–0.04 (0.07)	–0.05 (0.07)
Other	–0.01 (0.07)	–0.01 (0.07)	–0.02 (0.07)	–0.01 (0.07)	–0.01 (0.07)
Subjective financial situation	–0.05 (0.03)	–0.05 (0.03)	–0.05 (0.03)	–0.05 (0.03)	–0.05 (0.03)
Access to health care when in need	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Subjective health status	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)
Flu epidemic	0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Health spending (% of GDP)	0.01 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)	0.04 (0.09)	0.00 (0.08)	–0.01 (0.09)
Old-age dependency ratio	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
GDP per capita	–0.00 (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)
RIGHT × health spending	–0.06** (0.02)				
3-way interaction: right ideology x flu x health spending <sup>1</sup>		ref.			
right × FLU × health spending		–0.02 (0.02)			
RIGHT × flu × health spending		–0.09** (0.03)			
RIGHT × FLU × health spending		–0.03 (0.04)			
Extensive Media Use <sup>2</sup>			0.08 (0.04)	–0.03 (0.04)	
4-way interaction: right ideology × flu × extensive media use × health spending			ref.	ref.	
right × flu × EXTENSIVE MEDIA USE × health spending			–0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	
right × FLU × extensive media use x health spending			–0.06 (0.04)	–0.03 (0.03)	
right × FLU × EXTENSIVE MEDIA USE × health spending			–0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	
RIGHT × flu × extensive media use x health spending			–0.09 (0.05)	–0.06 (0.04)	

RIGHT × flu × EXTENSIVE MEDIA USE × health spending			-0.11**	-0.08*	
			(0.04)	(0.04)	
RIGHT × FLU × extensive media use × health spending			-0.04	-0.00	
			(0.06)	(0.05)	
RIGHT × FLU × EXTENSIVE MEDIA USE × health spending			-0.04	-0.01	
			(0.05)	(0.05)	
Extensive Media Use					0.01
					(0.04)
Belief in efficiency of health care system					0.04
					(0.04)
5-way interaction: right ideology × Flu × extensive media use × belief in efficiency × health spending					ref.
right × flu × media use × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					0.04
					(0.04)
right × flu × MEDIA USE × efficiency belief × health spending					0.03
					(0.04)
right × flu × MEDIA USE × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					0.04
					(0.04)
right × FLU × media use × efficiency belief × health spending					-0.05
					(0.05)
right × FLU × media use × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					0.04
					(0.05)
right × FLU × MEDIA USE × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					-0.03
					(0.06)
RIGHT × flu × media use × efficiency belief × health spending					-0.09
					(0.06)
RIGHT × flu × MEDIA USE × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					-0.11*
					(0.05)
RIGHT × flu × MEDIA USE × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					-0.01
					(0.05)
RIGHT × FLU × media use × efficiency belief × health spending					0.02
					(0.09)
RIGHT × FLU × media use × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					0.02
					(0.08)
RIGHT × FLU × MEDIA USE × efficiency belief × health spending					0.11
					(0.07)
RIGHT × FLU × MEDIA USE × EFFICIENCY BELIEF × health spending					-0.14*
					(0.07)
Constant	8.07**	8.08**	8.03**	8.09**	8.03**
	(0.79)	(0.79)	(0.79)	(0.79)	(0.80)
<i>N</i>	8816	8816	8816	8816	8816

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Note:

<sup>1</sup> For a convenient understanding of the interaction terms, we adopted a notation known from Boolean logic: We write a variable in CAPITAL letters when the respective characteristic is present and in small letters when it is absent. Health spending as a continuous variable is always written in small letters.

<sup>2</sup> Extensive media use means newspaper reading in model Figure 6a and TV use in model Figure 6b.

### **Paper 3: Raising the retirement age: retrenchment, feedback and attitudes**

Naumann, E. (2014). Raising the retirement age: retrenchment, feedback and attitudes. In: Kumlin, S., & Stadelmann-Steffen, I. (Eds.) (2014). *How Welfare States Shape the Democratic Public: Policy Feedback, Participation, Voting, and Attitudes*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 223-243.  
DOI: 10.4337/9781782545491.00020

#### Abstract:

Life expectancy in western societies is increasing. A man of pensionable age living in an OECD country is expected to live, on average, a further 18.5 years – compared to 16.2 years 20 years ago (OECD 2011). With increasing life expectancy people spend more time in retirement, provided the retirement age remains unchanged. As ageing populations challenge the sustainability of the pension system, an increase in the retirement age seems to be an inevitable reform alternative (OECD 2011). This step is however frequently met with great resistance. In this paper I examine if and how attitudes towards increasing the retirement age have changed in recent years. Is the opposition to reform crumbling with rising reform pressures? And what are the effects of a reform that changes the legal retirement age? Moreover, do groups within societies react to these developments differently, and do we thus find increasing conflicts, for example between social classes? Or can we perhaps observe the emergence of new conflict lines, for example between the old and the young?

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<http://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781782545484.00020.xml>





## **Paper 4: Do Increasing Reform Pressures Change Policy Preferences?**

Naumann, E. (2014). Do Increasing Reform Pressures Change Policy Preferences? – An Experimental Study on Population Ageing, Pension Reform Preferences, Political Knowledge and Ideology. *Journal of European Social Policy* (under review).

