

5. The evolution of welfare attitudes in Europe over the past four decades¹

Gianna Maria Eick

INTRODUCTION

The recent crises have highlighted how crucial generous social policy measures are (Taylor-Gooby et al. 2017; Greve 2021). Thus, a new Social Question in Europe serves as the starting point for this chapter. It reproduces the dual challenges of economic disruption and social and institutional reconstruction across and within European countries.

This chapter focuses on the public opinion towards welfare states from a bird's-eye perspective over the past four decades to determine the legitimacy of current welfare arrangements. That is because, amongst others, analysing welfare attitudes over long periods can help to disentangle the views of the general population with those of the more powerful elites that frequently claim to speak for the general population (Schakel et al. 2020).

Notably, the field produced some conclusions about welfare attitudes in Europe. As points of departure for this chapter, the three most prominent rationales for explaining public support for the welfare state are used. First, according to self-interest reasoning, those who are most likely to profit from welfare state resources will also be those who support the welfare state and particular welfare policies (Dallinger 2010). This suggests that people's employment status and exposure to socioeconomic risks are indicators of their preference for government redistribution (Rehm 2009).

Second, ideology reasoning entails that political socialisation shapes welfare attitudes (Neundorf and Soroka 2018). Since ideological positions are not entirely endogenous, previous studies demonstrate that more inclusive attitudes are often related to more generous welfare attitudes. For example, political partisanship (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015), economic individualism (Blekesaune 2007), or deservingness (van Oorschot 2000).

Third, institutional reasoning serves as an indicator of public support for government redistribution (Rothstein 1998). Studies usually argue that institutional risks and crises are related to more generous welfare attitudes. For

example, income inequality (Finseraas 2009) or economic decline (Dallinger 2010). Institutional reasonings suggest that the welfare regime theory explains public opinion towards welfare policies in light of institutional setups (such as the welfare state's structure), political dynamics (such as the influence of right-wing parties), and cultural history (such as religious diversity) (Esping-Andersen 1990). Another body of literature focuses on the interaction between institutions and public opinion regarding their accomplishments, notably the effects of policy feedback (Busemeyer et al. 2019).

While important conclusions already emanated from the field that differed in substance and emphasis, more comprehensive analyses still lag. This chapter uses the wealth of existing knowledge on welfare attitudes to shed light on the larger developments over the past four decades. The few studies that examine welfare attitudes across time demonstrate increasing preferences for government redistribution (Burgoon et al. 2012; Jæger 2013). However, these studies mainly deal with general government redistribution and more detailed studies that examine welfare policies and socioeconomic divides across time are still lacking. This chapter contributes to this debate by taking a bird's-eye perspective on the evolution of welfare attitudes in Europe across time, socio-economic groups, and welfare policies. Hereby, this chapter will identify a profile of the demands for change and reforms.

A comparative viewpoint is especially useful for addressing issues related to the formation and modification of attitudes. This is because it helps us better understand the factors that influence attitudes. Unfortunately, a scarcity of data has hampered the research field for many decades. With the formation and expansion of large survey programmes that include both time-series and comparative data, the field has since advanced immensely. Now it is possible to analyse public attitudes towards European welfare states during the past four decades. For this chapter, the following three representative survey programmes will be included:

- European Social Survey (ESS) 2002–2018
- International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 1985–2015
- European Value Survey (EVS) 1981–2017.

Starting with the year 1981 and ending with 2018, these surveys include Europe's confrontation with several crises, such as the financial crisis, the refugee crisis and Brexit. The data sets end before the COVID and Ukraine crises, but similar or even more pronounced trends can be expected in the future. Overall year-means, country-year-means, region-year-means and group-year-means are calculated. To ensure the quality of the results, design weights were applied and "don't know" answers were treated as missing

values. The results from the EVS analysis are not shown in this chapter, but they indicate that the findings are overall robust.

