

Redistribution reinforced? Citizens' perceptions towards welfare conditionality between conduct and circumstances

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Abstract:

Against the backdrop of welfare state retrenchment, fiscal constraints and austerity as a guiding paradigm, the unpopular task of (re)distributing scarce resources brings the old welfare state question of who should get what and why back on the top of political agendas. In this regard, most European welfare states have adopted a pathway towards greater benefit conditionality (e.g. stricter eligibility criteria, harsher means-testing, sanctioning misbehaviour); a turn which has been discussed from different theoretical and empirical angles, such as a social citizenship perspective, benefit schemes' design, or behavioural psychology etc.

However, while several studies examine the dimensions and degree of conditionality across welfare states and benefit schemes, so far we know little about whether and to what extent citizens support the different facets of conditionality. Although some aspects of conditionality (e.g. whether unemployed should take any job or lose their benefits; World Value Survey) have been included in public opinion surveys and analysed respectively, they remain at a very general and isolated level, and do not tell us how the relationship between rights and responsibilities should be designed in the eyes of the population - a most crucial question when it comes to the legitimacy of welfare states.

In light of these desiderata in the current welfare state literature, in the present paper, we seek to contribute to the understanding of the legitimacy of welfare conditionality by providing insights into citizens' preferences, assessments, aspirations and expectations towards both behavioural and circumstantial conditions under which benefits and services should be granted to unemployed people. By drawing on both quantitative survey-data from the latest wave of the European Social Survey (ESS 2016) and qualitative focus groups conducted in two European welfare states (Germany and Norway), we aim at comparing citizens' attitudes against the backdrop of different welfare regimes and different institutional approaches towards welfare conditionality.