## **Do Increasing Reform Pressures Change Policy Preferences? – An Experimental Study on Population Ageing, Pension Reform Preferences, Political Knowledge and Ideology**

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### **Abstract**

It is a perennial issue in the public and the scientific debate whether increased pressures to reform due to the financial crisis or population ageing erode welfare state support. The New Politics argument, for example, assumes that welfare state support remains high even in times of austerity and public opinion is considered as a major obstacle to reform. Surprisingly though our knowledge of how individuals change their attitudes in hard times is still limited – both theoretically and empirically. We rely on newly available data from a survey experiment in a representative German online survey and exogenously manipulate the perceived pressure to reform (due to an ageing society). We show that people indeed change their reform preferences when faced with an ageing society: the strong opposition to increasing the retirement age decreases. Further analyses reveal that not all groups within society react to increased reform pressures in the same way: political knowledge but also political partisanship do moderate the strength and the direction of the attitude change.

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### **Keywords**

public opinion, pension reform, attitude change, population ageing, survey experiment

## Introduction

Financial pressures and rising public deficits have been ubiquitous in almost all western societies over the last decades. These pressures have even been aggravated by the recent financial crisis of 2008. As a consequence scholars and politicians, depending on their political background, either fear or hope for a (radical) restructuring of the welfare state and cutbacks in social expenditures. Yet, both sides agree that public opinion is one of the crucial players in this process. Boeri and Tabellini (2012: 327) answer the question “why it is so difficult to reform the unsustainable and overly generous European pension system [with the opposition of the] majority of elderly European voters who want to gain at the expense of younger or future generations”, whereas Vis et al. (2011: 339) argue that “the supportive public opinion on the core welfare state programmes is an important precondition” to prevent serious cutbacks. But are welfare preferences affected by increasing reform pressures at all? Although public support is at the core of the main theoretical perspectives of (welfare) state development (e.g. Pierson, 2001) it has rarely been tested whether people ask for a stronger welfare state to be protected against hard times, or whether they follow a classical economic logic and accept retrenchment when faced with budgetary constraints. This paper provides such a test.

On the macro level (that is on the country level) it seems that welfare attitudes are very stable in the long run (Jeene and van Oorschot, 2014), a finding which the public opinion literature has confirmed for various other issues and across time (Erikson et al., 2002). Nevertheless various studies suggest that changes in the socio-economic, political and institutional context are correlated with changes in aggregated public opinion (Soroka and Wlezien, 2009). However these macro studies face the empirical challenge of establishing causality and of determining whether attitudes affect the political and institutional context or vice versa (Brooks and Manza, 2006). In the latter direction of causality the research is also missing a specific theoretical explanation of how and why people change their attitudes on the individual level in reaction to socio-economic or institutional changes (Mettler and Soss, 2004). Whereas the individual determinants of attitudes (e.g. self-interest and values) are rather well-known (Kumlin, 2007; Larsen, 2006; van Oorschot et al., 2012), our knowledge is still limited when it comes to explaining individual attitude *change*. In contrast to aggregated opinion individual attitudes seem to be rather instable and it seems as if “opinion statements vary randomly across repeated interviews of the same people” (Zaller, 1992:28). As (cross-national) panel data covering longer periods of time is still scarce one challenge remains to link socio-economic and institutional change on the macro-level and attitudinal *change* on the individual level moving beyond static comparisons of countries at a single point in time.

Following up on these lines of research we investigate whether people change their individual reform preferences when faced with increasing pressures to reform. We use preferences for pension reforms as our empirical test case for three reasons: in terms of spending the pension system is the most important one in most European welfare states, pension reforms are back on the political agenda due to population ageing, and attitudes towards pensions have recently gained renewed scientific attention (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2013; Jaime-Castillo, 2013; Naumann, 2014). More specifically we examine

whether an ageing society, as one of the major challenges for the financing of the pensions system, affects pension reform preferences.<sup>1</sup> In order to narrow the theoretical and methodological gaps outlined above we will combine the welfare attitudes literature with findings from political psychology. First, the paper contributes to welfare attitude research on a theoretical level by paying explicit attention to individual attitude formation. In this respect we rely on an extensive literature from political psychology that examines attitude formation and change on the individual level (e.g. Zaller, 1992; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Second, we apply a new method and make use of a survey experiment that externally manipulates the reform pressure.<sup>2</sup> Survey experiments may help to overcome some of the problems inherently linked to cross-sectional data analysis and can complement existing research (Gaines et al., 2007).

### **Enduring popularity of the welfare state in times of crisis?**

One core claim of the *New Politics of the Welfare State* literature is that “contemporary politics of the welfare state take shape against a backdrop of both intense pressures for austerity and enduring popularity” (Pierson, 2001: 410). The new politics argument states that interest formation in times of welfare state retrenchment follows a quite different logic when compared with times of welfare state expansion. As long as the welfare state was expanding reforms were basically aiming at distributing additional benefits. Even if benefits were not distributed equally and interests might be conflicting, opposition to reform is assumed to be less pronounced as people usually agree with a reform if they at least benefit to a certain degree. In contrast, in times of austerity reform is about retrenchment, about cutting back benefits or at least recalibrating the welfare state. Opposition to such reforms is assumed to be much stronger as groups who benefit from the welfare state will defend ‘their’ programmes and acquired rights.<sup>3</sup>

The relevance of public opinion in the policy process is a longstanding topic in political science (Burstein, 2003). In the light of the *New Politics of the Welfare State* literature it has gained renewed attention and public opinion is identified as a possible and powerful veto player blocking reforms (Pierson, 2001). Two mechanisms are distinguished. First, changing attitudes might alter vote choices thereby directly affecting the composition of the government. But voting behaviour is not the only way how people can

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<sup>1</sup> The major part of the research on welfare attitudes has been concerned with examining more general attitudes towards the welfare state such as demand for redistribution (e.g. Blekesaune, 2007), spending preferences (e.g. Soroka and Wlezien 2009) or the role of the state (e.g. Taylor-Gooby, 2001). Recently, the research field moved towards the examination of more specific attitudes in each field of the welfare state separately acknowledging that the “welfare state is an umbrella term covering a range of governmental activities that have distinct characteristics” (Pierson, 2001: 11).

