

# **Partisan Preference Divides Regarding Welfare Chauvinism and Welfare Populism – Appealing only to Radical Right Voters or Beyond?**

**Matthias Enggist**  
[enggist@ipz.uzh.ch](mailto:enggist@ipz.uzh.ch)

**Silja Häusermann**  
[silja.haeusermann@ipz.uzh.ch](mailto:silja.haeusermann@ipz.uzh.ch)

*University of Zurich*

## Abstract

Welfare chauvinism and welfare populism as defining features of radical right parties' welfare stances have become challenges to the welfare state as we know it. However, in order to understand the extent of these challenges to the welfare state, i.e. how these claims are likely to change welfare politics, it is essential to study the attitudes of the entire party spectrum, to find out whether welfare chauvinism and welfare populism attract voters beyond the radical right and, if so, which party voters. Results based on original public opinion data in eight Western European countries show that, contrary to assumptions in many public and academic debates, welfare chauvinism and welfare populism divide the right more than the left. Electorates of not only green but also social democratic and radical left parties are the most sceptical about discriminating between the welfare rights of natives and immigrants, even if this is done in a fiscally expansive way. Voters of most mainstream right parties are at best moderately welfare populist and welfare chauvinist, leaving the fervent support of radical right voters for welfare chauvinism and populism unmatched by any other electorate. While preferences for welfare chauvinism are strongly polarized, no partisan choice has clearly established itself in opposition to welfare populism. These findings have important implications for the strategic situation of left parties and for understanding how welfare chauvinism and welfare populism can challenge welfare states.

Word count: 8424

## Acknowledgements

Previous versions of this project were presented at the ESPAnet conference 2021 and the SPSA Annual Congress 2022 both held online. We are grateful for valuable input from participants at these occasions and especially for comments from Alexandre Afonso, Macarena Ares, Gianna Maria Eick, Benjamin Leruth, Michael Pinggera, Femke Roosma and Sven Schreurs.

## 1. Introduction

The politics of welfare state reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfold under dramatically changed political circumstances than those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While 20<sup>th</sup> century politics were shaped by working class mobilization and class conflict, the post-2000 landscape of welfare politics is affected by the strong politicization of a “second dimension” cleavage dividing both voters and political parties along the lines of more liberal-universalist vs. traditional-particularist programmatic policy preferences (Beramendi et al., 2015; Kriesi et al., 2008). Issues such as gender equality, supranational integration, and immigration have become increasingly central to political competition and have – at least in some contexts – sidelined or reframed questions of economic equity and market-correction that structured the politics of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hall 2020). While the predominant cleavage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was essentially a class cleavage opposing the left, as the traditional allies of the working class, to the right, as the representatives of capital, the new cleavage is most clearly underpinned socio-structurally by age and education level (Bornschieer, 2010; Dancygier and Walter, 2015) and has the potential to create divides not only between but also within the left and the right.

The liberal-universalist agenda of new left/green parties has clearly left its mark on welfare state politics, for example in terms of increasing concerns for gender equality in social rights (e.g. Häusermann, 2010). In recent times, however, it really are two forms of welfare state opposition, promoted by the radical right and very much in line with the conservative-particularistic pole of this second dimension, that have the potential to challenge the very nature of Western European welfare states (see also the introduction of this special issue). These are *welfare chauvinism*, that is the demand to exclude non-citizens from social benefits and services (Eick and Larsen 2021), and *welfare populism*, that is opposition against a welfare state allegedly serving liberal elites and lazy segments of the society.

Both of these newer forms of welfare state opposition do not necessarily question the objectives of the welfare state, such as redistribution or the insurance of the native working population against economic insecurity. Welfare chauvinism appeals “to redistributive social closure on the basis of the deservingness criterion of identity” (Abts et al., 2021) while welfare populism (de Koster et al. 2013, van Hootehem et al. 2021) or “economic populism” (Derks 2004) emphasizes the “unintended dysfunctions and purported unfairness of the distributive system” (van Hootehem et al. 2021: 128). It accuses contemporary welfare institutions of producing rather than reducing economic injustices by shifting resources from deserving “makers” (hardworking producers and taxpayers) to lazy and undeserving “takers” (Rathgeb

2021, Derks 2006). Welfare populists argue that welfare institutions in developed democracies tend to benefit on the one hand undeserving “welfare scroungers” and on the other hand well-paid civil servants rather than those really in need and deserving of support.

While research agrees on both of these new types of welfare state opposition being key appeals of radical right parties in the field of welfare policies (e.g. de Koster et al. 2013), it has also observed that ideas of non-deservingness of immigrants may be supported beyond the mere electorates of these parties (Cappelen and Midtbø, 2016). Similarly, skepticism about negative moral and economic consequences of the welfare state seem also to resonate beyond voters of the radical right (van Oorschot 2010; van Oorschot et al. 2012). Both socially conservative forms of welfare opposition have been shown to be particularly relevant among working-class voters, who were long thought of as staunch defenders of the welfare state and have traditionally been a stronghold of left parties. Among other things these findings have sparked – so far unresolved – debates to what degree welfare chauvinism and welfare populism may divide especially left parties and electorates (Mewes and Mau 2012, Heizmann et al. 2018, van der Waal et al. 2010). Moreover, it remains unclear whether the traditionally more welfare-sceptic mainstream right party electorates also embrace these new forms of welfare opposition based on socially conservative, particularistic motivations rather than on neoliberal grounds or whether these divide electorates of radical and mainstream right parties. To understand how and to what extent welfare populism and welfare chauvinism are serious challenges to contemporary welfare states, it is vital to understand who else besides radical right voters is susceptible to particularistic forms of welfare opposition. This is what we want to shed light upon in this paper.

We go beyond previous literature in two ways. First, while literature so far has primarily focused on the welfare chauvinist and populist preferences of radical right voters (laudable exceptions are de Koster et al. 2013 and Koning 2017), we broaden our perspective and focus equally on the stances of other party electorates towards the immigration-welfare-nexus and welfare populism. Second, and specifically with regard to welfare chauvinism, we argue that the *differential treatment of immigrants and natives with regard to social rights can take different forms*, depending on whether it emphasizes generous rights of natives or the exclusion of immigrants. In other words: the question of including or excluding immigrants interacts with voters’ positions regarding etatism, fiscal policy and welfare generosity more generally. To take that into account we differentiate between two forms of welfare chauvinism, namely *welfare protection* (discriminating between immigrants and natives by protecting or expanding

benefits for natives) – which should particularly appeal to the left – and *welfare exclusion* (discriminating between immigrants and natives by excluding immigrants from welfare benefits and services) – which should particularly appeal to the mainstream right. We ask whether welfare chauvinism and welfare populism have the potential to divide left and right party electorates. Are welfare populist and welfare chauvinist preferences limited to voters of the radical right or do they appeal to mainstream right electorates too? And are even parts of left-wing voters susceptible to these new criticisms of the welfare state?

We answer these questions based on newly collected public opinion data in eight Western European countries (Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain), which allow us to measure the policy positions voters advocate. We descriptively map electorates' support levels for welfare exclusion and welfare protection as well as for welfare populism.

