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Chung, Heejung and Taylor-Gooby, Peter and Leruth, Benjamin (2018) Political legitimacy and welfare state futures: Introduction. *Social Policy & Administration*, 52 (4). pp. 835-846. ISSN 0144-5596.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12400>

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# Political legitimacy and welfare state futures: Introduction

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## Funding information

NORFACE, Grant/Award Number: 462-14-050

## Abstract

Welfare attitudes are pivotal in understanding the preferences and demands of citizens to help shape future policy reforms in welfare states. Accordingly, and due to the availability of large scale comparative survey data on attitudes, large numbers of studies of welfare attitudes have emerged during the past few decades. However, some limitations still exist in the field, such as the background assumptions informing the questionnaire design and top-down framing of issues, the population represented, and, lastly, limitations in teasing out the causal mechanisms of relationships, especially pertaining to that of policy reform. This regional issue brings together articles that address some of these issues and others in welfare attitude research to provide some guidance for future studies. This article first summarizes the existing studies on welfare attitudes to identify some of the key limitations, and introduces the five articles in this issue. It concludes with some suggestions for future studies in welfare attitudes.

## KEYWORDS

Europe, methods, political legitimacy, welfare attitudes, welfare state futures

## 1 | BACKGROUND: THE VALUE OF ATTITUDE SURVEYS IN STUDYING WELFARE

Welfare states in Europe are experiencing great economic, social, and political pressures (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, & Chung, 2017). At the economic level, the competitive pressures from an increasingly globalized world exert pressure on the capacity of government to fund a high level of provision, and make decisions over priorities

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harder. At the same time, these changes, alongside the changes in the nature of the labor market, increase demand for education and life-long learning (Zimmerman, Chung, & Heuer, 2018). At the social level, demographic shifts exacerbate spending demands from traditional health and social care services and pensions, and the increasing number of women in the labor market expands the demand for care (Chung, Filipović Hrast, & Rakar, 2018). At the political level, it seems that the electoral decline of mainstream political parties and the emergence of a new wave of populism are reshaping welfare state politics. Other factors (improvements in health care techniques, improved health in old age, better management and greater use of evidence in designing services) improve the situation, but these are outweighed by the changes, which are making the task of the welfare state more difficult.

All these pressures have been exacerbated by the Great Recession of 2007–08 and by political concerns about the future of the European Union (EU) (Leruth, Startin, & Usherwood, 2018). The recession led to nearly a decade of stagnation, and the EU as a whole has only recently recovered in terms of growth rates since 2008. The impact of the recession and of recovery programs based on a commitment to austerity at both European Central Bank and national levels has led to a general decline in support for the EU as a whole (which would eventually lead to the United Kingdom's vote to leave the EU in June 2016 for various reasons, such as immigration and national sovereignty), but also a decline in trust in national governments alongside increasing polarization of interests (Emmenegger, Häusermann, Palier, & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2012).

Against this background, conducting research on welfare state attitudes is of great importance for several reasons. The rapidly developing area of social attitude studies is particularly appropriate to investigate the impact of policy change on political legitimacy in Europe because it provides data on how people perceive (mistakenly or not) the new developments. The study of welfare attitudes also enables us to chart the preferences as well as demands of citizens to help shape future policy reforms in welfare states. These include possible trade-offs of policies allowing policymakers to understand reform scenarios so to avoid mass political dissent. Further, we are able to examine the relations between attitudes and the socio-demographics of supporters of the new and old parties (Jæger, 2006), and also how the existing characteristics of welfare states shape these preferences (Chung & Meuleman, 2017). Researchers can thus examine the political changes through the lens of attitudes (Arts & Gelissen, 2001; Bonoli, 2000); how social traditions and interests relate to the emerging more fragmented politics (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012; Roosma, Gelissen, & van Oorschot, 2013; Roosma, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2014; van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012); and how voters' preferences can potentially shape policy reform/directions (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017).

Recently, there has been an increasing number of studies examining welfare state attitudes, primarily using large secondary data sets that have developed over the years. However, they are not without limitations. To illustrate, there are issues surrounding the background assumptions informing the various studies, and their questionnaire design, typically based on a top-down framing of issues. There are limits to studies, which are not well-adapted to tease out the relationships between attitudes in different areas, especially pertaining to how policy reform may affect welfare attitudes. Lastly, there are issues with the populations covered. This regional issue aims to contribute to the field by bringing together articles that endeavor to provide new and innovative ways to tackle some of these limitations. These articles present some of the main findings of four of the NORFACE Welfare State Futures program<sup>1</sup> projects dealing with welfare state attitudes together with the findings from another major project on welfare attitudes based in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands. The Welfare State Futures program aims to encourage innovative thinking, to stimulate novel research questions, and to develop future research, by bringing disciplines together in collective and comparative projects on how welfare states should and will develop in the future.

Section 2 of this article summarizes developments over the past decades in welfare attitude research and points to some of the opportunities for further development. This section also provides some possible ways we can overcome existing limitations, drawing on some of the main contributions of this issue by introducing the five articles. This article concludes with some thoughts and suggestions for future research on welfare attitudes.