<sup>2</sup> New in the sense that survey experiments are a well-known method from related research areas but have not yet gained attention in the field of welfare state research.

<sup>3</sup> This kind of reasoning is implicitly based on and thus supported by findings from economics and social psychology. They show that people perceive gains and losses quite differently (loss aversion) and that losses affect the utility much stronger than gains do (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Both findings support the basic claim of the new politics proponents that the basic logic has changed in times of welfare state retrenchment.

inhibit welfare state retrenchment. Second, fearing electoral backlash politicians might not propose any policy that goes against public opinion.<sup>4</sup> Thus positive welfare attitudes and opposition to reform might block welfare state retrenchment also indirectly without necessarily affecting voting behaviour.

Despite the evidence that reforms take place in times of austerity (Häusermann, 2010) and that voters do not necessarily punish retrenchment efforts (Giger, 2011) the starting point of the new politics theory that rising reform pressures do not affect the popularity of the welfare state still remains rather unquestioned in the welfare attitudes literature. This is surprising since competing expectations exist in the literature. Both rely on self-interest and values as the basic mechanisms that determine attitudes.

In line with the new politics argument people might maintain their high welfare state support (or are even more inclined to support the welfare state) out of self-interest since more people have to rely or expect to rely on the welfare state (Blekesaune, 2007). Value-oriented explanations stress that increasing reform pressures affect welfare preferences via deservingness perceptions of welfare recipients (van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2014). When more people (and possibly also family and friends) rely on the welfare state sympathy and reciprocity with those people increases. Moreover, some scholars even argue that ‘Samaritan’ values will be strengthened in hard times (Goul Andersen et al., 1999).

Competing arguments also rely on self-interest and values to explain why people might withdraw their welfare support in reaction to increased pressures. Self-interest oriented explanations assume that people have a fixed preference on how much should be spend on welfare (i.e. how much they are willing to pay). Increased costs that are expected when current levels of welfare provision are maintained will thus make people withdraw their support since the increased welfare spending overshoots their preference (Soroka and Wlezien, 2009). Other approaches have a broader understanding of self-interest and show that people are also guided by sociotropic motivations and long-term self-interest (Kinder and Kiewit, 1981). Retrenchment and short-term individual losses might be acceptable when they ensure the functioning of economy and thereby contribute to the long-term existence of the welfare state. People thus might accept cut backs in order to be protected in the future. Finally value oriented explanations assume that economic circumstances affect basic values such as generosity. “People are only as generous as they can be” (Alt, 1979: 184).

Convincing empirical evidence on whether and how people change their reform preferences in times of welfare state retrenchment is scarce. The standard approach analyzes cross sectional data (preferably with multilevel models) and tries to link institutional differences and different levels of attitudes across European countries (Dallinger, 2010; Fernandez and Jaime Castillo, 2013). Findings are inconclusive. For example, Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo (2013) do not find a consistent impact of reform pressures (measured as the share of the population aged 65 or older) on reform preferences. Comparing three pension reform alternatives (increasing the retirement age, increasing contributions, and reducing

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<sup>4</sup> Previous research confirms that politicians are very attentive to and influenced by opinion polls (Page and Shapiro, 1983).

benefits) to the reference category of no change, only in the case of a preference for increasing contributions they find that in countries with a higher pressure to reform (that is in countries with an older population) people prefer no change over an increase of contributions. One reason for these mixed findings might be the methodological challenge of low case numbers on the country level paired with low variation between countries (usually only between 10-15% of the total variance is due to the country level). Moreover these studies miss a dynamic component. Observed differences in attitudes are explained by current institutional indicators but these differences might be the result of past policy developments as well.<sup>5</sup>

The few studies examining time trends find that aggregate public opinion changes very slow (Jeene and van Oorschot 2014; Taylor-Gooby, 2001) and that attitudinal change over time is rather the result of generational replacement (Svallfors, 2010). Nevertheless there is some evidence that people also adapt their attitudes in the short run reacting for example to the business cycle (Raven et al., 2010; van Dalen and Henkens, 2005; Shivo and Uusitalo, 1995). Although the first two studies examine data from the Netherlands between the mid 80s and the mid 2000s results are contradictory. Whereas Raven et al. (2010) find that support for higher social security expenditures increases if the unemployment rate is high, van Dalen and Henkens (2005) find lower solidarity with older workers in times of recession.

Given the theoretical arguments and the inconclusive empirical evidence we propose two competing hypotheses:

- H1a When faced with population ageing and increasing pressures to reform people maintain their high welfare state support and oppose retrenching reforms.
- H1b When faced with population ageing and increasing pressures to reform people withdraw their high welfare state support and are more willing to accept retrenching reforms.