We show that contrary to many assumptions in the public debate and literature, welfare chauvinism and welfare populism divide the right more than the left. Left-wing electorates clearly support welfare rights for immigrants and are opposed to a discrimination even if it comes in the form of welfare expansion exclusively for natives. The political right is much more divided regarding welfare chauvinism: while radical right voters support not only the exclusion of immigrants from welfare but also strong welfare protection for natives, moderate right electorates occupy a middle position between left and radical right electorates. Also, concerning support for welfare populism we observe the radical right electorates to constitute the clear welfare populist spear head, with differences between other party family electorates being comparatively small. Thus, these new forms of particularistic welfare opposition most strongly divide the radical right and the left

## **2. Welfare Populism and Two Types of Welfare Chauvinism**

So far, the bulk of the literature on immigration as a challenge to the welfare state conceptualizes this challenge in terms of the extent to which voters, parties and governments engage in and support welfare chauvinism as a “new” social policy paradigm. Welfare chauvinism tackles the key question entailed in the newly salient, socio-cultural cleavage between universalism and particularism head-on: How and under what conditions should social

policy support all members of a welfare state equally or differently? Should social rights be stratified according to immigrant status or not? Welfare chauvinism is thus conceptualized as a unidimensional concept and the question becomes focused on the extent and intensity of support to this claim. However, when looking more closely at the definitions of welfare chauvinism, we detect at least two manifestations of the concept with highly different implications in terms of policy design: On the one hand, welfare chauvinism is conceptualized as the combination of support for a big and generous welfare state, as well as support for prioritizing and privileging welfare provision for natives as opposed to immigrants. De Koster et al. (2013: 6), e.g. explicitly label welfare chauvinism as implying “egalitarian views on the one hand, and restrictive views pertaining to the deservingness of immigrants on the other hand”. Most importantly, by focusing on the generous rights of natives, this conceptualization of welfare chauvinism emphasizes the “left-wing economic attitudes to redistribution” (Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016: 301) among welfare chauvinist voters, and the fact that welfare chauvinist parties occupy a “traditional social-democratic or left-wing ideological space on the socioeconomic dimension” (Careja et al., 2016: 436). The distinctive and novel aspect of welfare chauvinism in this conceptualization refers to the combination of these pro-welfare, fiscally expansive positions with “anti-immigration right-wing positions on the socio-cultural dimension” (Careja et al., 2016: 436). It is this statist, pro-welfare component of welfare chauvinism that suggests its appeal even among the traditional left.

However, there is a second, more sparse definition of welfare chauvinism, which focuses more explicitly on the exclusive aspect of the political stance, that is the partial or full exclusion of immigrants from the welfare state. As in the first formulation of the concept, this second conceptualization implies a differential, unequal treatment of natives and immigrants by the welfare state. However, its focus lies on the exclusive and restrictive dimensions of welfare chauvinist reforms (Eick and Larsen, 2021; Heizmann et al., 2018; Mewes and Mau, 2013; Van der Waal et al., 2013), i.e. on welfare retrenchment based on the (deservingness) criterion of immigration or citizenship. Empirical studies on actual welfare chauvinist reforms tend to focus mostly on such reforms reducing benefits for immigrants. These reforms do not necessarily involve overall strong support for a generous welfare state or for expansive fiscal policies in favor of natives. Hence, taking the two understandings of welfare chauvinism seriously suggests that while there is agreement on immigrant exclusion, there is a quite massive continuum within welfare chauvinism along a *second* dimension linked to support for

fiscal expansion vs. austerity, that is whether discriminating immigrants has the goal to retrench welfare for immigrants or to protect the welfare of natives.

This differentiation of the concept of welfare chauvinism suggests that when conceptualizing the politics of the welfare chauvinism paradigm and when measuring preferences for welfare chauvinism, we must consider both dimensions of preference differentiation jointly – the socioeconomic and the socio-cultural dimensions. Such an analytical differentiation becomes especially important if the goal – as in this paper – is to assess whether discriminating immigrants might be attractive to voters beyond the radical right. It should be mostly the fiscally expansive type of welfare chauvinism that could attract support among the left, whereas we would expect primarily the fiscally restrictive type to appeal to mainstream right voters.

We call *welfare protection* a strategy of expansive welfare chauvinism. The focus here is on protecting the welfare provision for native citizens rather than disentiitling immigrants. If people believe that welfare for immigrants has opportunity costs, they might fear that a welfare state catering to a growing number of immigrants could exert pressure on welfare benefits and services for natives. This might lead some voters to promote the discrimination of immigrants in order to protect generous welfare for natives. Thereby, the motivation for welfare protection is not welfare opposition per se. To the contrary, welfare protection has the goal to preserve and strengthen a generous system of social protection for native/national members of a community of solidarity that should be shielded but to do so readily accept a discrimination and a relative (to natives) disentitlement of immigrants.

In contrast, the focus of *welfare exclusion* is on the immigrants, but in a fiscally restrictive way. The underlying reform direction is one of welfare state retrenchment, notably at the cost of immigrants. Such reforms can happen, for example, by cutting social assistance benefits for refugees to a mere minimum, below the level of “regular” social assistance. Motivations for welfare exclusion can be either the desire to punish immigrants, to decrease a country’s attractiveness for immigrants or just support for welfare retrenchment – which is relatively easy to achieve at the expense of immigrants.

Similar to both types of welfare chauvinism, welfare populism describes a particular critique of the welfare state that does not stem from a fundamental opposition to redistribution, to social insurance or to egalitarianism within the boundaries of a community perceived deserving, but is strongly based on the idea that there exist differences in the deservingness of various groups

to receive welfare benefits and therefore legitimate reasons to make welfare conditional on specific recipient characteristics. It deviates from the narrower concept of welfare chauvinism on the one hand by differentiating not only between undeserving immigrants and deserving natives but also by highlighting deservingness gaps within natives. On the other hand, it blames welfare institutions for not directing welfare to those perceived deserving. Welfare populism is can be based on the perception that the actual design of welfare institutions is dysfunctional and unfair because it involves problems of moral hazard (i.e. by encouraging welfare recipients to stay on benefits rather than becoming self-reliant) (Likki and Staerklé 2015), and because it wastes money both on “lazy, undeserving welfare scroungers” as well as on an ineffective, rent-seeking “welfare industry” that primarily ensures “well-paid and comfortable jobs for self-interested civil servants” (de Koster et al. 2013: 6).

### **3. Divides within the Left, Divides within the Right**

Our goal is to study the preferences of party electorates regarding welfare populism and welfare chauvinism to answer several questions: what are the key divides among and between the Left and the Right on the voter level? Do voters of different parties converge on exclusionary or populist policies as much as parts of the literature would suggest? Is the radical right the only welfare populist force or is there potential for a broader welfare populist coalition? We discuss our expectations first with regard to the challenge of immigration politicization and then with regard to the welfare populist challenge to the welfare state.

#### **Immigration Challenge to the Welfare State**

Our expectations regarding the positioning of different voter groups are informed by studies on the determinants of welfare chauvinist vs. universalist attitudes, by the literature on the “liberal dilemma” within the Left, as well as by the literature on the reconfiguration of mainstream right parties in the wake of the rise of second dimension politics.

The literature on attitudes towards social policy and immigration has provided ample evidence that attitudes towards welfare inclusion vs. exclusion of immigrants are strongly stratified along socio-economic status, education levels (Mewes and Mau, 2012; Reeskens and van Oorschot, 2012; Van der Waal et al., 2010) as well as indicators of subjective relative deprivation which are particularly prevalent in the skilled working class and lower middle class

(Heizmann et al., 2018). This stratification along indicators of social class seems to suggest a divide within the broad electorate of the Left, given that this electorate today consists of a large coalition of working- and educated middle class voters (Beramendi et al., 2015; Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015). The expectation of a divide within the left electorate is amplified by findings of several studies that show just how prevalent anti-immigrant deservingness perceptions have become in the democracies of Western Europe even beyond the lower social strata: Van Oorschot (2006) shows that immigrants are perceived to be the least deserving group when it comes to various dimensions of deservingness, such as reciprocity, need, identity or attitudinal alignment. In Norway, a clear majority of respondents indicated resentment regarding the amount of welfare benefits distributed to immigrants (Cappelen and Midtbø, 2016) and Marx and Naumann (2018) have shown in-group favoritism to rise across different social classes and political camps during the German “refugee crisis”. Moreover, Reeskens and van Oorschot (2012) have shown that those voters supportive of the most redistributive, fiscally expansive policies also have the most anti-immigrant distributive preferences. Based on all this evidence, the prevalence of resentment against social benefits for immigrants suggests that voters of left-wing parties may well be divided when it comes to the inclusion-exclusion dimension, especially since voters of the left-libertarian and green parties are distinctively the most universalistically minded voters in the political spectrum.

