

Attitudinal constraint in welfare priorities: Political interest and welfare publics

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, welfare politics has been increasingly studied from the lens of austerity, fiscal constraint, and the idea that—in contrast to earlier times of welfare expansion—improvements in one area will inevitably come at the cost of cuts in another area (Pierson, 1996, 2001). This focus on the kind of tradeoffs and limitations that governments—and, more generally, political elites—face in the area of social reform has also been reflected in studies of public opinion on welfare policies. Public opinion towards social policy is considered a crucial input in the welfare reform process, since it constrains parties and governments in what they can offer and do in office, if they want to gauge electoral support. This is reflected in a growing literature focusing on the determinants of individual attitudes towards redistribution, social spending, and different aspects of welfare policies (e.g. Beramendi & Rehm, 2016; Brooks & Manza, 2008; Dimick, Rueda, & Stegmüller, 2014; Fossati & Häusermann, 2014; Gallego & Marx, 2016; Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2006; Rueda, 2005). While early studies in this research strand tended to rely on general measures of support for redistribution or broad social policy objectives, the latest efforts have proposed increasingly specific measures of welfare policy preferences, facing respondents with questions and situations that mirror the kind of tradeoffs and constraints that political elites face (Bremer & Bürgisser, n.d.; Busemeyer & Garrizmann, 2017a; Gallego & Marx, 2016; Kölln & Wlezien, 2016).

The increasing specificity of items and scenarios presented to survey respondents does provide a more valid measure of the choices to be made in welfare reform. Yet, these measures tend to assume that the public has a set of real, specific and consistent attitudes towards these kind of policies. We know, however, that it can be problematic to take for granted the level of structure of policy attitudes among the public. In fact, studying the extent to which policy preferences are coherently structured among citizens has been the focus of a relevant strand within public opinion research (e.g. Bizer, Visser, Berent, & Krosnick, 2018; Converse, 1964; Goren, 2013; Krosnick, 1990; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1985). One consistent finding in these studies is that the public tends to display lower levels of attitudinal constraint than political elites. While attitudinal constraint has been a key concept in research of public opinion since its inception, most of the analyses of citizens' welfare preferences tend to focus on levels of support for different reforms (sometimes aggregated into latent dimensions). These analyses usually tend to disregard whether these positions captured by survey items are part of an organized set of preferences.

Addressing the level of attitudinal constraint of welfare priorities is precisely the focus of this paper. Drawing on seminal contributions in the area of public opinion (Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990), we study the extent to which citizens present a coherent structure of preferences in a set of newly-developed specific measures of social policy priorities. In contrast to most of the research on welfare preferences (see Goerres

& Prinzen, 2012 for an exception), in this paper, we do not address levels of support for welfare reforms and their determinants, but study instead whether citizens have coherent preferences. In a second step, we also address differences in levels of coherence between different groups. As mentioned above, public opinion is a crucial element to understand welfare politics and policy development. At the same time, the importance of public opinion for the policy reform process is likely to be dependent on its structure and consistency. Inchoate preferences—which could be easily swayed by parties’ or other actors—are less likely to constrain the policy making process.

Levels of coherence in social policy priorities can have two relevant implications. First, recent efforts in welfare politics research have focused on presenting respondents with increasingly more nuanced and differentiated social policy alternatives, because these provide a better reflection of the decisions in the welfare reform process (Bremer & Bürgisser, n.d.; Gallego & Marx, 2016; Häusermann, Kurer, & Traber, 2019). However, facing respondents with these kind of items may appear artificial if the complexity of these items is not matched by coherent preferences among the public. We might ask ourselves whether it is realistic to assume that citizens hold concrete positions on such specific policy propositions. Moreover, most studies of preference formation on welfare issues ultimately attempt to explain actual policies. The impact of citizens’ preferences in the policy making process is likely to be dependent on the consistency of these preferences. At the individual level, structured attitudes play a larger role in how people evaluate parties and party leaders, and, ultimately, in how they decide their vote (Converse, 1964; Goren, 2013). Hence, attitudinal constraint can be considered as a prerequisite for policy voting (Krosnick, 1990; Thomassen, 1999).

Second, precisely because of the implications it may have for policy responsiveness, it is necessary to address differences in the degree of attitudinal constraint within the public. If certain groups display inchoate welfare preferences, while others show a greater degree of coherence and structure, this is likely to affect the representation of their interests. Inequalities in the structuring of preferences could lead to unequal responsiveness. It has been repeatedly shown that attitudinal constraint (on different issues) depends on the level of political sophistication and interest of individuals (Luskin, 1990). In the area of social policies this is consequential because political interest has been frequently associated to socio-economic factors that also affect welfare preferences (e.g. educational attainment, income, social class). However, research on issue publics has also indicated that people interested or affected by a specific policy also show greater levels of constraint (Krosnick, 1990). Thus, inequalities due to political sophistication could be mitigated for individuals with a vested interest in a given policy.

In this paper we start by addressing overall levels of constraint in welfare policy preferences by relying on novel survey data that asks respondents specific questions about their *social policy priorities*. Priorities are

gauged by facing respondents with tradeoffs, where an expansion of benefits comes at cost of cutbacks in other benefits, or where expansion can mainly take place in one area (while preserving the status quo in others). By inquiring about priorities, we ask respondents to simultaneously evaluate more than one policy instrument and to express a relative opinion. Even if these may seem demanding measures of welfare priorities, our results indicate that respondents hold structured preferences, inconsistencies and lack of structure are rather infrequent. This lends support to the recent endeavor of providing a more detailed picture of public opinion on social policy. Our analyses also indicate that, in line with existing research, respondents with higher levels of political interest are more likely to display internally consistent policy priorities. At the same time, respondents who are likely to be affected by reforms in a specific policy field are also more likely to display a coherent structure of preferences. Hence, even if differences in political interest could generate inequalities, these are likely to be mitigated by issue publics.

The rest of the paper we proceed as follows. We start by stating the relevance of addressing attitudinal constraint in the context of welfare policy. We continue by discussing the concept of constraint, and its individual-level determinants. Next, the data and methods section introduces the particular nature of the novel data under consideration and introduces the different measures of constraint implemented in this paper. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the results and, lastly, the conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The structure of social policy preferences

One important topic in the field of comparative welfare state research has been public opinion on social policies and welfare reform, as well as the divisions within public opinion (Brooks & Manza, 2008; Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017a; Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Margalit, 2013; Rehm, 2009, 2016; Rueda, 2005; Svallfors, 2012). Studying social policy cleavages and the individual-level determinants of these preferences is an interesting endeavor in itself. Yet, most of the focus on citizens' preferences has been grounded on the influence that they should exert on social policy development at an aggregate level. The preferences of different social groups, and conflict on social policy issues, is an important input for the policy-making process. The assumption is that political parties will attempt to gauge support from different groups and build electoral coalitions representing specific social policy positions. Public opinion constraints what parties can offer and what governments can do if they want to be elected. Thus, voters' preferences have played a key role in the explanation of what is feasible in terms of welfare reform.