WELFARE ATTITUDES ACROSS COUNTRIES

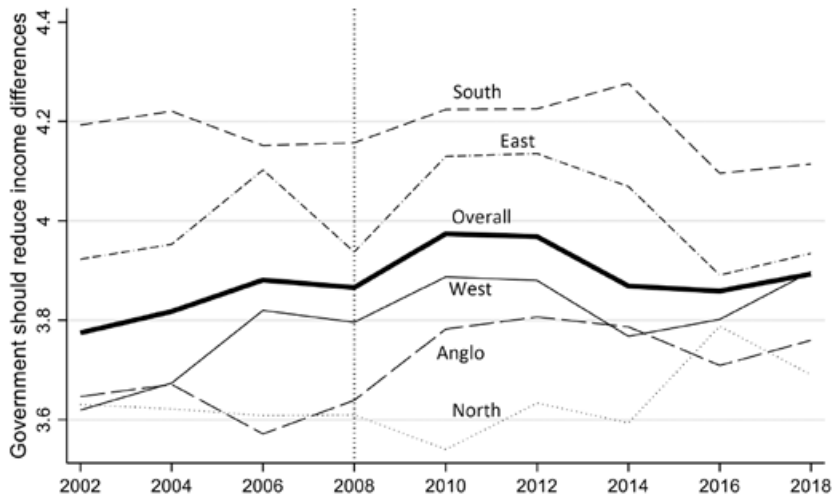
The analysis starts with the most prominent survey item that is covered by the current data: attitudes on general government redistribution in Europe. This section examines ESS data that was gathered every two years between 2002 and 2018. Respondents evaluate the following statement:

The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.

Figure 5.1 demonstrates that the public in Europe overall supports the government's efforts to decrease income disparities. Over the past 20 years, support for income redistribution has generally increased. The variation averages 0.15 on a 1–5 scale during the past 20 years. This is not a dramatic increase, but public attitudes tend to be relatively steady over time, and European welfare states have a long history of receiving solid levels of support (Sainsbury 2001). An intriguing finding from Figure 5.1 is that support for income redistribution increased more during the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Although the increase appears to be relatively small (from 3.8 to 3.9 on the scale), it is the largest in the observed period.

The results are consistent with research showing that people's perceptions of economic hardship increased during the financial crisis of 2007–2008 (Taylor-Gooby et al. 2017). This is because the public demand for government redistribution (across different policy areas) increased in bad times when the economic conditions are poor or when unemployment levels are high and vice versa (Blekesaune 2007; Dallinger 2010). The lack of control many individuals experienced throughout the crises may be the cause of the increased support for income redistribution. Possibly, the need for government assistance is seen as less of an individual responsibility in crisis times. It's important to note that similar trends can be observed using the same item in other survey programmes, such as the ISSP (1985–2015) and EVS (1981–2017).

Additionally, Figure 5.1 breaks down average welfare attitude trends across five regions of Europe: North, East, South, West, and Anglo. These findings back up the notion that contextual factors influence public attitudes towards redistribution (Dallinger 2010). Overall, the public supports reducing income differences less where redistribution is already higher/more salient, and vice versa. However, the low demand for redistribution in the Anglo countries is in line with the welfare regime theory, which postulates that the demand for redistribution is lowest in such a low-spending Liberal regime (Finseraas 2009).



Notes: “North” = Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden; “East” = Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Slovenia; “South” = Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Spain, Portugal and Greece; “West” = Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland; and “Anglo” = Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Data: European Social Survey, 1 = disagree strongly to 5 = agree strongly, 418,713 individuals, 33 countries, dotted line indicates the financial crisis in 2008.

Figure 5.1 “Government should reduce differences in income levels” (mean) in European regions, 2002–2018

Additional analyses demonstrate a strong relationship ($R\text{-squared}=0.232$) between the support for government redistribution and income inequality, measured as the Gini index of equivalised disposable income (OECD Database 2020). Even such simple snapshots suggest that public demand for redistribution is lower at lower levels of income inequality, and higher at higher levels of income inequality (see also Jæger 2013).

Further, the relationship between the attitude “Government should reduce differences in income levels” in 2002 and the change in this attitude between 2002 and 2019 is analysed. This method helps in spotting β -convergence, which occurs when country cases show low values on an indicator initially (in this chapter, mean attitude), but show above-average increases in this indicator over time (Barro and Sala-i-Martin 1992). Indeed, the findings show a strong negative and statistically significant association between previous levels of attitudes towards income differences and later changes ($R\text{-squared}=0.122$), indicating that support for redistribution has increased, especially in countries where it had been particularly low initially.