Moreover, the literature on the “new liberal dilemma” has argued that there is also an “objective / structural” dilemma the Left confronts, because an open and heterogeneous society would be incompatible with a generous welfare state, for fiscal reasons on the one hand, and because multiculturalism and diversity would undermine the legitimacy of solidarity on the other hand (Breznau and Eger, 2016; Eger, 2010; Schmidt-Catran and Spies, 2016). Indeed, Schmitt and Teney (2019) show that immigrants tend to be excluded from welfare programs more strongly in countries where left-wing parties have been represented more strongly in government, suggesting that left-wing parties (and potentially also voters) indeed seem to feel compelled to choose between either immigrant inclusion or welfare generosity.

In light of this literature, it is not surprising that much of the scholarly debate and of the political discussion suggests that the inclusion-exclusion divide cuts right through the Left, with green voters on one end, supporting immigrants’ welfare rights, and radical left voters on the other end, supporting welfare protection. The expected positioning of social democratic voters in this question is largely open, with potential variation between countries.



Based on both attitudinal research and studies on the transformation of the mainstream right, one would expect a similarly divided field on the Right. On the one hand, the combination of particularist working class votes on the radical right (which has been shown extensively to support exclusionary policies towards immigrants), small business owners and more highly skilled managers voting on the mainstream right (e.g. Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015) makes it clear that at the level of individual voters, attitudes are likely to spread widely between support for immigrant inclusion in the welfare state, welfare exclusion and welfare protection. While a national-conservative position would tend towards welfare exclusion, business milieus and market-liberal forces traditionally favored labor-market based immigration as a means of expanding labor supply (Gidron and Ziblatt, 2019; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). Discriminating between immigrants' and natives' welfare rights could be perceived as reducing the attractiveness of a country for immigration. Our expectations for the voter level are further bolstered by recent findings that government participation of radical and mainstream right parties on immigrant welfare rights differs markedly (Römer et al. 2022).

This discussion of existing studies on attitudes and programmatic positions suggests that we should expect divides both among the Left and the Right. We thus arrive at the following two hypotheses:

H1: Welfare chauvinism (especially welfare protection) divides the Left between new left/green and traditional/radical left party electorates.

H2: Welfare chauvinism divides the Right between radical right and mainstream right party electorates.

## **Welfare Populism Challenge to the Welfare State**

How could the preference configuration look like with regard to welfare populism? Previous research has demonstrated criticism of the negative and unintended moral and social consequences of the welfare state to be more prevalent among right-wing than among left-wing voters (van Oorschot 2010). Similarly, support for welfare conditionality is decidedly higher among people identifying as having a right rather than a left ideology (van Oorschot 2000, 2006).

What could lead us to expect divides on welfare populism not only between but also within ideological blocs? First, research on the socio-structural predictors of criticizing the workings

of the welfare state have – similar to welfare chauvinism – shown socio-economically vulnerable groups to be particularly welfare populist (van Oorschot 2010, van Oorschot et al. 2012). Van Hootegem et al. (2021) scrutinize this seemingly paradoxical relationship further and posit that “experiences of resentment” triggered by relative deprivation, a perceived loss of social status and general social distrust lead socio-economically weaker groups to accuse the welfare state of being unjust and to feel discontent with how it operates. We know from research on the relationship between social status perceptions and voting behavior that subjective experiences of declining relative status are a strong predictor of voting for radical rather than mainstream parties – especially but not only on the Right. It has been shown that feeling economically marginalized (a perception correlated with low social trust) is not only a predictor of right-wing but also left-wing populism (Gidron and Hall 2020). Moreover, Burgoon et al. (2019) have shown positional deprivation, that is if someone loses out economically compared to other societal groups, to increase the likelihood of both radical right and radical left voting.

Second, the socio-structural composition of different electorates might matter especially strongly on the left. As addressed above, the left electorate today consists of a coalition of both working- and new, educated middle-class voters with the latter especially having become the backbone of new left and green parties. A large part of this new, educated middle class are so-called socio-cultural professionals who often work in industries such as healthcare, education or welfare (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Thus, these are exactly the people who often work within the public sector or the welfare state and are criticized by welfare populists to be part of an ineffective system and to be part of the problem. We therefore should expect the new middle-class electorate of the left to be less welfare populist than their working-class voters.

For these reasons, we expect divides concerning welfare populism – as concerning welfare chauvinism – to exist not only between but also to cut across ideological blocs with voters of radical parties on the right and on the left to be more prone to be welfare populist than voters of right and especially left mainstream parties.

These theoretical expectations are also largely in line with what de Koster et al. (2013) have found in the Netherlands. Focusing on the radical right, they discovered that having welfare populist attitudes<sup>1</sup> predicts voting for the radical right party relative to mainstream right and

---

<sup>1</sup> Which in contrast to us, they however measured as a combination of egalitarian preferences and critical views pertaining to the functioning of the welfare state rather than only the latter.

new left parties but found no significant effect on differentiating between the radical right and an old/radical left vote.

H3: Welfare populism divides the Left between radical left and mainstream left party electorates.

H4: Welfare populism divides the Right between radical right and mainstream right party electorates.

## 4. Data and Methods

To measure the preferences of party electorates, we rely on individual-level data gathered in the context of the “welfarepriorities” project between October 2018 and February 2019 (Häusermann et al., 2020a). This survey was conducted in eight Western European countries which cover different welfare regimes, namely Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy and Spain. In cooperation with a professional survey institute (Bilendi), we fielded an online survey to about 1,500 respondents per country, leaving us with a total number of 12,129 completed interviews. Respondents were recruited from Bilendi’s or their partners’ online panels. To achieve representativity of our sample to the target population (a country’s adult population), quotas for age and gender (crossed) as well as education were introduced. To mitigate concerns stemming from the fact that the data is not based on a random sample, we compared distributions of different political variables to the corresponding distributions in the European Social Survey. We find that our sample is only slightly more politically interested and nearly identical concerning left-right self-identification, redistribution preferences and cultural attitudes than ESS samples in the respective countries. To further alleviate any remaining biases, we weighted the data by gender, age, education and vote shares at the last election before data gathering.<sup>2</sup>

While respondents in the survey were prompted to state their opinions on a wide range of social policy issues, in this paper we use novel questions to capture how the public would like immigrants to be in- or excluded in the welfare state and to capture welfare populist sentiments. Especially, these questions allow us to measure support for the two types of welfare chauvinism

---

<sup>2</sup> We asked respondents both to state which party they would vote for if there were an election to take place next week and which party they had voted for in the last election. While we use the former question to measure partisanship, the latter vote recall question is used to determine the weight.

we conceptualize. To distinguish between *welfare protection* and *welfare exclusion* we make use of two questions asking respondents whether they agree that the “government should expand social assistance benefits for country nationals only” (*welfare protection*) and whether they agree that the “government should reduce social assistance benefits only for non-nationals” (*welfare exclusion*). Respondents could indicate whether they “agree strongly”, “agree”, “disagree” or “disagree strongly” with these exclusive reform proposals. Before differentiating between welfare protection and welfare exclusion we use a simple additive index of these two questions to show support for welfare chauvinism that is independent of one’s position regarding welfare expansion or retrenchment.

We measure support for welfare populism using a question stating that “some people say that the money that goes into the welfare state in [Country] is used efficiently, while others say that a lot of money is wasted” and asking respondents what they think. Respondents could indicate their perception on a 10-point scale with the statements “a lot of money is wasted” and “the money is used efficiently” describing the extreme values.

To illustrate preferences of party electorates, we regress the dependent variables presented above on the party preference and control for age, gender and (in an aggregated analysis of party families) country fixed effects. Since the main goal is to descriptively show where different party electorates position themselves rather than to test causal hypotheses about the relationship between party vote and preferences, we refrain from adding further control variables such as education or income to not distort the picture. We show findings both by country as well as aggregated across all eight countries by showing average values for six party families. We differentiate three left (social democratic, green and radical left) and three right (radical right, conservative, liberal) party families (see appendix AX).