Within this strand of research, recent studies have implemented increasingly complex measures of social policy preferences that seek to reflect, at the individual level, the kind of choices that elites face in the

reform or recalibration of the welfare state. There are, particularly, two aspects of social policy reform that new measures have addressed: its multidimensionality and the tradeoffs imposed by fiscal constraint (Bremer & Bürgisser, n.d.). New measures of welfare policy preferences have introduced references to the cost in terms of higher taxation of said politics (see e.g. Hansen, 1998); have faced respondents with tradeoffs between different policy domains (e.g. expansion of education at the cost of pensions) (Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017b); or have presented a choice between specific policy instruments within a broader policy domain (Fernández & Jaime-Castillo, 2013; Gallego & Marx, 2016). These new measures provide a more realistic reflection of the kind of decisions that voters need to make, e.g. when evaluating a proposal for a pension reform (Häusermann et al., 2019). These new contributions represent more valid measures of social policy preferences and priorities that provide a better fit with current debates on welfare politics. More fine-grained measures should also display greater variation in the answers provided by different social groups. More traditional items like support for redistribution or for increased spending in education tend to show little variance—and, hence, to underestimate political conflict—because these measures do not allude to any cost of such policy interventions.

These recently-developed measures, as well as the survey questions on which we rely in this paper, represent a notorious improvement from more traditional items gauging generalized support for redistribution or social policy. The availability of several items capturing more fine-grained welfare preferences allow us to address an aspect that has been largely neglected: the degree of constraint of said preferences. One of the first conditions for issue voting (in this case, social policy voting) is that voters have a genuine attitude on it given issue (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Converse (1964) first proposed that structured and consistent attitudes are a functional ability in the political sphere that allow voters to make decisions and pursue specific policy demands on the basis of their personal preferences. In other words, we might conceive the structure and consistency of policy preferences among the public as a prerequisite for these individual preferences to influence policy development. While recent research has invested more efforts in introducing novel measures of welfare policy preferences, it has not addressed the potential inconsistency, ambivalence or lack of structure in them (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012).

As it is in other policy areas, we can conceive social policy preferences as being part of a belief system. Following the definition by Converse, a belief system is a *'configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence'* (Converse, 1964, p. 207). A fundamental concept in this definition is that of attitudinal constraint. Constraint refers to the success that one would have in predicting that an individual holds certain preferences and attitudes, on the basis of the initial knowledge that he or she holds a specific attitude. Thus, constraint refers to a

coherence in the structuration of cognitions or attitudes. As Converse also indicated, constraint should not be treated as something that is present or absent, but rather as a matter of degree.

The concepts of belief system and constraint have been implemented to assess whether individuals hold coherently structured preferences on different issues or towards different political objects, such as foreign policy or environmental policy, among others (Goren, 2013; Krosnick, 1990; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1985, 1993; Rohrschneider, 1993). Some of these studies elaborate on the distinction between two types of attitudinal constraint: vertical and horizontal (Peffley & Hurwitz, 1985). Vertical constraint refers to a relationship between two ideas or idea-elements (as termed by Converse, 1964), where one more general idea (at a higher level of abstraction) is superordinate and a determinant of one (or more) specific attitudes. A typical example of a superordinate attitude is economic ideology, and its relationship to, e.g., specific preferences regarding taxation. Horizontal constraint refers, instead, to the coherent or predictable structuration of two (or more) attitudes on the same level of abstraction (Goren, 2013). Relying on the same example, an individual who supports tax cuts should also be supportive of a balanced budget. As discussed in further detail in the data and methods section, in this paper we focus exclusively on measures of horizontal constraint, since we address the level of structuration and coherence of specific preferences in the domain of welfare policy.

Initial research assessing the extent to which structured belief systems are common among the electorate—particularly the analyses by Converse (1964)—led to quite pessimistic conclusions. Only about 15 percent of American voters were included in the two highest-ranked categories of constraint (ideologues and near-ideologues). In contrast to this dire scenario, later research indicated that the public held more coherent attitudes than initially believed (Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2008; Inglehart, 1985). Studying different sets of attitudes (such as economic, racial, foreign policy, health policy or social-moral attitudes), Peffley & Hurwitz (1985) argue, instead, that individuals are highly consistent and that specific policy attitudes are constrained by more abstract beliefs concerning the role of government or ideological self-placement. Moreover, it is a consistent finding in this literature that policy preferences in a specific issue area tend to show greater levels of covariance (a frequently used measure of constraint) than preferences in different issue areas (Goren, 2013). Thus, even if we face respondents with complex survey items that underline the multidimensionality and constrained nature of current welfare politics, because our focus is on the specific domain of social policy we expect individuals to display integrated belief systems. Moreover, qualitative evidence in the area of welfare policies has shown that preferences about specific policies (like unemployment or pensions) are rather stable, even when individuals engage in a process of deliberation with other people (Zimmermann, Heuer, & Mau, 2018).

The efforts in developing and implementing new measures of social policy preferences have not been matched by a focus on the degree of structure of these preferences. We find some examples of studies that have focused on constraint in particular policy fields, like environmental or foreign policies (Peffley & Hurwitz, 1993; Rohrschneider, 1993), but social policy has not been the subject of such analyses. That is not to say that welfare attitudes have not been included in analyses of general ideological constraint. When comparing the ideological constraint of congressional members and the general electorate, Converse (1964) included in the analyses welfare attitudes concerning employment policies by the central government, aid to education, and federal housing. Goren (2013) also includes measures of preferences towards health care reform, minimum wage, and tax cuts to assess the coherence of attitudes towards limited government. Peffley and Hurwitz (1985) include spending in welfare, in job training, and in health policy as measures of specific political attitudes. These domain-specific attitudes show a relatively high level of constraint, especially when compared to the covariance among between attitudes in different fields.

In the area of welfare politics, Goerres and Prinzen (2012) come closest to studying the degree of constraint of policy preferences—even if not explicitly referring to this concept. Two of the dimensions they address are particularly interesting for this paper. First, they assess inconsistencies in welfare attitudes, that is, the degree to which statements logically contradict each other, which maps onto the concept of constraint. As Converse (1964) indicated, certain constraints are purely logical, for instance, one cannot simultaneously favor and oppose a given policy. Second, these authors consider the possibility of non-attitudes. Particularly when asked close-ended survey questions, respondents can provide an answer even if they do not have a clear and fully developed attitude about an issue. Relying on focus group and survey data, they show that traditional measures, like those implemented in the International Social Survey Program systematically underestimated the number of inconsistencies and non-attitudes within the public.²

2.2 Differences in constraint of social policy attitudes

2.2.1 Political interest

Thus far we have referred to aggregate levels of attitudinal constraint within the public. However, there are reasons to expect that the degree of articulation of welfare preferences will differ across individuals. Political sophistication and interest have been consistently associated to more articulated belief systems since Converse's (1964) seminal contribution. Most people know and care little about government and politics and, when asked about issue preferences, unsophisticated voters tend to provide top-of-the-head

