

Summary of the key conclusions from the WelfSoc project

Our research demonstrates that democratic forums can contribute to improved methodology in attitude research, to generating new knowledge about how people think about major social issues and to policy debate. It supports seven points:

1. Democratic forums offer a new way to explore popular understanding of welfare. Extended discussion of the issues with limited moderation generates results that parallel the main findings from structured surveys, but go beyond them to provide an account of how ordinary people understand the issues and why they come to the conclusions they do in very different economic, social and institutional contexts. Despite limitations, forums can be a valuable asset in understanding public policy attitudes.
2. The regime approach provides a useful typology of European welfare states. The democratic forum material helps understand why attitudes in the different countries fit loosely into the general regime categories.
3. The UK differs from other European welfare states in its extreme emphasis on individual responsibility and the work-ethic (influencing the perception that the most important social division lies between working and non-working groups, highlighting paid work as the main justification for childcare, valuing social investment solely because it promotes fairer opportunities in work), its exclusionary and defensive approach, as if existing services were the private property of those who enjoy them, and in its presumption that the state is incapable of sustaining the major services as pressures grow more intense.
4. Other countries tend to understand their social world in more collective terms. Individual and family interests are to be advanced by contribution and allocation and the economy is a dynamic and collective enterprise requiring intervention and regulation to achieve the most good, and government is capable of delivering this. This leads to a more wide-ranging access to benefits and services.
5. Immigration emerges as a major issue in most countries, but not one which leads to an overt exclusionary approach, except in the UK. There are indications that the issues are more to do with social and cultural integration in most countries and that policies to promote this are seen as essential. Immigration is a potential area of conflict between old and new Europe as anti-immigrant parties enter parliament in a number of

countries at the same time as other countries export workers north and west. The forum discussions point to an integrative approach to manage the issue.

6. The intergenerational contract remains remarkably resilient in most countries, and older people in particular are willing to support provision for younger age groups and in richer countries make sacrifices in their own services to pay for it

7. Social investment is seen as the way forward across a range of European welfare states, but for different reasons. This reflects the policy emphasis of *Europe 2020*. It fits with a general shift of emphasis in public policy attitudes away from older groups and towards the needs of younger groups and the belief that the primary role of welfare is to help people meet the challenges of a new more globalised and competitive world.

In short, democratic forums build on structured survey research to enrich our understanding of welfare state attitudes in Europe. They show that in most countries the intergenerational contract is secure, but the emphasis is shifting in social policy debate from old to young, from consumption to social contribution and investment, and that public debate in different countries can endorse similar opportunity-centred policies for different reasons, appropriate to national context. The European commitment to state welfare is tested by population ageing, recession, rapid labour market change and the conflicts over immigration. Our work shows that in most countries ordinary people see the welfare state as continuing into the future and developing to meet the new challenges.