## **5. Party Political Divides Regarding Welfare Chauvinism**

For the discussion of the results, we start by focusing on party electorates’ preferences regarding welfare chauvinism. To test the hypotheses, the central questions we want to answer are whether there indeed exist divides within the left, that means between voters of social democratic, green, and radical left voters and whether there are divides between voters of radical and mainstream right parties. While we first conduct an analysis that aggregates all

eight countries, we then also repeat the analyses by country to detect potential divides *within* party families.

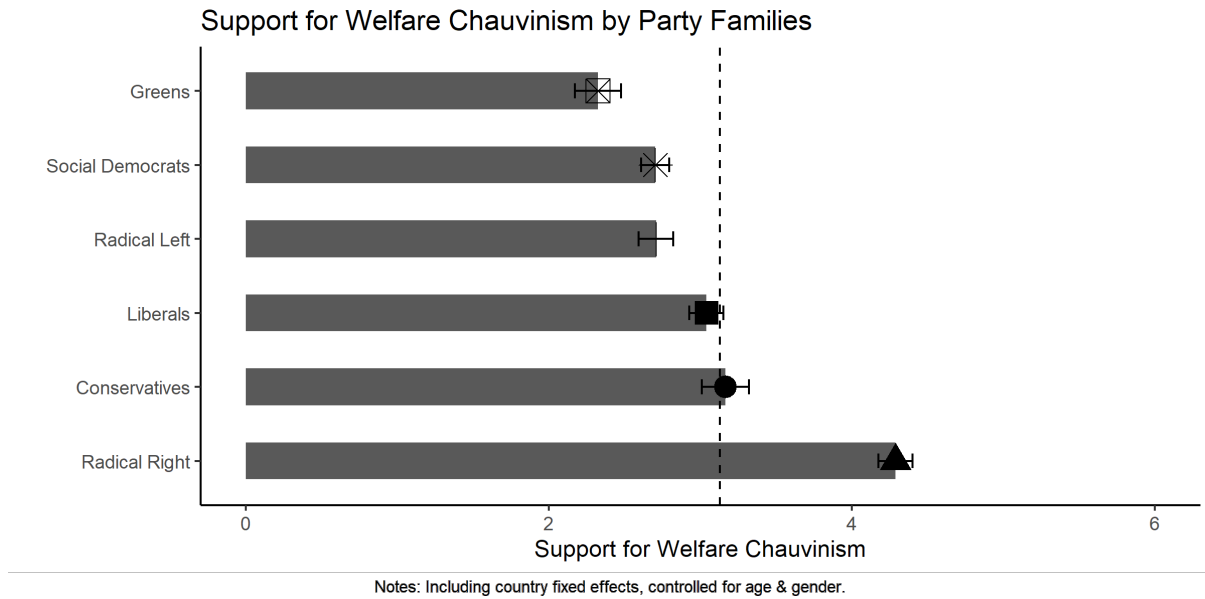


Figure 1: Predicted values of support for welfare chauvinism for voters of party families, aggregated over all countries.

Figure 1 presents the average positions of the voters of six party families concerning welfare chauvinism, that is the preference for an unequal treatment of immigrants' and natives' regarding their welfare rights. A value of 0 indicates complete rejection of any discrimination be it through the retrenchment of benefits for immigrants or through the expansion of benefits for natives exclusively. A value of 6 indicates strong agreement with both retrenching immigrants' and expanding natives' rights. The dashed line represents the average preference of citizens.

Figure 1 shows a clear left-right divide between party family electorates concerning welfare chauvinism. Looking towards the Left, we observe that all left party electorates are clearly and significantly less welfare chauvinist than average citizens. Already this finding suggests that narratives of left voters being strongly susceptible to welfare chauvinism barely bear empirical scrutiny. We find, however, that the voters of the three party families differ with regard to the radicality and homogeneity with which they reject welfare chauvinism. Green party voters on average oppose welfare chauvinism even more strongly than social democratic and radical left voters. These differences are largely in line with our expectations outlined in H1. Nevertheless, since all left party electorates have average values below the middle value of 3 and are clearly and significantly less supportive of discriminating between natives and immigrants than the

average citizen and any other party family electorate, welfare chauvinism does not seem to divide the left decisively.

On the right, we find a clear and not too surprising divide between the electorates of radical right parties on the one hand and of the two traditional, mainstream right party families (liberals and conservatives) on the other hand. Radical right voters are clearly different from the voters of their mainstream competitors in that they are the one and only party political pole strongly supporting the exclusion of immigrants from the welfare state. Electorates of both liberal and conservative parties, in contrast, are not as enthusiastic about differentiating welfare rights between immigrants and natives. They take the center position between left and radical right voters, being about as welfare chauvinist as the average citizen in a country. Although a small difference, we observe in accordance with Römer et al.'s (2022) finding that conservative parties are the most likely mainstream right party to cut immigrants' welfare rights, voters of the conservative party to be slightly but significantly more welfare chauvinist than voters of the liberal party family. Thus, while we find only limited evidence for a divided left, we find a clearly divided right.

Before hastily jumping to this conclusion, there are however two possibilities to consider. First, it might be that these findings emerge only in an aggregate analysis but that a divided left or an undivided right exist in several countries. Second, as outlined in the theory section, we might see a more divided left regarding welfare protection and a less divided right regarding welfare exclusion.

Starting with country-variation, we observe relative – although not full – consistency between our eight countries regarding an undivided left but a divided right (see Figure A1 in the appendix). Looking towards the left, Ireland stands out as the exceptional case where the voters of the radical left Sinn Féin occupy the welfare chauvinist pole and thereby stand in stark contrast to the other left party electorates in Ireland. Reasons for this divided left in Ireland could be both the absence of a radical right party and the issue of immigration so far being much less salient than in almost all other West European countries. Except in Ireland, we find no left party electorate clearly embracing welfare chauvinism. While few party electorates have preferences close to the average citizen, namely the voters of the Danish Social Democrats and of the Dutch radical left SP, a clear majority of left party electorates are relatively strongly opposed to discriminate between natives and immigrants.

On the right side of the political spectrum, we find the existence of a clear and strong divide regarding welfare chauvinism in at least five of our eight countries. In every country, where radical right parties have played a substantial role already at the time of our survey in 2018/2019, their voters occupy the clear pole in support of welfare chauvinism. Thus, in most countries the divide within the right plays out between radical right voters and voters of rather socially liberal mainstream right parties such as the Dutch D66, the Swedish Liberals, the Danish Liberal Alliance or the British Liberal Democrats, whose voters are among the stronger opponents of welfare chauvinism. Substantial differences emerge especially within the conservative / Christian-Democratic party family. Especially the electorates of the German CDU/CSU and the Dutch CDA are less welfare chauvinist than their average country citizens. In contrast, voters of the British Conservatives, of the Swedish Moderates or of the Spanish mainstream right parties are above average welfare chauvinist and in some cases endorse the discrimination of immigrants nearly as much as radical right electorates.

Now, we want to know whether the right is even divided about discrimination in a context of welfare retrenchment (welfare exclusion) and whether the left's opposition remains firm if discrimination would come in the context of additional welfare benefits for citizens (welfare protection). Predicted values of support for welfare exclusion and welfare protection are depicted in Figures 2 and 3 again by party family with the dashed line indicating average support in our sample. Starting with the reform proposal to cut back social assistance benefits exclusively for immigrants, we see that in line with the findings shown above there exists a clear left-right divide. On a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree), voters of all left party families cluster around a value of 1 or even below as in the case of green voters and are thus clearly opposed to welfare exclusion. Radical right voters are clearly supportive of this reform strategy (value of 1.9) with voters of both conservative and liberal parties being nearly in the middle of the scale (1.5) and matching the preferences of the average citizen. Thus, although mainstream right party electorates are on average not clearly opposed to welfare exclusion, they distinguish themselves strongly from radical right electorates also on the question of welfare exclusion.