² They also include measures of attitudinal ambivalence and uncertainty, which are also underestimated by traditional survey instruments.

responses (Goren, 2013; Zaller, 1992). In contrast, those who are interested and think regularly about public affairs are better able to express and organize abstract ideas (Krosnick, 1990). Politically interested individuals are more frequently exposed to information about the complex world of politics (Jewitt & Goren, 2016). Through direct and indirect exposure to political information they evaluate a wider range of issues than those who pay little attention to politics (Zaller, 1992). Hence, we expect attitudinal constraint in social policy attitudes to decline with decreasing political interest. Educational attainment, another factor closely linked to cognitive sophistication, has also been shown to stratify levels of ideological coherence of belief systems (Lupton, Myers, & Thornton, 2015).³

This stratification in attitudinal articulation along levels of political interest could generate inequalities in the kind of preferences that are more coherently expressed, particularly, because political interest is known to be associated to other variables affecting welfare preferences (like socio-economic status or income). Political and government elites could face an asymmetry in the attitudinal constraint of their voters, which is most probably not neutral to the kind of welfare preferences that these different groups hold. While social policy appeals can be more easily processed and evaluated by voters with articulated belief systems, this is harder for voters with lower levels of attitudinal organization. This could, ultimately, lead to unequal policy responsiveness.

2.2.3 Issue publics

Political interest is likely to generally increase attitudinal constraint on a broad range of policy issues. However, even politically uninterested people could display well-articulated beliefs in those specific issues that are personally important to them. Citizens with attitude objects that are particularly important to them are likely to consider these attitudes frequently, which, in turn, results in a disposition to evaluate that object in a consistent manner (Goren, 2013; Krosnick, 1990). Policy attitudes that are important are more easily accessible in memory, and hence lead to more consistent replies when asked about them. Moreover, research has indicated that cognitive sophistication is not a requirement for attitudes to become personally important. In fact, a strong predictor of importance of a given attitude is material self-interest. Attitude importance is higher when an issue or an object is likely to have a direct impact for an individual's life (Krosnick, 1990).

Issue publics should mitigate some of the potential inequalities generated by differences in political interest, particularly because it should be the citizens who care or are likely to be affected by a certain policy issue

³ In additional analyses that we perform as robustness tests we address stratification in constraint along levels of educational attainment. These results are presented in Appendix A.2 but not discussed in the results section of this paper.

that should show greater levels of constraint. Because our substantive focus is on welfare policies, we identify as issue publics those groups who, on the basis of their socio-economic characteristics, are more likely to benefit or bear the cost of a given policy intervention. To illustrate this with an example, in the area of unemployment policies (whether referring to benefits or to reintegration into the labor market) we expect the unemployed to be particularly concerned, interested, and therefore, constrained in his or her preferences towards this issue. In the area of pension policy, we consider pensioners to constitute the main issue public. We also consider respondents with high and low income to attribute greater relevance to means-tested reforms. Lastly, we also consider parents as a likely issue public of childcare policies.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Measuring welfare priorities

To address aggregate levels of welfare attitudinal constraint among the public, as well as differences based on political interest and issue publics, we rely on novel data from a survey conducted in the context of “Welfarepriorities” project (Häusermann 2017). Survey data was collected for 1,500 respondents in eight West European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, United Kingdom, Italy and Spain). The target population was a country’s adult population (>18 years), with quotas on age and sex (crossed) and educational attainment. The total sample counts 12,506 completed interviews that were conducted between October and December 2018.

It was this survey’s purpose to improve the measurement of welfare policy preferences and, particularly, to gauge policy *priorities*. Following this objective, we designed different survey items. Some of the items mirror traditional *positional* measures that ask respondents to state their position on a given policy reform (e.g. increasing minimum pensions) or field (e.g. increase spending in university education). *Position* measures do not allude to the cost of a policy (neither in terms of costs of opportunity nor tangible costs). *Priorities*, on the contrary, depart from these unconstrained scenarios, and are thus closer to the kind of choices made in the context of welfare reform. *Priorities* capture relative preferences for a given policy over one or several alternatives. Measuring priorities entails, first, facing respondents with the cost of a policy—either in terms of explicit cutbacks in other areas or in terms of the opportunity cost of not being to implement other desirable expansionary measures. Second, priorities make evident the multidimensionality of social policy, either by capturing relative preferences between different policy fields (e.g. pension, unemployment benefits, education...) or between different policy instruments implemented in a given field (e.g. means-tested vs. universal benefits, targeted recalibration...).

The differences between the traditional *positional* and the different *priorities* measures we propose become clearer with a few illustrative examples.⁴ Positional items ask respondents to state their level of agreement with a set of expansionary and retrenching measures, where no tradeoff or reciprocal benefit or cost is implied. Respondents indicated how much they agreed with the statement “*The government should increase old age pension benefits*” or “*The government should increase the fees for public childcare benefits*”. Agreement was measured on a 4-point scale: Disagree strongly, Disagree, Agree and Agree strongly. As we would expect, the distribution of responses indicated across-the-board support for expansion and opposition to retrenchment. In the analyses that follow we rely on four positional measures in two fields: increases and cutbacks in old age pension and in unemployment benefits.

To measure priorities, we rely on two different strategies. In one, we face respondents with several point distribution tasks. Individuals were asked to allocate a total of 100 points to six different items according to the importance they attribute to each of them. Two tasks referred to expansionary measures, and two to retrenching measures. Moreover, two of the tasks (one expansion, one retrenchment) were phrased in terms of overall improvements/cutbacks in six different social policy fields (old age pensions, childcare, university education, unemployment benefits, labor market reintegration services, and services for the social and labor market integration of immigrants). The other two tasks presented six different specific expansionary (and retrenching) measures in different policy fields (e.g. increase the minimum level of old age pension benefits, or increase student fees for university education). The reforms include measures in the fields of old age pensions, childcare and tertiary education and vary in whether they affect all citizens (universal) or only specific groups (targeted).

The second strategy to measure priorities consists of direct tradeoff questions. Respondents were asked to express their agreement with a measure in which increasing benefits in one policy area comes with the direct and explicit cost of a cutback in another policy. Hence, the costs of a reform were made very explicit and concrete. Respondents indicated whether they thought these tradeoffs to be completely unacceptable (1), rather unacceptable (2), rather acceptable (3), or completely acceptable (4). In this paper, we draw on the responses to three of the tradeoff questions: (i) “*The government increases benefits for the unemployed, at a cost of slightly lowering the maximum old age pension benefits*”; (ii) “*The government increases the availability of childcare, at a cost of slightly lowering the maximum old age pension benefits*”; (iii) “*The government increases financial support for university students from low income families, at a cost of raising fees for students from middle and high income families*”.

⁴ The exact wording of the questions used to construct the variables included in the analyses are presented in Appendix A.1.