Next, the prospective convergence of attitudes towards income reduction is investigated, i.e. the yearly mean absolute deviation of a country's attitudes from the cross-country average. This is related to the concept of σ (sigma)-convergence, i.e. the relative convergence of observation units to a common mean (Cornelisse and Goudswaard 2002). And indeed, the results reinforce a clear trend of convergence in attitudes across Europe. This might indicate a certain degree of harmonisation of welfare attitudes across European countries. Such a process, particularly in times of crisis, has the potential to strengthen welfare legitimacy across Europe.

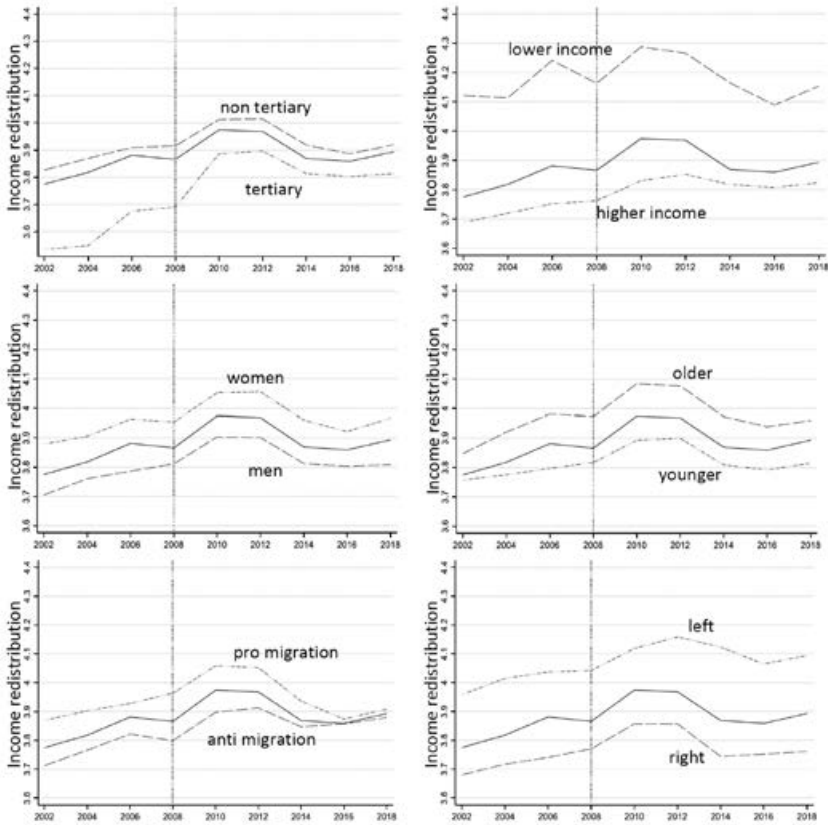
WELFARE ATTITUDES ACROSS SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS

Next, this chapter examines general attitudes towards income redistribution in Europe across socioeconomic groups using the ESS data. Specifically, the individual data for different groups in this section were aggregated in each ESS wave, also called quasi-panel data (Jæger 2013). The group-level variables include a dummy item for each socioeconomic group to enable a meaningful convergence analysis over time. Using this approach, one can increase the variation in social risk exposure while taking the regular sample sizes of each ESS country and wave into account (around 1000 to 2000 respondents). The results represent all groups in each country and period.

First, Figure 5.2 depicts socioeconomic divisions between those with higher and lower income and between those with and without tertiary education. According to the findings for both groups, those who have less income and those without tertiary education support income redistribution more than their counterparts, which is consistent with the literature (Rehm 2009). These groups converge rather than diverge over time, particularly those with different education levels. These patterns demonstrate how the literature frequently produces premature correlations between labour market vulnerability and income/education. When investigating this relationship, it is important to keep in mind that more insecure employment sectors, including the service industry, have grown over the past several decades in countries that are becoming more post-industrial. As a result, higher income and education groups that were previously in more secure employment positions are now more vulnerable in the labour market (Häusermann et al. 2015), which may encourage these groups to support the welfare state more strongly. The findings point to a rising likelihood of pro-welfare coalitions involving those with higher and lower levels of income and education. This could be a result of two interrelated social risks that these groups have faced in the workforce that are related to their preferences for more generous welfare states. These are intriguing patterns that go

across economic and educational divides and may help us better understand polarisation, solidarities, and the politics of the welfare state.