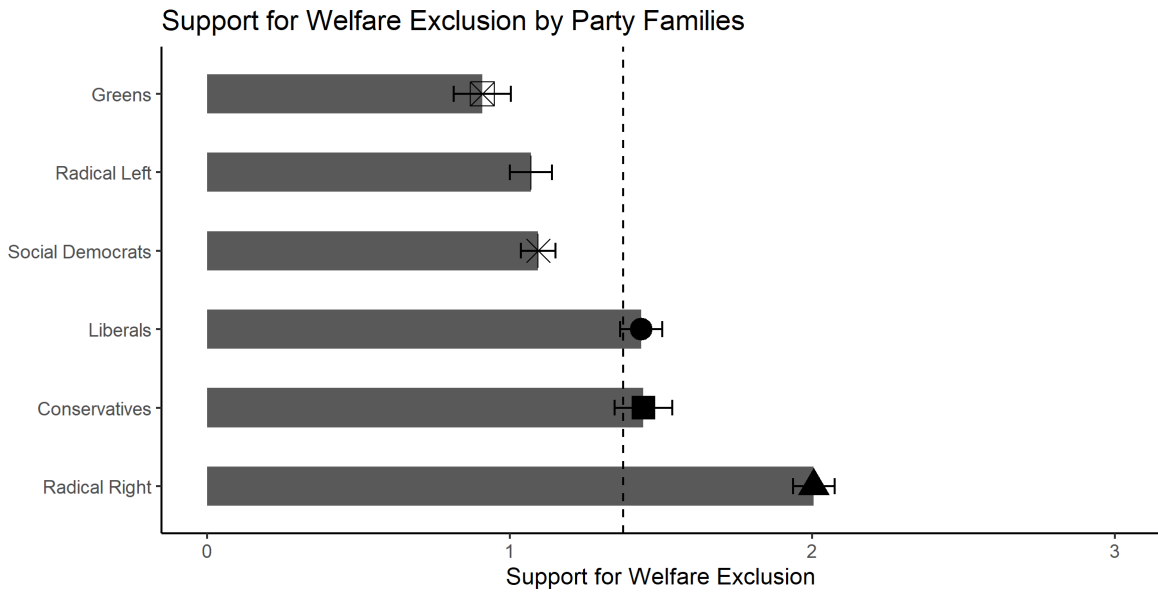
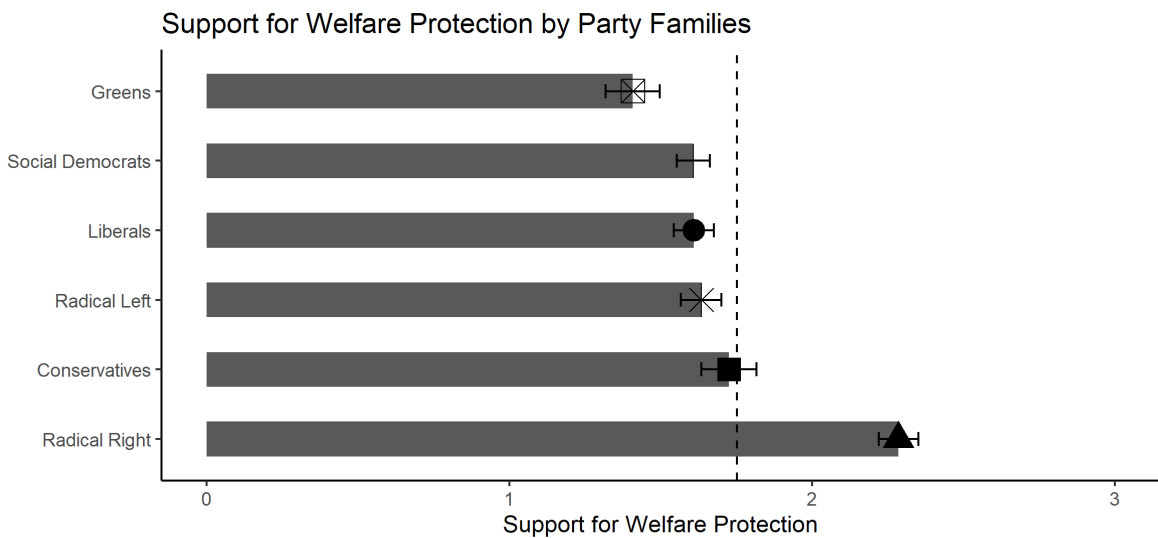


Figure 2: Predicted values of support for welfare exclusion, by party families.



Notes: Including country fixed effects, controlled for age & gender.  
 Notes: Including country fixed effects, controlled for age & gender.

Figure 3: Predicted values of support for welfare protection, by party families.

Preferences for welfare protection are directly comparable since support for this principle was indicated on the same scale. We can discern that across the entire electorate, expanding welfare for natives is generally more popular than retrenching immigrants' welfare rights. Looking at the configuration of party family electorates, Figure 3 shows that in line with welfare exclusion, welfare protection is primarily promoted by radical right voters. They are not only in favor of taking away immigrants' welfare rights but also strongly endorse expanding welfare for natives exclusively. Again, conservative electorates on average share



the preference of average voters, while liberal party voters tend clearly towards being barely enthusiastic supporters of welfare protection, thereby making the divide within the right even bigger for welfare protection than for welfare exclusion. Similarly, the general popularity of welfare protection is hardly driven by left voters. Voters of all three left party families are significantly more opposed than the average citizens. This is remarkable and anything but obvious given that the statement used to operationalize welfare protection asks about welfare expansion for a large share of the population. Nevertheless, left party voters are no more supportive of such a reform than liberal voters and significantly more opposed than conservative voters. As in the case of welfare exclusion, it is green voters who are least tempted to discriminate immigrants in order to get more welfare for natives and thereby constitute the pole in opposition towards welfare protection. Although the different left electorates differ slightly in the degree of opposition, these findings unveil no real divide between supporters and opponents of welfare protection – even though we have expected this form of welfare chauvinism to be most appealing to parts of the left. The narrative of the left being divided on the issue of immigrants’ welfare rights remains exaggerated in light of these findings.

## **6. Party Political Divides Regarding Welfare Populism**

With regard to support for welfare populism, we are again primarily interested whether welfare populism divides the left and the right. Are certain left electorates part of a welfare populist coalition? Have mainstream right electorates adopted a populist criticism of the welfare state too or does welfare populism remain a unique feature of the radical right? Does the party political configuration with regard to welfare populism correspond to the configuration we observed with regard to welfare chauvinism? Thus, does our empirical evidence correspond to welfare populism being “a radical expression of welfare chauvinism” (Derks 2004: 519)?

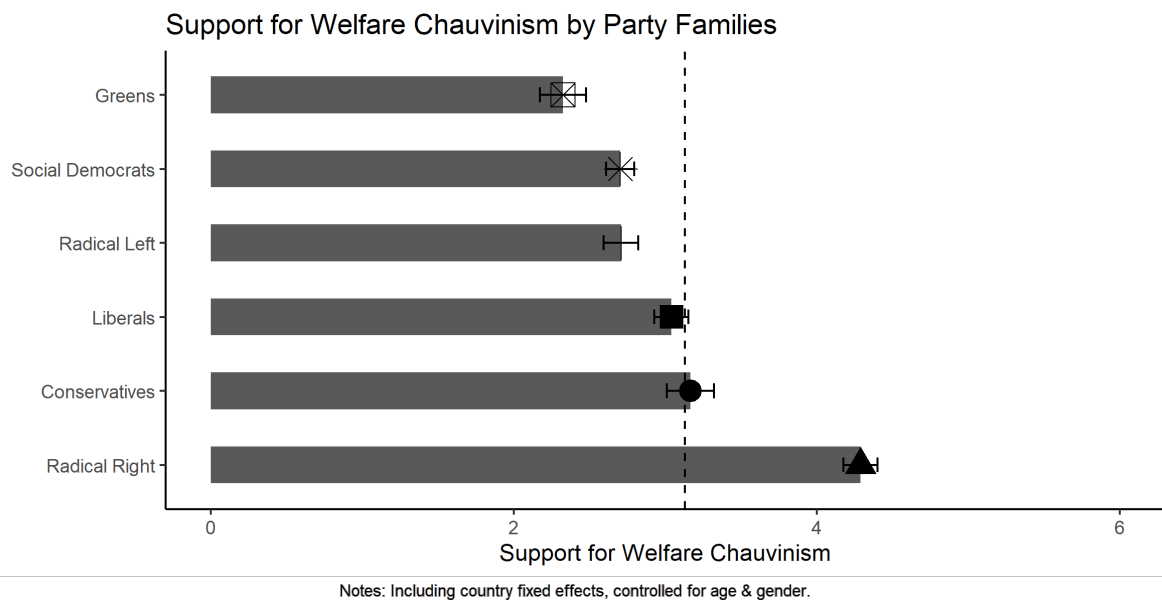


Figure 4: Predicted values of support for welfare populism, by party families.