Because of the explicit reference to the multidimensionality and to the constraints in welfare policies, the priority items can be seen as relatively complex and demanding measures that ask respondents to express concrete preferences in specific issues. The positional measures, in contrast, present respondents with an easier scenario that does not involve implicit costs or limitations.

3.2 Measuring constraint

The constraint of political belief systems is a relational property of attitudes. This is why, starting with Converse (1964) and in subsequent studies, researchers have frequently relied on correlational measures to operationalize constraint. To measure vertical constraint, Peffley and Hurwitz (1985) advocate for latent measurement models that estimate the relationship between attitudes and superordinate values. In either of the two cases, because constraint is a measure of the extent to which different attitudes are coherently structured, it requires a theoretical framework that specifies a priori which attitudes should covary. Some constraints can be defined in purely logical terms: if individuals report attitudes that logically contradict each other we can be confident that this is sign of lack of constraint. In other cases, we need to elaborate, theoretically, why two or more attitudes should be positively or negatively correlated. The measures we implement to operationalize constraint are based on the premise that if individuals have a stable and coherent preference for a specific policy, particularly if they prioritize a certain policy field or policy reform, this should be reflected in their responses across survey items that face them with different scenarios and comparisons of policy reforms. Strictly, these measures allow us to address horizontal or ‘issue’ constraint, that is, a consistency between concrete issue positions but not the correspondence between these concrete measures and more abstract beliefs (Peffley & Hurwitz, 1985).

We start by implementing a rather undemanding measure of constraint. Relying on the positional items described above, we compare responses to two policy fields (pension and unemployment benefits) that were worded in exact opposite terms in the expansion and retrenchment scenarios. We take as a sign of lack of constraint responses that are simultaneously favorable of expansion and retrenchment in the same field. As a second measure, we take a similar approach but rely on the point distribution questions across different policy fields. We have two rating questions about policy fields. One asks respondents to assign most points to areas in which they prioritize expansion, and the other one asks them to attribute more points to areas in which they will accept retrenchment. We operationalize support for expansion or retrenchment in a specific field based on the points respondents assign to that field. Because respondents are asked to distribute 100 points among six different policy fields, if they were indifferent between all of them, they should assign a maximum of 17 points for a specific policy field. Based on this, we generate a measure of support for expansion/retrenchment in a specific field if respondents allocate more than 17 points to

expansion/retrenchment in that field.⁵ Based on this dichotomized measure of expansion/retrenchment priority in a specific policy field, we are able to measure whether respondents provide contradictory replies in these two scenarios. For instance, if an individual attributes higher-than-average priority to expansion of university education (e.g. 35 points to this field) while, simultaneously, also attributing higher-than-average support for retrenchment (e.g. 45 points) we take this as a measure of lack of constraint. In contrast to the positional measure, which asks about agreement/disagreement within a single field, this imposes stronger requirements on respondents. We also compute an aggregate measure of contradictions by summing the number of fields in which respondents provide a contradictory answer.

The next measures of constraint we implement go beyond identifying contradictory replies and are, hence, more complex. We start by addressing the correlation between the variances in the replies asking about position and priorities on the same policy fields. We start by calculating, by individual, the standard deviation of the responses provided to the six positional items (which refer to six policy fields), and of the responses to the point distribution questions (across the same policy fields). We calculate the standard deviation separately for the expansion and retrenchment questions. The variance of the replies provided captures one dimension of respondents' structure of preferences (to what extent they differ in how they position themselves on six policy fields). This underlying variance of preferences should be reflected across the different specific items that they are faced with. If individuals hold distinctive and diversified preferences across the different policy fields—i.e. they clearly favor expansion in certain fields, but not in others—then this should be reflected both in replies to the positional and priorities questions. If respondents support to a similar extent expansion and retrenchment in different fields, then this should also be manifested across different question formulations. To illustrate this with an example, we consider as low constrained a respondent who indicates that he 'Agrees' to expansion across all six social policies (low variance of his responses), but then allocates 100 points to university education and 0 points to all other fields in the expansion rating question (high variance of his responses). For this individual, the association between the two standard deviations is low. We take the correlation between the standard deviations of the positional and rating questions (for expansion and retrenchment separately) as a measure of constraint.

The last measure of constraint studies the association between the replies provided to the tradeoff and rating questions. Both of these types of questions address respondents' priorities. Each tradeoff item confronts respondents with an expansionary measure that occurs at the cost of a cutback. For three of the tradeoff questions, each of the components of the tradeoff (the expansion and the cutback) are also included in the rating questions. Thus, we have a measure of the extent to which an expansion or retrenchment is a priority

⁵ A neutral response would require that respondents give $16\bar{6}$ ($100/6$) to each policy field.

in two different survey items. If respondents hold articulated preferences, prioritizing a specific policy or reform in one question should be correlated to prioritization in a different question as well. For example, if a respondent prioritizes expanding unemployment benefits (i.e. assigns a high number of points in the rating question), he or she should be more likely to accept the tradeoff in which this expansion is pitted against a reduction in the maximum old age pension. By the same token, respondents who strongly oppose lowering the maximum pension should be less likely to accept this tradeoff. Thus, the last measure of constraint analyses the relationship between each of the two sides included in a tradeoff and their corresponding counterpart in the rating questions.

3.3 Model estimation and independent variables

The results section starts by presenting some descriptive statistics that indicate the extent to which contradictory preferences are common among respondents. This is based on the first two measures of constraint introduced above. The next analyses go on to introduce OLS regression models that study (i) the association between the standard deviation of the positional questions and that of the rating questions, and (ii) the association between acceptance of a tradeoff and the prioritization of the two sides of that same tradeoff. In these two sets of regression models we introduce some individual-level controls, namely: age, gender of the respondent, level of educational attainment, income and country fixed-effects. When analyzing the correlation between the standard deviations of the position and priority items we also introduce a control for ‘attitudes towards tradeoffs’. This variable is based on a survey item that asks respondents about their agreement with the statement that tradeoffs in social policy are unavoidable.⁶ We introduce this control variable since respondents who perceive welfare politics generally in terms of tradeoffs should be less likely to support expansion and oppose retrenchment across-the-board and should, hence, display higher levels of variance in their replies.

To address differences in constraint across levels of political interest and issue publics, we estimate interactive regression models. To measure political interest, we rely on an item that asks about the extent to which respondents are interested in politics (generally, without reference to welfare or social politics). To get at issue publics, we rely on characteristics of the individuals that should increase their likelihood of being affected by a certain policy and, hence, for which self-interest should play a relevant role. For old age pensions, we focus on pensioners who are 65 or older. For childcare, we separate parents from respondents without children. For unemployment benefits we create an indicator variable to identify the unemployed. Lastly, for means-tested university policies (that provide additional resources exclusively to

⁶ The item reads: “*Nowadays, the welfare state cannot offer everything that one may wish for. If you increase benefits for some people, sooner or later someone else will have to accept lower benefits*”. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with this statement.

children from low-income families), we differentiate between respondents with different income levels. The interactive terms with interest and the variables capturing issue publics are introduced in separate models.