### **How individual attitudes change in times of crisis**

One reason why the new politics hypothesis is not supported by clear evidence might be its lack of a theoretical micro-foundation. It is not clear to which aspects of the political and socio-economic development people react. Following a large body of literature an implicit assumption of its argument is that people are aware of increased reform pressures related to, for example, population ageing, or at least act as if they were informed (Erikson et al., 2002; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). This assumption is at odds with psychological models of attitude formation that stress the importance of information processing. Zaller (1992) describes the process of attitude formation in three steps: people *receive* information, they *accept* them (or not), and when finally forming their attitude they rely on a *sample* of related evaluations, considerations and attitudes already stored in their memory (“Receive-Accept-Sample Model” - RAS

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<sup>5</sup> The following interpretation of results illustrates this point. For example, Dallinger (2010) finds that the demand for redistribution is lower in countries with a high GDP and interprets these results in favor of the hypothesis of “a decrease in the demand for redistribution in times of economic prosperity”.

model). A possible bias might emerge because, at the stage of information reception cognitive engagement with an issue is related to actually perceive and comprehend information. Moreover, at the stage of acceptance people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions. And finally at the stage of constructing opinion statements, people make greatest use of ideas that are most immediately salient to them (Zaller, 1992: 52). What is thus often neglected in welfare attitude research is what exactly people perceive and how they process the information about the socio-economic developments that are assumed to affect attitudes. That's why we focus on the question of whether information on population ageing (that's what we provide as a treatment in the survey experiment) affects welfare preferences. Increased information or an increased awareness of population ageing is possibly one of the immediate consequences of the actual process of population ageing. Elderly people will be increasingly present and visible in the daily environment and the media will broach the issue of population ageing. Information on population ageing will possibly affect attitudes before other, more substantial aspects of population ageing such as financial problems of the pension system or an increased burden to the health care system come into play.

Significant information effects are found at both the aggregate and the individual level (Althaus 1998; Blinder and Krueger, 2004). Our argument why people seem not to react to increasing reform pressures builds on these information effects. Assuming that information on population ageing might not immediately be available or directly linked to pension reform preferences (in the sampling process) people just do not take related reform pressures into account when forming their preferences. It is thus not surprising that preferences seem to be unaffected by increasing reform pressures. In contrast to the new politics expectation we hypothesize that people react to reform pressures such as an ageing society and adapt their reform preferences if they are (made) aware of them. When information about increasing reform pressures is provided people give up their opposition to reform and are willing to accept retrenchment.

H2 When (explicitly) faced with population ageing and increasing pressures to reform people are willing to accept retrenching reforms.

The information effect is not uniform across all individuals but moderated by the political awareness of people. Political awareness can be understood as whether people are interested in politics and what people know about politics. Political awareness affects attention to and reception of messages (Zaller, 1992), increases the ability to counter-argue communications (Krosnick, 1990), and as political awareness increases, reliance on cues drops and reliance on issue relevant values rises (Kam, 2005). Individuals with a high political awareness are thus more likely to have already heard about the increased reform pressures and adapted their preference accordingly. Both general political information (Blinder and Krueger 2004) as well as specific information about the functioning of the pension system (Boeri and Tabellini, 2012; Boeri et al., 2001) increases the willingness to accept reforms. For example Boeri et al. (2001) find a positive correlation between correct information on the net costs of a pension system and the acceptance to privatize parts of it. Moreover, building preference formation on rather stable values



and being less affected by information about increasing reform pressures individuals with a high political awareness should form their preferences independent of additional information provided in the survey. In contrast we expect that less political aware individuals will react stronger to cues about increasing pressures to reform. The third hypothesis thus implies a heterogeneous effect across groups with differing political awareness:

H3 The effect of information on reform pressures on reform preferences is stronger among people with a low political awareness.

The previous argument was mainly concerned with the moderating effect that the strength of already existing attitudes can have. In addition to the strength of attitudes also their content is supposed to moderate the effect of additional information. How do people react to information that are already in favour of retrenchment? And does their reaction differ from those who tend to oppose retrenching reforms? Leeper and Slothuus “make the case why political parties should be given center stage attention in understanding processes of public opinion formation” (2014: 132). They show that elite partisan polarization affects attitude formation and intensifies the impact of party endorsements on opinions, but also decreases the impact of substantive information (see also Druckman et al., 2013). Still, in contrast to American Politics the political context of welfare policies seems not to be characterized by increased partisan polarization. Recent research by Castles (2008) points to an entirely different expectation and shows that the party colour of governments has little impact on the level of public involvement in welfare. Since this work argues theoretically that governments in the aggregate represent the preferences of their voters, it follows that partisan polarization at the individual level should also matter less for preferences. Substantive information on population ageing might become more important and individual attitude formation might resemble how parties take their position on retrenching reforms: constrained by the popularity of the welfare state parties (and voters) of the right are not able to follow ‘their’ retrenchment policies, whereas parties (and voters) of the left have to adapt to the reality of economic and demographic pressures and cannot adhere to a policy of welfare state expansion any more.<sup>6</sup>

H4 Neutrally framed information on reform pressures will decrease the cleavage between reform supporters and reform opponents.

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<sup>6</sup> We are aware that the difference between retrenchment supporters and opponents might also increase due to information on reform pressures when people engage in motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber, 2000; Redlawsk, 2002). We do not expect respondents to heavily engage in motivated reasoning when answering the survey question. Although population ageing is sometimes used as an argument to justify retrenchment it is rather a neutral fact than a partisan argument and thus hard to counter argue. This is in particular true when the information on population ageing is not directly linked to a political argument but provided by a ‘neutral’, scientific survey.

## Data and methods

Data for this paper comes from the third wave of the German Internet Panel (GIP) that has been in the field in January 2013. The GIP is a new large-scale online panel based on a random probability sample of German speaking individuals living within households in Germany. Panel households are initially approached offline, with a short face-to-face interview. Subsequently, all household members are invited to complete the bi-monthly GIP questionnaires. To minimize non-coverage bias, households without access to the internet were provided with the necessary hardware and/or a broadband internet connection. The recruitment phase and a first wave of interviews have been completed in September 2012 with 1,468 participants (Blom et al., 2013). Due to panel attrition and item non response 764 individuals are part of this analysis.

### Dependent variables: Reform preference and opposition to reform

The reform preference is measured by responses to the following question:

‘The ageing of society puts the financing of the state pension at its current level at risk. Which of the following reform proposals would you most likely support? And which one would you prefer the least?’