Figure 4 shows predicted values of support for welfare populism by party family voters on a scale from 0 (“money that goes into the welfare state is used efficiently”) to 9 (“a lot of money that goes into the welfare state is wasted”). The dashed line represents the average value in our sample.<sup>3</sup> On the left, we find that welfare populism appeals slightly (but significantly) more strongly to radical left than to green and especially social democratic voters. Radical left voters perceive about as much as mainstream right voters that a substantial share of money going into the welfare state is wasted rather than used efficiently. Not surprisingly the strongest opponents of welfare populism can be found among the mainstream left. It is electorates of social democratic parties which in five of our eight countries (see Figure A2 in the appendix) build the backbone of support behind defending the working of current welfare institutions. Whereas green voters fight most strongly against the discrimination of immigrants, social democratic voters are on average most opposed to a populist criticism of the functioning of Western European welfare states.

Despite these small differences on the left, the real dividing line concerning welfare populism runs between voters of the radical right and all other party families, leading again primarily to a divided right. Radical right voters are far more welfare populist than voters of conservative

<sup>3</sup> Note that respondents who indicated to abstain in elections or would vote for other parties that we could not classify into one of the party families are used for the calculation of the average too. The fact that these people seem to be disproportionately welfare populist explains why the electorates of all party families except the radical right display subpar values on our welfare populist variable.

or liberal parties and constitute the welfare populist pole in every country where they exist except Denmark. In contrast, mainstream right electorates are only slightly more welfare populist than mainstream left parties. A clear left-right divide can only be observed in Sweden, whereas in many countries differences between the mainstream right and left are relatively small.

Do these findings mean that welfare populism as a paradigm poses no serious threat to the welfare state because only electorates of radical right parties stand out as being particularly welfare populist? Not necessarily so. Admittedly, the preference configuration suggests that radical right parties monopolize the role as the original, authentic welfare populist party political alternative. If we do not only focus on relative configurations but also on absolute support, however, we observe that agreeing to the welfare populist statement is generally quite appealing to respondents. On the scale from 0 to 9, average responses in all countries tend at least slightly to the welfare populist response option (with country averages between 4.6 in Denmark and 6.4 in Spain). All party electorates except the Danish Left have averages of 4.5 or more and therefore exhibit at least some concerns that the welfare state wastes a considerable amount of money.

Comparing the party political configuration of welfare populism and welfare chauvinism, these are similar at first sight. Radical right electorates constitute the clear and uncontested pole in favor of welfare populism and excluding immigrants from the welfare state. Mainstream left parties populate the opposite pole with the mainstream right being in between. Nevertheless, the correlation between welfare populist attitudes and preferences towards the inclusion / exclusion of immigrants in the welfare state is at best moderate.<sup>4</sup> Besides the moderately welfare populist but not welfare chauvinist position of the radical left, this relatively low correlation might be due to the fact that welfare populism attracts broader support than welfare chauvinism. Only 13% of welfare chauvinists<sup>5</sup> are opposed to welfare populism<sup>6</sup>. Of welfare populists<sup>7</sup>, however, more than a third of respondents are decidedly opposed to welfare chauvinism. This shows that support for welfare populism (in our paper operationalized as the

---

<sup>4</sup> Depending on the measure of welfare chauvinist attitudes (i.e. support for which type of welfare chauvinism) we use, Pearson's correlation coefficient varies between 0.14 and 0.24.

<sup>5</sup> Measured as people who agree to both welfare exclusion and welfare protection or like one more than they dislike the other.

<sup>6</sup> That means they indicate a value between 0 and 3.

<sup>7</sup> Having a value of 6 or higher.

perception that a lot of money in the welfare state is wasted) does not necessarily require an identification with the nativist core of the radical right's welfare stances.

## **7. Discussion**

The politicization of a divide between liberal-universalist and traditional-particularist preferences has increasingly become relevant and salient also in the realm of welfare politics, particularly in the form of two challenges to the welfare state: welfare populism and the politicization of an alleged influx of immigrants into Western European welfare states.

In this paper, we have investigated how these two challenges to the welfare state are politicized with regard to partisanship. We find that not surprisingly, electorates of radical right parties are the strongest supporters of any kind of welfare chauvinism and welfare populism. The radical right's fervent support for these particularistic forms of welfare opposition is not matched by many other electorates with only the voters of few mainstream right parties clearly endorsing the welfare exclusion of immigrants. As expected, we thus observe both welfare chauvinism and populism to strongly differentiate voters of the radical and most mainstream right parties – with only some conservative party electorates such as the Swedish Moderates or the British Conservatives having adopted welfare chauvinist preferences. In contrast to this divide among the right, we find however neither welfare populism nor welfare chauvinism to strongly divide left party voters. Voters of green parties show most aversion to discriminate between immigrants and natives and mainstream left electorates are least susceptible to welfare populist criticisms of the welfare state. Although less pronounced, even voters of radical left parties have significantly fewer sympathies for these particularistic forms of welfare opposition than average citizens. Even welfare protection, that is expanding welfare for natives exclusively – the welfare chauvinist option that should appeal most strongly to the left – receives not above average support by any of the left party family electorates. Thus, left voters of all party families seem to prioritize their inclusive preferences regarding immigrant welfare over their general preference for welfare expansion.

This remarkable dislike of welfare protection among left electorates implies that the strategic situation of most left parties at the immigration-welfare nexus is less complicated than often perceived. Despite welfare chauvinist attitudes being prevalent among the former core electorate of left parties, that is working class voters and despite the “new liberal dilemma”-discourse denying the compatibility of welfare and immigration, our findings show that in order

to remain congruent with their current electorates, left parties should take a stand for immigrants' welfare rights. If anything, the positioning towards especially welfare chauvinism poses more strategic problems for some mainstream right parties whose electorates have more ambiguous stances.

The existence of this particular configuration has important implications for the politics of welfare chauvinism. Specifically, it contradicts claims that left and radical right parties might coalesce to promote welfare protection, that is a generous welfare state catering exclusively to natives. Our finding of the general unpopularity of such reforms among average left party voters makes this option less viable than often assumed. In contrast, if welfare chauvinist reforms are viable, they should be the outcome of coalitions between radical right and some mainstream right parties, whose voters in some countries (but not others) are rather supportive of especially welfare exclusion. Despite generally higher public support for welfare protection than for welfare exclusion, this means that the latter might be the more viable of the two welfare chauvinist reform strategies.