4. Results

4.1 Levels of welfare constraint

To gauge the level of constraint of belief systems on welfare policies, we start by presenting some straightforward statistics on the proportion of inconsistent or contradictory attitudes among respondents. Table 1 summarizes the results from a less strict test of attitudinal consistency, it shows the proportion of respondents who support retrenchment and expansion on pension and unemployment benefits based on the replies they provide to the positional questions. As we can see, only a small proportion of respondents (3.68 percent on pensions and 4.52 percent on unemployment) enter the contradiction of supporting simultaneously expansion and retrenchment. We expected contradictory responses to be relatively infrequent in these items because the positional questions impose little demands on respondents, since they do not entail comparing different policies at the same time or considering a cost. As a matter of fact, the number of inconsistent replies increases when we focus on the more stringent measures of social policy priorities.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who support expansion and retrenchment in positional questions

		Opposition to retrenchment	Support for retrenchment
Old age pension benefits	Opposition to expansion	13.59	4.75
	Support for expansion	77.98	3.68
Unemployment benefits	Opposition to expansion	27.62	17.65
	Support for expansion	50.2	4.52

N= 12,236

Table 2 presents the proportion of respondents in four different categories, which are based on the replies to the expansion and the retrenchment policy field rating questions. Inconsistent replies are those that indicate simultaneous support for expansion and retrenchment in a given field. Indifferent replies are those that do not favor expansion nor retrenchment. The expansion and retrenchment categories indicate priorities in these two directions. As we observe in table 2, relying on measures of priorities—particularly on the relatively demanding rating questions—increases the number of inconsistent attitudes. The lowest proportion of contradictory replies now amounts to 8.89 percent (for policies directed at the integration of migrants) and raises up to the maximum of 17.14 percent for labor market reintegration services. It is also

interesting to note (even if not the subject of this paper) that there is a relatively high number of indifferent replies in some policy fields, like unemployment benefits, or university education). Even if attitudinal constraint seems lower when we rely on these more stringent measures of priorities, still it is mostly less than a sixth of respondents who hold such unconstrained priorities. Moreover, as we can observe in table 3, most of the sample (about 76 percent) displays inconsistencies in, at most, one policy field. Table 3 presents how respondents are distributed by number of inconsistent responses provided (up to a theoretical maximum of six, the total number of policy fields rated). This table indicates that the contradictions displayed in table 2 are not concentrated among a specific group of the sample. Instead, inconsistencies are fairly distributed among respondents, so that the majority of them display inconsistencies in one (or two) policy fields at most. This is line with the expectation that different individuals will prioritize different social policies (based on their own interests and values), and hence, it is natural to expect that they can show inconsistent preferences in those dimensions that they care about less. If the clustering of unconstrained attitudes was, for instance, strongly articulated by political interest, then we would expect contradictory attitudes to be clustered within a specific groups of individuals who would show a high number of those attitudes. This, however, is not what table 3 indicates.

Table 2: Proportion of inconsistent, indifferent, supportive of retrenchment and expansion responses to priority rating items

Type of response	Social policy field					
	Old age pensions	Childcare	University education	Unemployment benefits	Labor market reintegration services	Services for the integration of migrants
Inconsistent	16.41	14.45	14.32	11.54	17.14	8.89
Indifferent	16.8	33.77	34.64	37.81	33.09	28.49
Retrenchment	7.14	19.88	24.23	24.8	26.62	54.15
Expansion	59.66	31.9	26.81	25.85	23.15	8.47

N= 12,236

Table 3: Sum of inconsistent responses to priority rating items

Number of inconsistent responses	Percentage of respondents
0	50.49
1	26.67
2	14.84
3	5.92
4	1.75
5	0.33
6	0.00

N= 12,236

After presenting these measures of contradictory or inconsistent attitudes, we turn to measures of attitudinal constraint that are closer to those implemented in earlier research. Table 4 displays the association between the standard deviation of replies to expansion positional and rating questions (in models 1 and 2) and to retrenchment positional and rating questions (models 3 and 4). As we would expect in the presence of attitudinal constraint, the standard deviation of answers to positional and priority items (on the same issues) are associated. Respondents who display higher variance in the point distribution questions (because they attribute more points to specific fields, instead of distributing them equally across policies) also show higher variance in their replies to the positional questions. This indicates that, to some extent, positional questions are also able to capture part of respondents' priorities. Comparing the retrenchment and expansion scenarios, we see that constraint appears to be greater for retrenchment attitudes, an increase in one unit for the standard deviation of retrenchment ratings increases the standard deviation of positional items by 0.007 points, while for expansion this association amounts to 0.004 points. Moreover, this association is robust to the inclusion of additional socio-demographic controls in the model. Among the control variables it is interesting to address attitudes towards tradeoffs. Respondents who see tradeoffs in social policy as unavoidable tend to display greater variance in their replies to positional questions. In other words, their understanding that social policy benefits entail a cost increase their willingness to manifest support for retrenchment in certain policies or to not support expansion across-the-board. Moreover, the coefficient associated to this understanding of welfare policy is larger for positioning on retrenchment than for expansion.

Table 4: Relationship between standard deviations of replies to positional and priority items

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Expansion positions	Expansion positions	Retrenchment positions	Retrenchment positions
Std. deviation of priority rating questions	0.004*** (0.000)	0.004*** (0.000)	0.007*** (0.000)	0.007*** (0.000)
Age		-0.001*** (0.000)		0.001*** (0.000)
Female		0.022*** (0.006)		-0.031*** (0.007)
Educational attainment		0.012*** (0.002)		-0.019*** (0.003)
Income		0.006*** (0.001)		-0.001 (0.001)
Political interest		0.036*** (0.004)		0.017*** (0.004)
Attitudes towards tradeoff		0.011** (0.004)		0.039*** (0.004)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Constant	0.565*** (0.010)	0.406*** (0.020)	0.529*** (0.011)	0.392*** (0.022)
Observations	12,385	12,010	12,384	12,008
R-squared	0.061	0.078	0.058	0.074

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

The last measure of attitudinal constraint proposed captures the relationship between acceptance of a tradeoff, and the individual prioritization of the two elements involved in the tradeoff. Table 5 presents six models, two for each of the tradeoffs analyzed. The results indicate that these attitudes tend to be coherently structured among respondents. As we would expect, prioritizing certain welfare expansions—of unemployment benefits, of the availability of childcare, or of access to university among low-income families—increases the likelihood of accepting a tradeoff that expands these same policies. At the same time, willingness to accept retrenchment in the policies introduced in the cost side of the tradeoff also increases the acceptance of the tradeoff. The link to the benefit element of the tradeoff appears stronger than the link to the cost. Across all models, the coefficient associated to the rating of the expansion item is larger—at least twice as large—than the coefficient associated to the cost. This would indicate that desirability of the increase in benefits is driving the willingness to accept the tradeoff to a larger extent. Again, it is interesting to point out that, except for the last model (6), a general understanding of social policy in terms of tradeoffs increases the probability of accepting a specific tradeoff.