Second, Figure 5.2 demonstrates that women favour redistribution more than men, despite the fact that these cleavages have remained constant over



Notes: Continuous line shows the overall mean. Measuring education (tertiary versus non-tertiary educated), income (highest three income deciles versus lowest six income deciles), age (over 50 versus under 50), gender (men versus women), allow many/few migrants of different race/ethnic group from the majority (allow versus do not allow) and left–right identification (highest five versus lowest six). Country sample, see Figure 5.1.

Data: European Social Survey, 1 = agree strongly to 5 = disagree strongly, 418,713 individuals, 33 countries, dotted line indicates the financial crisis in 2008.

Figure 5.2 Convergence and divergence of “Government should reduce differences in income levels” (mean) across socioeconomic groups (2002–2018)

the years. Given the large increase in female labour force participation, this finding is intriguing. It could imply that women still rely more on welfare state programmes than men or that they generally have a more solidaristic approach to redistribution. The results show a greater disparity between younger and older groups; While younger groups' support for redistribution is declining, older groups are favouring it more and more. This may be because older populations rely on pension plans. In fact, current retirees are more secure and well paid than any past retirees and likely also compared to future retirees. On the contrary, the ageing populations in most European countries result in a greater tax burden for the younger generations.

Third, Figure 5.2 analyses the evolution of two ideological groups, namely groups that support and oppose migration as well as groups that lean to the left and right ideologically. The results support the long-held claim in the literature that welfare attitudes have ideological underpinnings, and they also highlight the significance of these divisions throughout Europe. It is commonly argued that pro-migration groups also belong to higher socioeconomic status groups (Burgoon et al. 2012), which are less supportive of the welfare state though the results from Figure 5.2 show that the opposite is true. Regardless, here the cleavages are closing, which is an interesting observation. The results for left-versus right-oriented groups align with the current literature that assumes that left-oriented individuals support the welfare state more (Kriesi et al. 2008). The left–right gap is increasing, which is not surprising, considering that European societies have become increasingly polarised (Greve 2021). However, these results are puzzling, considering that lower socioeconomic status groups tend to vote for right-wing parties (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015). One can only speculate at this point that the evolution of welfare attitudes across ideological groups can be explained by welfare state recalibration and the restructuration of partisan politics.

WELFARE ATTITUDES ACROSS POLICIES

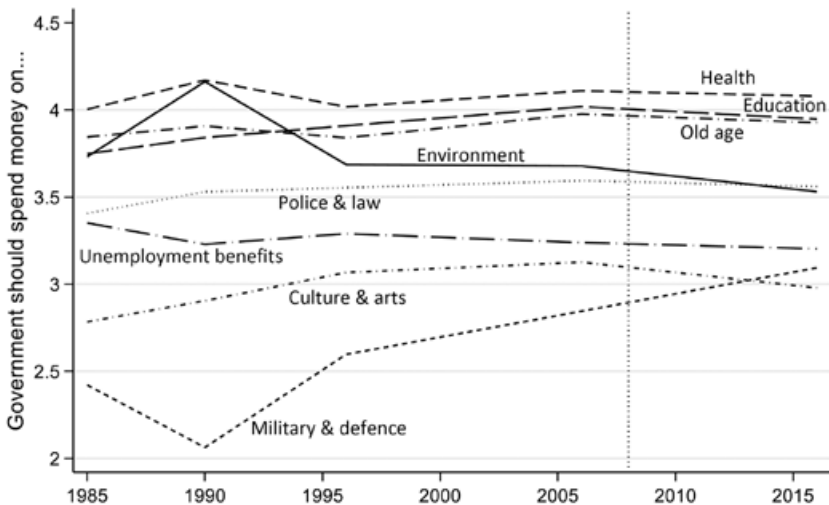
Last but not least, this chapter shifts from general developments in public views towards income redistribution to attitudes across different welfare policies. Even though there is fewer time-series data on policy-specific welfare attitudes, this topic is crucial because the “government responsibility for reducing income differences” differs from other welfare state objectives, such as insurance, compensation or social investment. Therefore, it can be argued that redistribution support is a problematic measure that requires clarification as to which welfare policies should be redistributed and to whom.