Comparing preferences for welfare chauvinism and welfare populism, there exist similarities in the party political configurations with both preferences most strongly dividing radical right and mainstream left (in the case of welfare chauvinism especially green) electorates. Even though it might look so at first glance, this however does not necessarily mean that support for welfare chauvinism and welfare populism strongly overlap. While preferences on welfare chauvinism (especially welfare exclusion but less so also welfare protections) are strongly and truly polarized along party political lines, welfare populism divides electorates less. While left electorates constitute a clear opposition to discriminating between natives and immigrants' welfare rights, welfare populism seems to resonate among a big and politically diverse share of the population. Even among mainstream left electorates which display the lowest level of welfare populist attitudes, a majority of voters perceives that a lot of money in the welfare state is wasted rather than used efficiently. On the one hand, this widespread perception suggests that a particularistic critique of the welfare state that does not only appeal to nativism but questions the functionality and fairness of current welfare institutions more broadly, might appeal to a wider segment of society and sparks less of opposition from left-universalist voters than welfare chauvinist discourses. More research, however, is required to investigate whether other, more concrete measures of welfare populist preferences (e.g. asking about whether welfare states tend to benefit well-paid civil servants rather than those in need) would lead to similar conclusions.



## 8. References

- Abts K, Mulle ED, Kessel S van, et al. (2021) The Welfare Agenda of the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe: Combining Welfare Chauvinism, Producerism and Populism\*. *Swiss Political Science Review* 27(1): 21–40.
- Beramendi P, Häusermann S, Kitschelt H, et al. (2015) *The Politics of Advanced Capitalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bornschieer S (2010) *Cleavage Politics and the Populist Right*. Temple University Press. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9498> (accessed 15 August 2019).
- Breznau N and Eger MA (2016) Immigrant presence, group boundaries, and support for the welfare state in Western European societies. *Acta Sociologica* 59(3): 195–214.
- Burgoon B, van Noort S, Rooduijn M, Underhill G (2019) Positional deprivation and support for radical right and radical left parties. *Economic Policy* 34(97): 49–93.
- Cappelen C and Midtbø T (2016) Intra-EU Labour Migration and Support for the Norwegian Welfare State. *European Sociological Review* 32(6): 691–703.
- Careja R, Elmelund-Præstekær C, Baggesen Klitgaard M, et al. (2016) Direct and Indirect Welfare Chauvinism as Party Strategies: An Analysis of the Danish People’s Party. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 39(4): 435–457.
- Dancygier RM and Walter S (2015) Globalization, labor market risks, and class cleavages. In: *The Politics of Advanced Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 133–56.
- De Koster W, Achterberg P and Van der Waal J (2013) The new right and the welfare state: The electoral relevance of welfare chauvinism and welfare populism in the Netherlands. *International Political Science Review* 34(1): 3–20.
- Derks, A. (2004) Are the Underprivileged Really That Economically Leftist? Attitudes towards Economic Redistribution and the Welfare State in Flanders. *European Journal of Political Research* 43(4): 509–521.
- Derks, A. (2006) Populism and the ambivalence of egalitarianism: How do the underprivileged reconcile a right-wing party preference with their socio-economic attitudes? *World Political Science Review* 2(3): 175–200.
- Eger MA (2010) Even in Sweden: The Effect of Immigration on Support for Welfare State Spending. *European Sociological Review* 26(2). Oxford Academic: 203–217.
- Eick GM and Larsen CA (2021) Welfare chauvinism across benefits and services. *Journal of European Social Policy*. SAGE Publications Ltd: 09589287211023047.
- Gidron N and Hall PA (2020) Populism as a Problem of Social Integration. *Comparative Political Studies* 53(7): 1027–1059.
- Gidron N and Ziblatt D (2019) Center-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1): 17–35.
- Gingrich J and Häusermann S (2015) The decline of the working-class vote, the reconfiguration of the welfare support coalition and consequences for the welfare state. *Journal of European Social Policy* 25(1): 50–75.
- Hall PA (2020) How Growth Strategies Evolve in the Developed Democracies. In: *Growth and Welfare in Advanced Capitalist Economies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Häusermann S (2010) *The Politics of Welfare State Reform in Continental Europe: Modernization in Hard Times*. Cambridge University Press.
- Häusermann S and Kriesi H (2015) What do voters want? Dimensions and configurations in individual-level preferences and party choice. *The politics of advanced capitalism*. Citeseer: 202–230.

- Häusermann S, Ares M, Enggist M, et al. (2020) Mass public attitudes on social policy priorities and reforms in Western Europe. WELFAREPRIORITIES dataset 2020.: 73.
- Heizmann B, Jedinger A and Perry A (2018) Welfare Chauvinism, Economic Insecurity and the Asylum Seeker “Crisis”. *Societies* 8(3): 83.
- Kitschelt H and McGann AJ (1997) *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. University of Michigan Press.
- Kriesi H, Grande E, Lachat R, et al. (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*.
- Likki T, and Staerklé C (2015) Welfare support in Europe: Interplay of dependency culture beliefs and meritocratic contexts. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 27(1): 138-153.
- Marx P and Naumann E (2018) Do right-wing parties foster welfare chauvinistic attitudes? A longitudinal study of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ in Germany. *Electoral Studies*. DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2018.01.011.
- Mewes J and Mau S (2012) Unraveling working-class welfare chauvinism. *Contested welfare states: Welfare attitudes in Europe and beyond*. Stanford University Press Stanford, CA: 119–157.
- Mewes J and Mau S (2013) Globalization, socio-economic status and welfare chauvinism: European perspectives on attitudes toward the exclusion of immigrants. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 54(3): 228–245. DOI: 10.1177/0020715213494395.
- Oesch D and Rennwald L (2018) Electoral competition in Europe's new tripolar political space: Class voting for the left, centre-right and radical right. *European Journal of Political Research* 57(4): 783-807.
- Rathgeb, P (2021) Makers against takers: the socio-economic ideology and policy of the Austrian Freedom Party. *West European Politics* 44(3): 635-660.
- Reeskens T and van Oorschot W van (2012) Disentangling the ‘New Liberal Dilemma’: On the relation between general welfare redistribution preferences and welfare chauvinism. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 53(2): 120–139. DOI: 10.1177/0020715212451987.
- Römer F, Röth L and Zobel M (2022) Policymaking on immigrant welfare rights: the populist and the mainstream right. *Journal of European Public Policy*.
- Schmidt-Catran AW and Spies DC (2016) Immigration and Welfare Support in Germany. *American Sociological Review* 81(2): 242–261. DOI: 10.1177/0003122416633140.
- Schmitt C and Teney C (2019) Access to general social protection for immigrants in advanced democracies. *Journal of European Social Policy* 29(1): 44–55. DOI: 10.1177/0958928718768365.
- Schumacher G and van Kersbergen K (2016) Do mainstream parties adapt to the welfare chauvinism of populist parties? *Party Politics* 22(3): 300–312. DOI: 10.1177/1354068814549345.
- Van der Waal JVD, Koster WD and Oorschot WV (2013) Three Worlds of Welfare Chauvinism? How Welfare Regimes Affect Support for Distributing Welfare to Immigrants in Europe. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 15(2): 164–181. DOI: 10.1080/13876988.2013.785147.
- Van der Waal J, Achterberg P, Houtman D, et al. (2010) ‘Some are more equal than others’: economic egalitarianism and welfare chauvinism in the Netherlands. *Journal of European Social Policy* 20(4): 350–363.
- Van Hootegeem, A, Abts K, Meuleman B (2021) The welfare state criticism of the losers of modernization: How social experiences of resentment shape populist welfare critique. *Acta Sociologica* 64(2): 125-143.



- Van Oorschot W (2000) Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public. *Policy & Politics* 28(1): 33-48.
- Van Oorschot W (2006) Making the difference in social Europe: deservingness perceptions among citizens of European welfare states. *Journal of European Social Policy* 16(1): 23–42.
- Van Oorschot W (2010) Public perceptions of the economic, moral, social and migration consequences of the welfare state: An empirical analysis of welfare state legitimacy. *Journal of European Social Policy* 20(1): 19-31.
- Van Oorschot W, Reeskens T, Meuleman B (2012) Popular perceptions of welfare state consequences: A multilevel, cross-national analysis of 25 European countries. *Journal of European Social Policy* 22(2): 181-197.