The different measures of constraint analyzed indicate that respondents tend to provide consistent responses across items, even when survey questions are relatively complex and require the consideration of different factors. This increases our confidence that the items proposed to measure social policy priorities capture real individual attitudes, and not just top-of-the-head answers (which would be highly likely to show contradictions). Even when we study priorities measured by items that present respondents with different decisional contexts (in terms of the costs or alternatives that are presented), we find that attitudes tend to display structural coherence.

Table 5: Relationship between acceptability of a tradeoff and prioritization of the two elements in the tradeoff

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Unemployment vs. pension		Childcare vs. maximum pension		Means-tested university support and fees	
Rating expansion element of the tradeoff	0.014*** (0.001)	0.014*** (0.001)	0.011*** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.001)	0.016*** (0.001)	0.016*** (0.001)
Rating retrenchment element of the tradeoff	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)	0.008*** (0.000)	0.007*** (0.000)
Age		-0.006*** (0.000)		-0.009*** (0.001)		0.004*** (0.000)
Female		-0.073*** (0.016)		-0.096*** (0.018)		-0.096*** (0.015)
Educational attainment		0.038*** (0.007)		0.019** (0.007)		-0.022*** (0.006)
Income		-0.020*** (0.003)		-0.013*** (0.003)		-0.026*** (0.003)
Political Interest		0.032** (0.010)		0.006 (0.011)		0.043*** (0.010)
Attitudes towards tradeoffs		0.021* (0.010)		0.064*** (0.011)		0.001 (0.009)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.365*** (0.025)	1.582*** (0.053)	1.487*** (0.025)	1.842*** (0.055)	2.224*** (0.024)	2.165*** (0.050)
Observations	12,142	11,761	9,102	8,804	12,142	11,761
R-squared	0.191	0.208	0.227	0.258	0.096	0.115

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

4.2 Stratification by levels of political interest and welfare publics

So far, the analyses have addressed overall levels of attitudinal constraint within the public. In this section, we turn the focus on individual-level characteristics that can produce differences in attitudinal constraint. One of such factors is political interest. Because of their more frequent exposure and cognitive engagement with political issues, we expect politically interested individuals to display more coherently structured preferences concerning welfare policies. Table 6 presents two models that introduce an interactive term between political interest and the standard deviation of the rating questions, in the explanation of the standard deviation of positional items. The first model is based on the expansion scenarios, while the second presents the results for retrenchment. Only the second model (retrenchment) provides evidence in favor of the proposition that individuals with higher interest display greater coherence in their attitudes. As displayed graphically in figure 1, for all levels of political interest we find a positive association between the variances in the two items, which goes on to show that even low interested individuals display constraint of these preferences. However, the correlation between these measures is marginally higher for highly interested individuals. In the relationship between the expansionary items, however, we do not find differences between individuals based on their political knowledge.

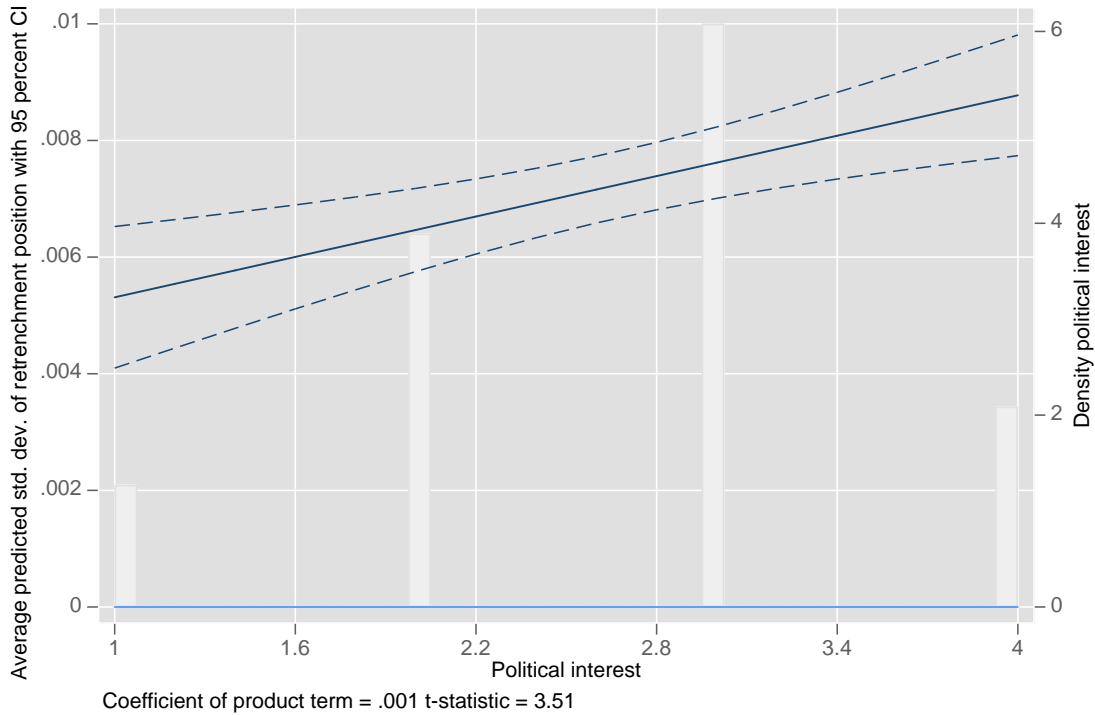
Table 6: Differences in the relationship between standard deviations of replies to positional and priority items based on political interest

	(1) Expansion positions	(2) Retrenchment positions
Std. deviation of expansion ratings	0.004*** (0.001)	
Std. deviation of retrenchment ratings		0.004*** (0.001)
Std. deviation of expansion ratings*Political interest	-0.000 (0.000)	
Std. deviation of retrenchment ratings*Political interest		0.001** (0.000)
Political Interest	0.040*** (0.007)	-0.002 (0.007)
Age	-0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Female	0.022*** (0.006)	-0.032*** (0.007)
Educational attainment	0.012*** (0.002)	-0.018*** (0.003)
Income	0.006*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.423*** (0.022)	0.536*** (0.024)

Observations	12,032	12,030
R-squared	0.077	0.068

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Figure 1: Predicted standard deviation of positional retrenchment question by level of political interest



The higher constraint among the politically interested is also generally supported by the interactive terms in the models that associate willingness to accept a tradeoff to respondents' prioritization of the two elements in the tradeoff. The estimation relies again on interactive models. As shown in table 7, at higher levels of political interest, the link between prioritizing a given welfare expansion (like increasing unemployment benefits) and the likelihood that a respondent will support that expansion even when it comes at the cost of a cutback in another area (like the maximum pension level) is stronger. The same is observed for prioritizing a retrenchment: this favors accepting a tradeoff to a larger extent among highly politically interested individuals than among those with low interest. We must, however, point out that not all interactive coefficients reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The interaction between political interest and prioritizing an increase in the availability of childcare (i.e. the expansion side of the tradeoff), or with raising university fees for middle- and high-income families (i.e. the retrenchment side of the tradeoff) do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Concerning the size of the

moderation effects, there is no clear pattern by which the interaction is consistently stronger for expansion or retrenchment. Overall, the analyses indicate that there are certain inequalities in the articulation of social policy belief systems following differences in political interest. However, as we discussed earlier, these inequalities could be less consequential if the public who is likely to be affected by a certain policy also display higher levels of attitudinal constraint. This is what we set out to study in the following analyses.