Answer categories to choose from include:

- State pensions should be kept at their current level, but contributions of the insured should be increased.
- The government should increase taxes in order to be able to keep state pensions at their current level.
- State pension and contributions should be kept at their current level, but the statutory retirement age should be increased.
- State pensions should be reduced according to the demographic change.<sup>7</sup>

The first two reform alternatives would preserve the status quo in terms of benefit levels and retirement age and increase contributions or taxes instead. An increase of contributions is the reform alternative that is most in line with the status quo of the contribution based German pension system, whereas the strengthening of tax financing can be seen as a departure from the general idea of contribution financed pensions. Both reforms would not explicitly expand welfare benefits, still given an ageing population the maintenance of the status quo would implicitly lead to welfare state expansion in terms of spending. In contrast the last two reform alternatives are retrenching the welfare state by increasing the retirement age or reducing pensions. Compared to standard measures of welfare preferences<sup>8</sup> the question has the advantage that it poses a trade-off among specific and realistic policy alternatives (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2013). The non-exhaustiveness of the list of reforms might be one reason for the comparable high share of ‘don’t know’-answers (12%) and missing values (4%). These

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<sup>7</sup>The order of answer categories in the survey was varied randomly.

<sup>8</sup> Usually welfare attitudes research relies on questions such as “Do you agree that the age of retirement should be raised so that people work longer and therefore spend less time in retirement?” in order to measure preferences.

respondents might have wished to answer 'None of these' or would have preferred a combination of all four reforms. Still, our results are robust to the inclusion of 'don't know'-answers and missing values as a separate answer category. In particular the share of don't knows is not affected by the experimental condition.

Moreover, we do not only ask for the preference for a reform but also for opposition to a reform alternative, the least preferred reform alternative. In the light of the theoretical argument that public opinion is considered a possible veto player blocking reforms the least preferred reform alternative might be as important as the most preferred one for the success or the failure of the reform process.

### **Independent variable: Population ageing as a reform pressure - the survey experiment**

The ageing of society is one of the major reasons why welfare states have come under great pressures for austerity. In this study we manipulated the introduction to the question measuring reform preferences so that in different versions the awareness of an ageing society is likely to be higher or lower. We assume that a higher awareness of an ageing society is closely linked to the perception of higher pressures to reform. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. In the treatment condition with information on an ageing society the following introduction was added to the question:

*“People in Germany live longer than before. In 1990 a 65 year old man on average could expect to live for another 14 years. Today a 65 year old man will approximately live until he will be 82.5 years old, thus he can expect to live for another 17.5 years. The ageing of society puts the financing of the state pension at its current level at risk. Which of the following reform proposals would you most likely support? And which one would you prefer the least?”*

Originally survey experiments were aimed at examining methodological questions like question-ordering or question-wording-effects. But they can also be used to examine substantive research questions. By comparing responses to manipulated questions a researcher can identify causal relationships that exist in the real world. Survey experiments mimic an experiment where one group of people is randomly assigned to a condition in which the perception of reform pressures is higher than in the control condition. The information describing population ageing was kept as neutral as possible providing only very basic and objective facts. If mentioning an ageing society lead to changed preferences in the context of a survey, then information on an ageing society and increased pressures to reform in the real world presumably will do the same.

Two aspects of our design need to be discussed in order to set expectations right. First, population ageing, and even more specifically information on population ageing, is only one aspect of increasing reform pressures. Other reform pressures such as the demographic change or the financial crisis might have different consequences on attitudes. Population ageing is thus one reason (among others) to accept (or oppose) retrenching reforms. Still, we are convinced that the effort to examine each reform pressure separately will contribute to our understanding of the overall effect. Second, we designed

the experiment in a way that it represents a hard test for our theoretical expectations. The dose of the treatment is very small since both groups answer the questions in a similar frame that mentions that the ageing of society puts the financing of the state pension at its current level at risk. The treatment then consists only of some very neutrally presented information that additionally rises the awareness for the fact of population ageing. This small dose runs the risk that results and effects will be very small. Still, in addition to a ‘hard test’ for our theoretical expectation, this scenario also comes very close to reality and thus increases our confidence in the external validity of our results.

Since participants of the experiment were part of a random probability sample of German households (and not only of a student population) we are able to examine not only the main effect of the treatment but also whether subgroups of the population react differently to the treatment. This will further improve our knowledge about how different people react to reform pressures and how they form their attitudes.

### Causal heterogeneity due to Political Awareness and Political Predisposition

The information provided in the introduction might affect preference formation differently depending on individuals’ political awareness. Political awareness is measured with an additive scale consisting of responses to two questions about political knowledge and five questions about the parties politicians (presented on pictures) belong to.<sup>9</sup> We took the median number of correct answers as the cut off point to split respondents into two groups. Respondents with five correct answers (the median) are defined as those with high political knowledge, whereas people with only 0-4 correct answers are defined as having a low political awareness (Table 1). Since this division is somewhat arbitrary we checked our results for their robustness when different cut off points are used.