The final analysis focuses on policy-specific welfare attitudes measurements. In particular, the ISSP includes repeated measures between 1985 and 2015: “Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please show

whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say ‘much more’, it might require a tax increase to pay for it. (1) Health, (2) The police and law enforcement, (3) Education, (4) The military and defence, (5) Old-age pensions, (6) Unemployment benefits, (7) Culture and the arts.”

The average attitude patterns across Europe are shown in Figure 5.3. The regional differences are similar to the findings from the previous section. The results show overall convergence among welfare policies once more, although with a few caveats: the trends reinforce the well-known conclusion that some policies, such as education, receive more support than others, such as unemployment assistance (Busemeyer et al. 2018). Furthermore, compared to other government bodies (i.e. culture, military, police and environment) that are not a part of the welfare state, the public is more in favour of increased government expenditure on old-age, health and education policies. The levels of support have been reasonably stable and robust even or because of the stresses of the global financial crisis.

The ISSP also includes items on the beneficiaries of such policies. Here the patterns are similar; the most deserving groups are sick people and students.



Notes: Countries include Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom.

Data: International Social Survey Programme, 1 = Spend much less to 5 = Spend much more, 82,870 individuals, 23 countries, dotted line indicates the financial crisis in 2008.

Figure 5.3 *Different government areas where spending should be increased/decreased (mean) in Europe, 1985–2015*

This further demonstrates that strengthening specific policies is quite popular across Europe. And while there is still room for more research into whether there may be convergence across many different social policy fields, it is telling that there are some familiar patterns in the levels of support across different welfare beneficiaries.

Related to this, researchers find clear differences in support for welfare policies, depending on whether they are provided universally or selectively (Rothstein 1998). Universal encompassing programmes such as pensions and healthcare receive strong support, while more targeted or selective policies such as unemployment benefits and social assistance are usually supported less (Svallfors 2012). Furthermore, the literature argues that social investment policies (such as education or childcare) gain popularity over traditional compensation policies (such as unemployment benefits or social assistance). This is because expanding social investments may have the potential to diminish social inequalities as well as to promote growth in service-based knowledge economies (Busemeyer et al. 2018).

The question remains why the levels of support for unemployment benefits are relatively low and decreasing over time. Possibly, the deservingness theory can help here (van Oorschot 2000). The unemployed are usually perceived as one of the least deserving social groups of welfare support by the public. This is because unemployment is often considered to be the individual's fault and not a systematic failure. Consequently, granting support to unemployed people is based on their observable efforts to re-enter the labour market. Furthermore, unlike other welfare beneficiary groups, such as pensioners, the unemployed face stronger conditionality for welfare support, because even though some unemployed have already contributed a lot to the system, they are seen as less deserving because people make judgements about their "reciprocity", which is typically higher for other groups, such as pensioners. To put it differently, the public might think that they have not earned the benefits they are paid.

The declining support towards unemployment benefits seems worrying, also because similar patterns can be found using another item from the ISSP on support for the government's role in ensuring the standard of living of unemployed people and how it changes over time. However, the unemployed may receive higher levels of public support when the questions are related to social investment, namely active labour market policies (ALMPs). In line with this, it is argued that there is a shift in the preferred balance between social rights and social obligations when it comes to employment policies (Roosma and Jeene 2017). This means stricter conditions imposed on the unemployed, such as actively looking for work, can increase support for these policies. Consequently, such activation policies have been marketed as trampoline policies rather than as safety nets. Interestingly, the ISSP data on ALMPs from 1985 to 2015 demonstrates that ALMPs are indeed overall more popular

than unemployment benefits. Overall, the cross-time results on employment policies are quite telling since other research suggests that in the short term (and during a crisis), there is particular demand for social compensation, not investment. However, looking at the big picture, the results do not show evidence of this.

CONCLUSION AND POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Public attitudes on welfare matter for the future of individuals, for national welfare states and for the European social integration. Welfare support is crucial to ensuring economic and social stability, particularly in times of crisis when incomes are dropping, inequality and poverty are rising, and working conditions are becoming more precarious (Taylor-Gooby et al. 2017). Although there is still widespread support for the welfare state in Europe, welfare attitudes are becoming more conditional towards specific groups, like migrants (Eick and Larsen 2022).