Table 7: Relationship between acceptability of a tradeoff and prioritization of the two elements in the tradeoff by level of political interest

	(1) Unemployment vs. pension	(2) Childcare vs. maximum pension	(3) Means-tested university support and fees
Rating expansion element of the tradeoff	0.010*** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)
Rating retrenchment element of the tradeoff	-0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)
Rating expansion element of the tradeoff*Political interest	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
Rating retrenchment element of the tradeoff*Political interest	0.002*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Political interest	-0.038* (0.017)	-0.035+ (0.018)	0.002 (0.017)
Educational attainment	0.037*** (0.007)	0.021** (0.007)	-0.022*** (0.006)
Age	-0.006*** (0.000)	-0.009*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.000)
Female	-0.075*** (0.016)	-0.101*** (0.018)	-0.097*** (0.015)
Income	-0.019*** (0.003)	-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.026*** (0.003)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.817*** (0.058)	2.008*** (0.055)	2.276*** (0.057)
Observations	11,787	8,828	11,787
R-squared	0.210	0.255	0.116

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Table 8 summarizes the results from interactive models in which priorities on the different expansion and retrenchment measures proposed (in the tradeoff and corresponding rating questions) are interacted with

the publics that are likely to be affected by them. The first model presents the interaction between the proposal to reduce the maximum level of pension and the indicator variable identifying pensioners, as well as the interaction between increasing unemployment benefits and being unemployed. As the table indicates, the coefficients are statistically significant, but in the case of the unemployed it is in the opposite direction to what we would expect. Unemployed respondents display a lower correlation between their prioritization of expanding unemployment benefits and their acceptance of the tradeoff where this expansion comes at the cost of reducing the maximum pension level. This result is surprising given that we would expect these individuals to attribute more importance to this attitude (because it is in their self-interest) and hence should show greater stability on it. It should also be noted that this model also introduces controls for income and age, so this surprising finding cannot be grounded on the distribution of these other variables. The interactive term between being a pensioner and acceptance of cutbacks on maximum pensions is in the expected direction, with constraint on this attitude being stronger for pensioners.

Table 8: Relationship between acceptability of a tradeoff and prioritization of the two elements in the tradeoff by issue publics

	(1) Unemployment	(2) Childcare	(3) Means-
Rating expansion unemployment benefits	0.014*** (0.001)		
Rating retrenching maximum pension level	0.004*** (0.000)		
Rating retrenching maximum pension level*Pensioner	0.002** (0.001)		
Rating expansion unemployment benefits*Unemployed	-0.005** (0.002)		
Rating expanding availability of childcare		0.011*** (0.001)	
Rating reducing maximum pension		0.004*** (0.000)	
Rating expanding availability of childcare*Parent		-0.002 (0.001)	
Rating reducing maximum pension*Pensioner		0.002* (0.001)	
Rating expansion of access to university to low-income families			0.009*** (0.001)
Rating raising university fees except for low-income families			0.007*** (0.001)
Rating expansion of access to university to low-income families*Income			0.001*** (0.000)
Rating raising university fees except for low-income families*Income			0.000 (0.000)
Political interest	0.032*** (0.010)	0.031** (0.010)	0.044*** (0.009)
Educational attainment	0.039***	0.020**	-0.022***

	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Pensioner	-0.055+	0.084*	
	(0.033)	(0.037)	
Unemployed	0.235***		
	(0.052)		
Parent		0.084**	
		(0.029)	
Age	-0.006***	-0.012***	0.004***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.000)
Female	-0.073***	-0.105***	-0.095***
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.015)
Income	-0.017***	-0.011***	-0.046***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.603***	2.094***	2.275***
	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.049)
Observations	11,787	8,795	11,787
R-squared	0.210	0.257	0.117

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

In the tradeoff that opposes expanding the availability of childcare services to lowering the level of the maximum pension, the differences between issue publics are small. Only one of the interactive terms reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. In line with the findings from the previous model, it is, again, the interaction between lowering the maximum pension level and being a pensioner that strengthens the association between the rating and tradeoff questions. For pensioners, accepting the reduction of maximum pensions increases to a larger extent the propensity to accept the tradeoff, where cutbacks in the maximum pension are done in favor of a greater provision of childcare.

The third model presents the results for the tradeoff where financial support for university students from low-income families is increased at the expense of higher university fees for students from middle- and high-income families. Of the two interactive terms with respondent's income, only the first—with the expansionary measure of financial support—is statistically significant. For those with higher income, the association between the tradeoff and the rating question on the expansion of access to university among low-income students is stronger. Overall, through the different models, the results tend to support the proposition that politically interested individuals, as well as the main beneficiaries and payers of a specific policy, are more likely to display higher levels of attitudinal constraint. We delve deeper into the implications of these findings in the next section.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined a concept that was central in seminal studies of public opinion research, that of attitudinal constraint or the structuration of belief systems. Early research raised concerns about the proportion of the electorate that held coherently structured political attitudes. The relevance of attitudinal constraint lies in that it can be considered as a prerequisite for policy voting and, hence, for parties' responsiveness to the electorate's demands. In this paper, we have focused on the structure of social policy preferences, precisely because public opinion has come to play a central role in explanations of welfare politics and reforms. The impact of citizens' preferences on what governments can do is thought to take place through policy voting. Parties are constrained in the kind of social policy reforms they can implement, because unpopular measures could lead them to electoral losses. In this process of welfare issue voting, attitudinal constraint should play an important role.

The debates around welfare state reform have also become increasingly complex, with social and economic transformations leading to new risks (e.g. single-parent households, atypically employed) and to new demands within the public. For this reason, recent contributions have put considerable effort in implementing more nuanced and realistic measures of social policy preferences in survey research. In the context of our own research project, we focus on priorities towards welfare policies. Even if measures have become more specific and complex, mirroring the kind of decisions that elites face, we do not find parallel attempts to address whether there is structure in this kind of preferences reported by voters. That voters provide a reply to a survey item does not necessarily guarantee that they hold well-structured preferences on that topic (Zaller, 1992).