**Table 3** Political awareness

Nb. of correct answers	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Share of respondents	3.2%	5.6%	6.3%	5.9%	12%	18.4%	24.9%	23.8%
Political Awareness	LOW					HIGH		

In order to capture the already existing political predisposition of respondents we rely on the vote intention people have for the next national election that took place in September 2014, around half a year after the survey. In general supporters of parties from the right (i.e. the conservative *CDU* and the liberal *FDP*) tend to favour retrenching reforms whereas voters of more leftist parties (such as the social democratic *SPD*, the Greens, and the socialist *Die Linke*) should oppose retrenchment. This expectation is

<sup>9</sup> The two questions testing the political knowledge asked for (1) the election threshold for a party to be represented in the German parliament and (2) who elect the German chancellor. Moreover, people were provided with the pictures of five German politicians, Ursula von der Leyen, Per Steinbrück, Daniel Bahr, Jürgen Trittin and Gregor Gysi, and had to choose the party the politician belongs to.

is reflected in the pension specific reform plans that parties proposed in their manifestos. The *CDU* and the *FDP* promised to keep contributions stable and to maintain the retirement age of 67. Moreover, they were in general strongly against tax increases. Both parties carefully chose not to mention consequences for benefit levels that necessarily would decrease. In contrast the *SPD* and the *Greens* explicitly promised to maintain the current level of pension benefits, *Die Linke* even proposed to increase pension levels. All three parties would accept moderate increases in contributions and also propose to finance part of the pensions system with taxes. The vote intention has been asked in a previous wave of the GIP four month earlier and is thus not affected by the treatment.

**Table 4** Political predisposition

	<i>CDU/CSU</i>	<i>FDP</i>	<i>SPD</i>	<i>Die Grünen</i>	<i>Die Linke</i>	Other parties
Vote share	32.5%	3.9%	23.9%	20.7%	5.4%	13.6%
Predisposition (Reform attitude)	favour retrenchment		oppose retrenchment			

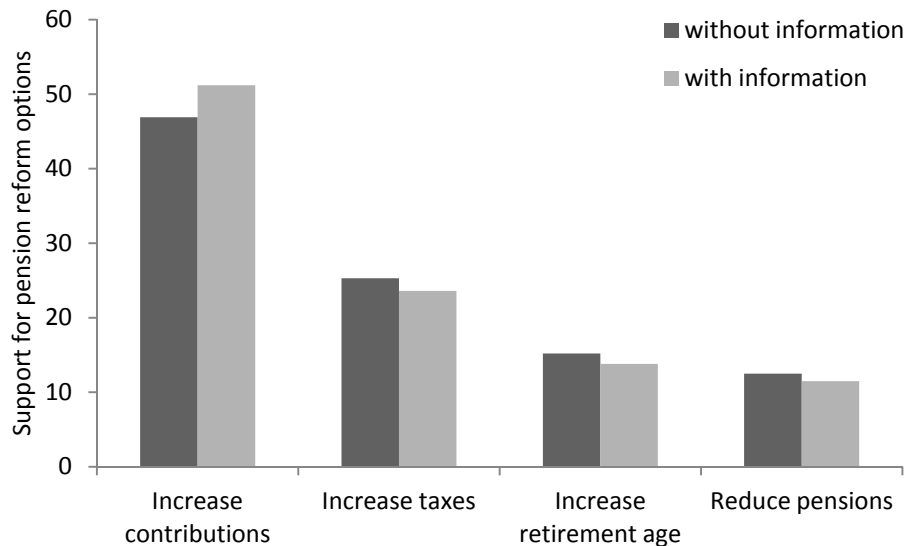
Political awareness and reform attitudes are not correlated for the main parties. Respondents from the *CDU* and *FDP* and respondents from the *SPD*, the *Greens* and *Die Linke* on average answered 5.4 questions correct. Only those supporting other parties seemed to be significantly less informed with only 4.1 correct answers.

## Results

As argued before both preferences for and opposition to reform can be important determinants for the success or the failure of a reform process. Consequently we will examine the effect of rising reform pressures on each of them separately.

### Reform preferences

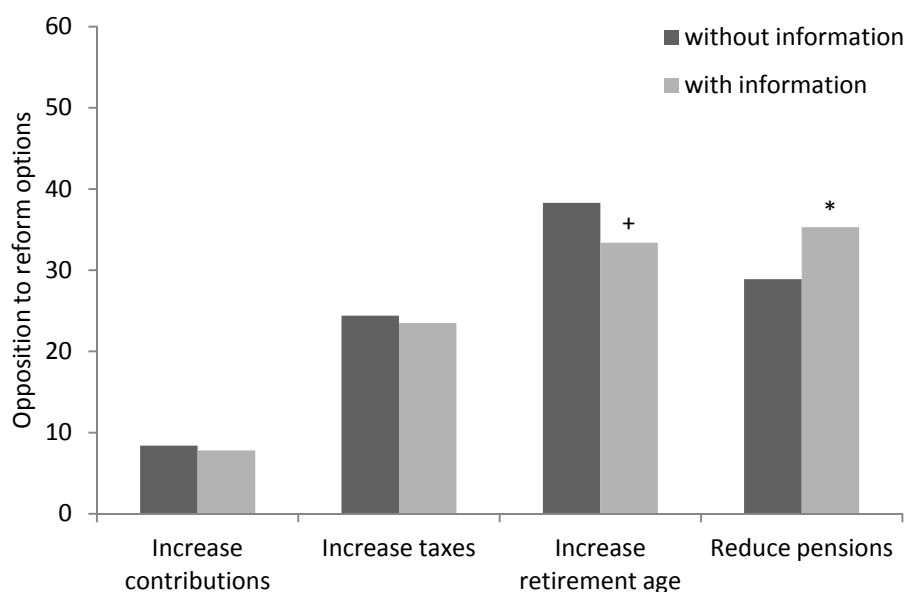
Not surprisingly the reform alternative almost a majority of respondents prefers is to increase contributions (46.9%). On the aggregate level the second best options is to increase taxes (Figure 1). Both findings are in line with expectations that the pension system is very popular and people would rather pay more than to cut benefits. Consequently only 15.2% of the respondents would increase the retirement age implicitly cutting benefits. The reform alternative that gets the lowest support is the explicit reduction of benefits by reducing pensions (12.5%). The information on an ageing society and increased pressures to reform did not change the ranking of reform alternatives. The two status quo preserving reforms are supported by a vast majority of approximately 75% of respondents, and in sum even gained popularity. These changes are not significant and hence support the new politics argument that increased reform pressures do not change reform preferences. People want to maintain a strong welfare state even in hard times.