This chapter empirically investigates the evolution of public welfare attitudes over the past four decades from a bird's-eye perspective. To do that, the chapter reviewed existing quantitative surveys on welfare attitudes. First, the chapter finds that the public shows overall high and relatively stable levels of support for more government redistribution. During the post-crisis years after 2007/2008 (the global financial crisis) some (upward and downward) convergence trends across countries and time in attitudes were reinforced. The COVID-19 crisis may serve as a foundation for establishing stronger policy stances on the long-standing divisions over the future of European welfare states. Crises, in general, may offer a chance to develop welfare states even more, especially when coupled with generous government responses (unlike austerity measures that likely reinforce negative attitudes towards those in need).

Second, social investment policies such as education enjoy increasing levels of support, while the opposite trends can be observed for compensation policies, such as unemployment benefits. This may be because unemployment is increasingly perceived as a personal decision and the support for unemployment benefits thus relies on this group to demonstrate the willingness to re-enter the labour market (van Oorschot 2000). So, even if welfare solidarity is still generally strong, it is also subject to certain conditions, such as a rising understanding that those who are vulnerable are expected to do more to help themselves out of a difficult situation. The chapter also discovers considerable support for measures that stimulate the labour market and are less punishing, such as investments in training and lifelong learning. Future policy measures

should be well justified to the public by policymakers if they are to improve redistribution across various policies.

Third, important socioeconomic cleavages are declining over time too, and there seems to be potential for strengthening welfare alliances across Europe. The upward convergence between the higher and lower educated groups is most intriguing because the higher educated are traditionally regarded as labour market insiders with distinctly different preferences. Faced with increasing inequality and labour market precariousness, high-skilled insiders might start to feel more like outsiders in demanding protection from the welfare state (Häusermann et al. 2015), which could explain their increasing welfare solidarity. However, the challenge for policymakers will be to address both the needs of the groups that traditionally received welfare provisions and of the groups that need welfare provisions because of the development of new social risks and who are particularly vocal and heterogeneous.

Importantly, the trajectory of European economic and social policy has demonstrated that social policy convergence does not happen automatically but requires decisive political action. The results hint at public preferences for increasing welfare spending in general and recalibrating and/or reforming the European welfare state from compensation to social investment models. In fact, against the fear of overall welfare state retrenchment, many countries have already expanded social investment policies as they serve – in comparison to compensation policies – long-term social equality strategies (Eick et al. 2021). Still, reorienting the welfare state towards social investment constitutes a complex and multidimensional challenge of policy recalibration and raises daunting political problems. The temporal mismatch between social investment reforms and their returns requires a degree of political patience on the side of current voters and politicians, which is not always disposable in contemporary democracies (Ferrera 2017).

Finally, this study offered a view into important research gaps in a field with plenty of potential for future research that might benefit the process of future welfare policymaking. First, there is a need for more cross-time studies to analyse the reasons for the convergence/divergence of attitudes on the macro and cross-national level. While the more recent rounds of the large survey programmes include many countries that are sufficiently institutionally specific, such data is missing for earlier periods (the 1980s, 1990s), and not all countries are included in all waves. In particular, longitudinal panel data across countries is largely missing in the field. A comparative panel would establish the time order of events, making it possible for the analyst to establish causal effects.

Second, the field could benefit from more (cross-time) studies on policy trade-offs and qualitative studies. This is because attitudes are often diffuse, multifaceted, multidimensional or downright contradictory (Roosma et al. 2013). However, more such projects are only just emerging in this field,

such as “Investigating in Education” (INVEDUC), “Welfare State Futures: Our Children’s Europe” (WelfSOC), “welfarepriorities”, or “The Future of European Social Citizenship” (EUSOCIALCIT).

Still, the patterns presented in this chapter suggest that the available data provided by international survey programmes is a valuable data source for exploring the evolution of welfare attitudes in Europe. To sum up, this chapter finds an overall emerging welfare solidarity across and within European countries and demonstrates that such preferences increase in times of rising social risks and crises.

NOTE

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