For this reason, this paper has addressed the extent to which voters' welfare preferences are coherently structured. We have done this by relying on novel survey data that implements different instruments to gauge social policy positions and priorities. Some of the items included in our study place relatively high demands on respondents, since they are asked to consider, at the same time, specific measures implemented in different social policy fields. Yet, even when faced with these complex measures, we find that respondents' social policy preferences tend to be coherently structured. Levels of attitudinal constraint are greater when taking measures of positioning on issues that place fewer demands on voters—e.g. only 3.7 percent of respondents provided contradictory replies to the positional questions on support for expansion and retrenchment of old age pension benefits. Yet, the number of inconsistent responses is also relatively low when assessing more complex measures, like rating different social policy fields by level of priority. Moreover, even when respondents do manifest inconsistent attitudes, it tends to be on a small number of issues (one or two). This would indicate that they hold less structured preferences on a few issues that may

be less important to them. Overall, most respondents have constrained preferences on most social policy issues they were presented with.

In a second step of the analyses we addressed whether attitudinal constraint was unequally distributed among respondents. If constraint or lack thereof were particularly concentrated among certain groups of the electorate, this could generate inequalities in the representation of their demands, since constraint can be conceived as a prerequisite for policy voting. As earlier research had indicated, we do observe stratification of attitudinal constraint by levels of political interest. However, we also found support for issue publics displaying higher levels of coherence in their attitudes. We identified groups of respondents that—based on their personal characteristics such as being unemployed, a pensioner, a parent—have more to win or lose from a policy being implemented. Our analyses showed that these welfare publics tend to hold better-structured preferences. Hence, even if political interest might generate inequalities, these are likely to be mitigated for the people who are most likely to be affected by the policy in question.

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7. Appendix A.1 Question wording

1.1 Positional items				
To what extent do you agree with the following policy reform proposals?				
	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
<i>The government should ...</i>				
... increase old age pension benefits				
... increase the availability of good-quality childcare services				
... expand access to good-quality university education for students from lower-income families				
... increase unemployment benefits				
... expand services that help reintegrate the long-term unemployed into the labour market				
... expand social assistance benefits for UK nationals only				
... reduce old age pension benefits				
... increase the fees for public childcare services				
... increase student fees for university education for students from middle- and higher-income families				
... reduce unemployment benefits				
... provide labour market reintegration services only to the long-term unemployed (rather than all unemployed)				
... reduce social assistance benefits only for the non-British				

1.2 Attitudes towards tradeoffs	
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “Nowadays, the welfare state can’t offer everything that one may wish for. If you increase benefits for some people, sooner or later someone else will have to accept lower benefits”.	
1	Strongly disagree
2	Disagree
3	Agree
4	Strongly agree

3.5 Trade-off questions

Please imagine that the government wants to improve certain social benefits. However, it can only do so by cutting back on other social benefits. To what extent do you find the following cutbacks acceptable in comparison to the improvement they allow?

	Completely inacceptable	Rather inacceptable	Rather acceptable	Completely acceptable
The government ...				
... guarantees decent old age pension benefits for all future pensioners, at a cost of somewhat lowering benefits for current pensioners.				
... increases the availability of good-quality childcare, at a cost of lowering child benefits.				
... increases benefits for the unemployed, at a cost of slightly lowering the maximum old age pension benefits.				
... increases financial support for university students from low income families, at a cost of raising fees for students from middle and high income families.				
... provides more services to help migrants find a job, at a cost of slightly lowering old age pensions for everyone.				

3.1 Rating reforms, EXPANSION

Imagine that the government had the means to increase some social benefits, but not all of them. Which of the following improvements of social benefits do you consider most important? You can allocate 100 points. Give **more points** to those **improvements** that you consider **more important** and fewer points to the ones you consider less important.

The government should ...

... increase the minimum level of old age pension benefits

... increase old age pension benefits for everyone

... increase the availability of good-quality childcare services only for lower-income families

... increase the availability of good-quality childcare services for everyone

... expand access to good quality university education for all students

... expand access to good quality university education only for students from lower-income families

3.2 Rating fields EXPANSION

Now imagine that the government had the means to improve benefits in some social policy fields, but not in all of them. You can allocate 100 points. Give **more points** to those fields in which you consider **benefit improvement more important**, and fewer points to those areas in which you consider benefit improvement less important.

Old age pensions _____

Childcare _____

University education _____

Unemployment benefits _____

Labour market reintegration services _____

Services for the social and labour market integration of immigrants _____

3.3 Rating reforms, RETRENCHMENT

Imagine the government had to cut back on some social benefits, but not on all of them. Which of the following reductions of social benefits do you find most acceptable? You can allocate 100 points. Give **more points** to those **reductions** that you consider **more acceptable** and fewer points to the ones that you find less acceptable.

The government should ...

... reduce old age pension benefits for everyone _____

... reduce only the maximum level of old age pension benefits, but preserve the minimum level as it is _____

... increase the fees for public childcare services only for middle- and higher-income families _____

... increase the fees for public childcare services for everyone _____

... increase student fees for university education except for students from lower-income families _____

... increase student fees for university education _____

3.4 Rating fields RETRENCHMENT

Now finally imagine the government had to cut back benefits in some social policy fields, but not in all of them. You can allocate 100 points. Give **more points** to those fields in which you would find a **reduction of benefits more acceptable**, and fewer points to those areas in which you would find reductions less acceptable.

Old age pensions _____

Childcare _____

University education _____

Unemployment benefits _____

Labour market reintegration services _____

Services for the social and labour market integration of immigrants _____

Appendix A.2: Models with educational attainment

	(1) Expansion Education	(2) Retrenchment Education
Std. deviation of expansion ratings	0.003*** (0.001)	
Std. deviation of retrenchment ratings		0.006*** (0.001)
Std. deviation of expansion ratings*Educational attainment	0.000 (0.000)	
Std. deviation of retrenchment ratings*Educational attainment		0.000* (0.000)
Political Interest		
Age	-0.000** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Female	0.012* (0.006)	-0.036*** (0.007)
Educational attainment	0.014** (0.004)	-0.024*** (0.005)
Income	0.007*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.509*** (0.018)	0.541*** (0.020)
Observations	12,046	12,044
R-squared	0.070	0.067

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

	(1) Unemployment vs. pension	(2) Childcare vs. pension	(3) Means-tested university education
Rating expansion element of the tradeoff	0.009*** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.002)	0.006*** (0.002)
Rating retrenchment element of the tradeoff	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
Rating expansion element of the tradeoff*Educational attainment	0.002*** (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
Rating retrenchment element of the tradeoff*Educational attainment	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)
Political interest	0.031** (0.010)	0.006 (0.011)	0.045*** (0.009)
Educational attainment	0.006 (0.012)	0.016 (0.012)	-0.104*** (0.011)
Age	-0.006*** (0.000)	-0.009*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.000)
Female	-0.075*** (0.016)	-0.101*** (0.018)	-0.096*** (0.015)
Income	-0.020*** (0.003)	-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.026*** (0.003)
Country-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.719*** (0.053)	2.008*** (0.055)	2.384*** (0.050)
Observations	11,787	8,828	11,787
R-squared	0.209	0.255	0.120

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10