**Figure 1.** The effect of increased reform pressures on **support** for pension reform proposals  
Share of people that support each reform proposal [in %], significant attitude changes in the treatment condition (with information) are marked with a + ( $p < 0.10$ ) or a \* ( $p < 0.05$ )

### Opposition to reform

The identification of public opinion as a possible veto player blocking reforms suggests that the success of a reform proposal not only depends on support but is in particular affected by the opposition to a reform proposal. If people give up their strong opposition to retrenching reforms their implementation might become more likely. As protests in Germany but also in other countries suggest, an increase of the legal retirement age is the most opposed reform alternative. More than a third of the respondents (38.3%) oppose such a reform proposal (Figure 2). The reduction of pension levels (28.9%) as another retrenching reform option is refused by roughly a third of the respondents. The other two reform options, increasing taxes or contributions, face far weaker opposition. Again, the ranking of the least preferred reform alternatives is not considerably changed by the treatment. But when faced with increased reform pressures people give up their reluctance to increase the retirement age. The share of people opposing this reform option decreases significantly from 38.3% to 33.4% (-4.9 percentage points). At the same time increased reform pressures lead to an increase of the opposition against an explicit retrenchment by reducing pension benefits.



**Figure 2.** The effect of increased reform pressures on the **opposition** to pension reform proposals  
Share of people that oppose each reform alternative, significant attitude changes in the treatment condition (with information) are marked with a + ( $p < 0.10$ ) or a \* ( $p < 0.05$ )

### The moderating effect of political awareness

Based on the literature on information effects our expectation was that the effect of increasing reform pressures is heterogeneous and varies between groups of different political awareness. In particular we expected that the preference formation of those with a low political awareness should be more affected by additional information. In Table 3 the opposition against the four reform alternatives is shown for the two groups separately.<sup>10</sup> Comparing the attitude of low and high aware respondents in the control group without information we find considerable differences between the two groups. Among those with low political awareness 43.4% oppose an increase of the retirement age whereas the opposition against an increase of the retirement age is much weaker among the respondents with a high political awareness. This finding supports previous research that has shown that higher educated people are more likely to support an increase of the retirement age (Fernandez and Jaime-Castillo, 2013). Instead respondents with a high political awareness rather oppose an increase of taxes or a reduction of pension levels.

**Table 3** The effect of increasing reform pressures on the opposition to reform

Least preferred reform alternative	Political knowledge					
	LOW			HIGH		
	WITHOUT information	WITH information	Treatment effect	WITHOUT information	WITH information	Treatment effect
Increase contributions	8.4%	10.9%	+2.5	8.0%	7.3%	-0.7
Increase taxes	22.1%	24.9%	+2.8	25.7%	22.0%	-3.7
Increase retirement age	43.4%	28.0%	-15.4*	34.9%	35.4%	+0.5
Reduce pensions	26.2%	36.2%	+10.0*	31.4%	35.3%	+3.9

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

<sup>10</sup> We omit the analysis of reform preferences (the most preferred reform alternative) since reform preferences seem not to be affected by political awareness. Results are available upon request.

Comparing the treatment effect of increasing reform pressures between the two groups we find our expectation of a heterogeneous effect confirmed. People with a low political awareness react to increased reform pressures by abandoning their strong opposition to increasing the retirement age (-15.4 percentage points). Instead their opposition against a reduction of pension benefits raises. In contrast there is no evidence for a significant preference change among the political knowledgeable respondents. Their opinion remains unchanged by the information on increased reform pressures. As a result there are only minor differences in reform preferences left when comparing low and high political aware respondents that were both provided with the information on population ageing.

### The moderating effect of political predisposition

For the political process it is of high relevance how the electorate reacts to increased pressures to reform. Will party cleavages and political conflict increase or do reform pressures unite the electorate in their reform preferences? In addition to this political relevance also the theoretical debate is concerned with the question of whether supporters and opponents of a reform proposal react to an argument differently.

In Germany right leaning parties (the *CDU* and *FDP*) either implicitly or explicitly favour the two retrenching reform proposals of cutting pension benefits or raising the retirement age in their manifestos for the national election in September 2013. In contrast parties from the left (*SPD*, *Die Grünen*, *Die Linke*) favour a strong role of the state in the pension system, prefer to keep up benefit levels and increase contributions or taxes instead. These reform positions are reflected in the attitudes of the electorate (Table 4). Without information the two groups differ significantly in their reform preferences. Supporting previous research by Jaime-Castillo (2013) we find that a vast majority of almost 85% of the voters of leftist parties strongly prefer one of the status quo preserving reform alternatives of increasing contributions or increasing taxes. Although these two reform alternatives also get a majority among the *CDU* and *FDP* electorate 40% among the right leaning electorate prefer retrenchment by increasing the retirement age or reducing pensions.