# Appendix

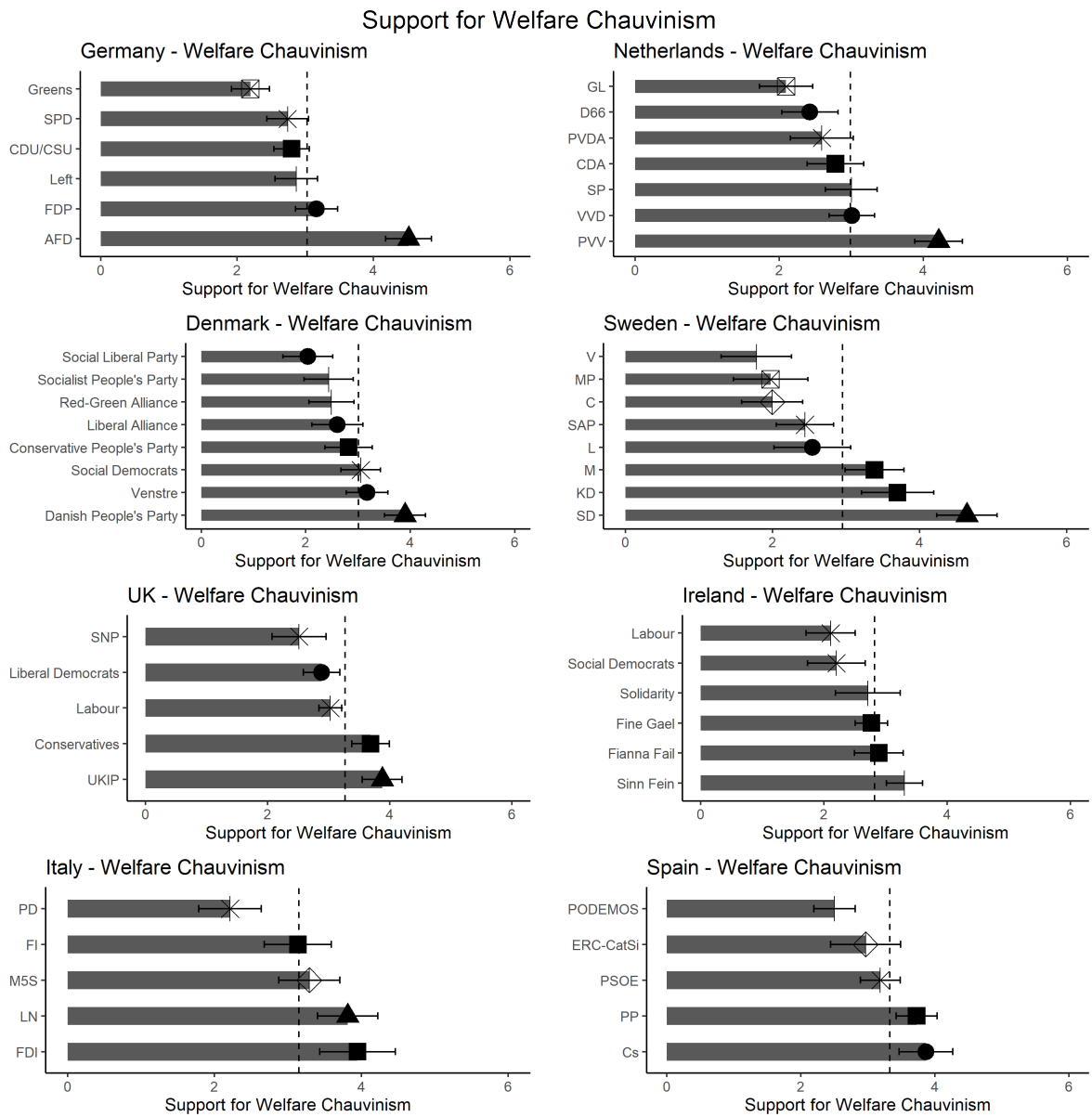


Figure A1: Predicted values of support for welfare chauvinism, by countries.

## Support for Welfare Populism

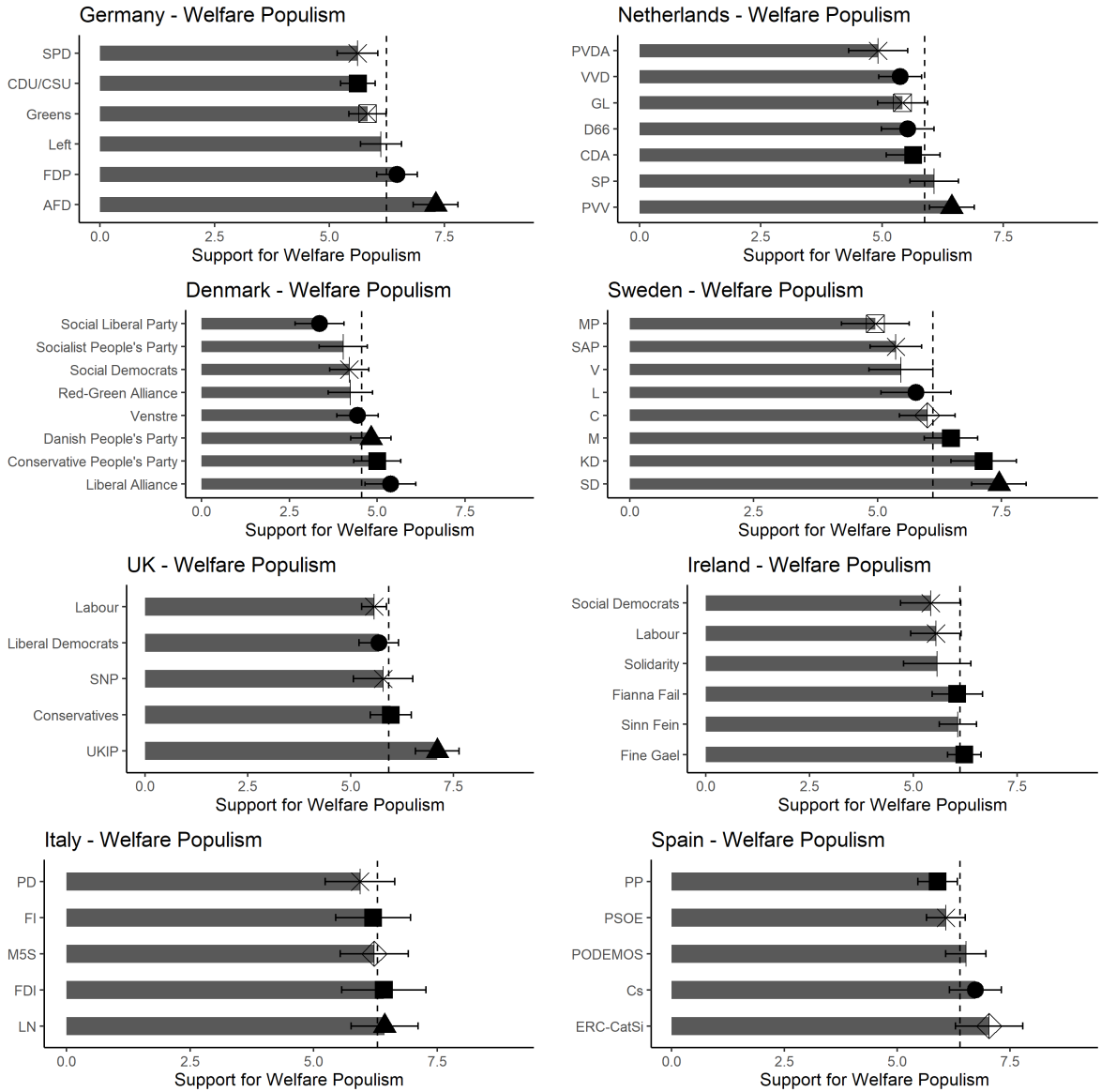


Figure A2: Predicted values of support for welfare populism, by countries.