**Table 4** Effect of increasing reform pressures on the support for reform

Most preferred reform alternative	Party electorate					
	Supporters of retrenchment ( <i>CDU/FDP</i> )			Opponents of retrenchment ( <i>SPD/Grüne/Die Linke</i> )		
	WITHOUT information	WITH information	Treatment effect	WITHOUT information	WITH information	Treatment effect
Increase contributions	41.9%	47.7%	+5.8	60.9%	48.1%	-12.8*
Increase taxes	17.1%	19.5%	+2.4	23.8%	28.4%	+4.6
Increase retirement age	23.7%	15.8%	-7.9 <sup>+</sup>	8.4%	16.7%	+8.3*
Reduce pensions	17.2%	17.0%	-0.2	6.9%	6.8%	-0.1

+ p < 0.10, \* p < 0.05



Based on the new politics argument and empirical findings that the party colour does not predict welfare spending any more we expected that the two groups would become more alike when confronted with increased reform pressures. Constrained by the popularity of the welfare state supporters of retrenchment are not able to follow ‘their’ retrenchment policies, whereas opponents of retrenchment have to adapt to the reality of economic and demographic pressures and cannot adhere to a policy of welfare state expansion any more. Comparing the two groups of the electorate with information we find that their reform preferences get more alike. People from the right decrease their support for retrenching reforms whereas people from the left withdraw their support for expansive reforms (an increase of contributions loses 12.8 percentage points) and even seem to increase their support for a retrenching reform such as increasing the retirement age (+8.3 percentage points). A similar trend can be observed for the least preferred reform alternative (Table 5). Those who tend to favor retrenchment increase their opposition against retrenchment (+8 percentage points against a reduction of pensions). Instead their opposition against the maintenance of the status quo by increasing taxes or contributions weakens. In contrast the strong opposition of left voters against retrenching reforms somewhat crumbles (-7.4 percentage points against an increase of the retirement age).

**Table 5** Effect of increasing reform pressures on opposition to reform

Least preferred reform alternative	Party electorate					
	Supporters of retrenchment ( <i>CDU/FDP</i> )			Opponents of retrenchment ( <i>SPD/Grüne/Die Linke</i> )		
	WITHOUT information	WITH information	Treatment effect	WITHOUT information	WITH information	Treatment effect
Increase contributions	12.0%	10.3%	-1.7	7.7%	6.4%	-1.3
Increase taxes	29.4%	23.3%	-6.1	17.9%	24.1%	+6.2 <sup>+</sup>
Increase retirement age	36.5%	36.3%	-0.2	36.6%	29.2%	-7.4 <sup>+</sup>
Reduce pensions	22.1%	30.1%	+8.0 <sup>+</sup>	37.9%	40.3%	+2.4

+ p < 0.10, \* p < 0.05

Supporting the hypothesis of a declining relevance of political partisanship in an era of austerity (Pierson, 1996), the information on increasing pressures to reform decreases partisanship differences in the electorate.<sup>11</sup> Whereas this claim has been mainly confirmed on the aggregate level – e.g. partisanship of the government shows no effect on social expenditures (Huber and Stephens, 2001) - our results suggest that a similar logic might apply to individual level attitudes.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to examine the claim of high and stable welfare state support and strong reform opposition in times of austerity. We relied on theoretical explanations from political psychology in order to improve our understanding of attitude change and formation on the individual level. We tested our

<sup>11</sup> Note that the two groups of the electorate do not differ in the political awareness.

hypotheses with newly available data from a survey experiment that was fielded in a German online survey in the beginning of 2013. In general the hypothesis of high welfare state support and strong reform opposition is confirmed by our results since a majority of the German population favours status quo maintaining pension reforms and seems to be willing to pay for increased costs by increasing either contributions or taxes. Moreover, our results support Pierson's expectation that opposition against retrenchment remains strong in times of increased reform pressures. Nevertheless we also found some evidence suggesting that there might be more room for reform than expected. In the light of an ageing society the opposition against increasing the retirement age significantly decreases. This effect is particularly pronounced among those parts of the electorate with a low political awareness and hints at the importance of a clear communication of policy aims and motives for a successful policy process. Moreover, not only political awareness but also the predisposition (i.e. partisanship) affects whether and how people change attitudes. Information on population ageing led to a convergence of reform preferences of people from the left and from the right.

A methodological contribution of our paper is the explicit distinction between reform preferences and reform opposition. Whereas the relevance of this distinction is obvious in most political contexts it is not yet reflected in standard survey questions that usually ask what people want and rather omit what people do not want. A stronger focus on what people oppose might add valuable insights to our understanding of reform success and failure since the opposition to reform proposals might be politically more relevant. Moreover, our findings suggest that they are more reliable on the individual level. Respondents in our study were quicker in choosing the least preferred reform than the most preferred one. Moreover, fewer missings occurred when asked for the least preferred reform option.

One limitation every experimental study has to face is the external validity of its results: Is the effect we find valid and relevant in the real world? What we explicitly use here to examine our research question is the framing of a survey question. Several authors argue that such framing effects are only a temporary "mood change" since they only affect the sampling process by increasing the salience and accessibility of some arguments that already exist. In contrast attitude change is defined as "permanent alterations in long-term response probabilities" and arguments (Zaller, 1992: 118). Research in this direction reinforces this concern as effects of political debate (Luskin et al. 2002) or elite framing (Druckman and Nelson, 2003) on public opinion vanished after 2-3 weeks. However, the theoretical model of attitude change does not assume that those permanent alterations happen immediately but rather incrementally. Even when an effect vanishes after some weeks our findings would at least provide some hints of the potential (and the direction) of attitude change in the long run. With an ageing population people possibly do not only get information on increasing reform pressures once but get informed repeatedly. Of course it is an open question whether repeated information has the potential to incrementally change attitudes. Moreover, contradictory frames of the same information or different senders of the information might further complicate an understanding of the overall process in the real world (Druckman et al., 2012; Chong and Druckman, 2010).

Despite these challenges we think that it is a worthwhile endeavour to follow this line of research. We are convinced that our (and similar) papers using survey experiments can complement existing studies in welfare attitudes research. Even when it turns out that the overall effect might not be more than a temporal mood change, the focus on the individual mechanisms of attitude change and formation add a valuable perspective to understand the macro level phenomena.

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