## 2 | DEVELOPMENTS AND SHORTCOMINGS IN ATTITUDE RESEARCH

### 2.1 | Developments in welfare attitude research

Attitude studies have come of age as a major component in social science. Welfare attitude studies can be dated back to the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Coughlin, 1980; Taylor-Gooby, 1985), many of which focused on the political legitimacy of welfare state provisions. Since then, for several reasons, there has been an explosion in the use of attitude material, with over 500 articles and 20 books on welfare attitude studies by 2012 (see Sundberg & Taylor-Gooby, 2013). There has been a development in secondary data that captures welfare state attitudes, such as the European Social Survey, the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the European Values Survey, and the EU's Eurobarometer, in addition to many national-level surveys. These surveys allow for the comparison of welfare attitudes within and across countries, as well as the examination of change over time, and permit investigation into how social, economic, and political shifts relate to attitude change (e.g., Ervasti, Goul Andersen, Fridberg, & Ringdal, 2012; Svallfors, 2012; van Oorschot, Reeskens, & Meuleman, 2012). Alongside this, there have been technical developments in quantitative survey design (Jæger, 2013; Reeskens & Van der Meer, 2014), delivery (notably online surveys), and analysis techniques, such as the growth of multi-level modelling which enables us to examine how country contexts and their variation influence the welfare attitude of individuals across countries (e.g., Chung & Meuleman, 2017; Finseraas, 2009; Roosma, 2016). This allowed the expansion of the range of areas that attitude research can cover to include topics such as the impact of particular political or policy interventions and media campaigns. In addition, there has been an increasing theoretical maturity in the conceptualization of attitudes (e.g., Jæger & Kvist, 2003; Kumlin, 2007; Mau, 2003). The increasing sophistication of qualitative approaches contributes to a richer understanding of the patterns of ideas which underlie attitudes and of how they link together (e.g., Burkhardt, Martin, Mau, & Taylor-Gooby, 2011; Goerres & Tepe, 2012; Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003; Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018; Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, & Chung, 2018).

Some of the key research questions raised in these numerous studies were how we can explain the variation in welfare state support or other types of welfare attitudes across different groups of populations (e.g., Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Chung & Meuleman, 2017; Knijn & van Oorschot, 2008; Taylor-Gooby & Martin, 2010; van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012). In conventional welfare state attitude research, welfare attitude preferences are understood to depend on self-interest, ideological beliefs, opportunity structures at both the individual level and the national level, and the institutional framework in which they live. Self-interest theory entails that those who are currently benefitting, or are most likely to benefit, from the public policy in question will be most supportive of it, and those who think they will be required to pay for it will be correspondingly less so (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Knijn & van Oorschot, 2008). Individuals' ideological positions have also been shown to be important predictors of welfare attitudes (Blekesaune, 2013; Edlund, 2006). This is based on the idea that "attitudes towards the welfare state are rooted in more general value systems regarding the proper relationship between the individual, the state and other institutions" (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003, p. 416). Previous studies have used political partisanship (Goerres & Tepe, 2012), economic individualism (Blekesaune, 2013; Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003), and gender role attitudes (Chung & Meuleman, 2017) to determine why individuals will support a certain policy area or the welfare state in general. Lastly, welfare attitudes are affected by the current policy provision, both the level and the structure, as well as other socio-economic conditions of the country (Blekesaune, 2013; Chung & Meuleman, 2017; see also the other contributions to this issue: Burlacu, Immergut, Oskarson, & Rönnerstrand, 2018; Cappelen, Cappelen, Kuhnle, & Tungodden, 2018; Kootstra & Roosma, 2018; Lubbers, Diehl, Kuhn, & Albrekt Larsen, 2018; Taylor-Gooby, Chung, & Leruth, 2018; in particular, Burlacu et al., 2018; Lubbers et al., 2018). Regarding the relationship between current policy levels and support, both a positive and negative relationship have been put forward. A generous welfare policy can lead to both higher (due to the rewards mechanism between policy and support) and lower welfare state support (due to the critical overload mechanism), depending on the policy in question (see van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012).

In addition, there are a wide range of topics covered in welfare attitude research (e.g., Arts & Gelissen, 2001; Calzada & Del Pino, 2008; Coughlin, 1980; Mewes & Mau, 2012; Roosma, 2016; Svallfors, 2010, 2012; Taylor-Gooby, 1985; Taylor-Gooby & Martin, 2010; van Oorschot, 2006). The first groups of studies are interested in what individuals believe to be the main *goals* of the welfare state, but also to examine the support people have towards some of the established goals of the welfare state, for example redistribution (e.g., Finseraas, 2009; Jæger, 2013; Svallfors, 1997). Welfare attitude studies can also be distinguished by the *range* of welfare state policies covered, such as support for unemployment benefits (e.g., van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012), pensions (e.g., Fernandez & Jaime-Castillo, 2013), healthcare (e.g., Ullrich, 2002), and childcare (e.g., Chung & Meuleman, 2017; Goerres & Tepe, 2012). In many cases, studies examine them in combination (e.g., Roosma et al., 2014). Another area of interest is the *degree* and levels of provision (how much should the state provide), especially in relation to how much social spending should be spent on welfare provisions (e.g., Svallfors, 2004). Welfare attitude literature has also examined attitudes towards *who* should be able to get the benefits. This links with the literature on deservingness (e.g., Taylor-Gooby, 1985; van Oorschot, 2006) regarding the conditions under which people are deemed to have rights to benefits (e.g., needs, contribution, identity). In many cases, especially in light of welfare state retrenchment and austerity cuts, studies compare different groups of welfare recipients to examine the population's welfare priorities—such as the unemployed versus old age population (e.g., Blekesaune, 2013). Related to this and to the increased political tension on the issues of immigration, a growing number of studies examine welfare chauvinism, i.e., perceptions of immigrants' rights to receive welfare benefits (e.g., Mau & Burkhardt, 2009; Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012). Lastly, a group of welfare attitude studies examine the effectiveness of policies, which cover, on the one hand, studies that examine how effective policies are in addressing the issues they are meant to tackle (e.g., Chung & van Oorschot, 2012; van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012), and, on the other hand, some of the consequences of the welfare state—in terms of moral consequences (“makes people lazy”) and economic performances (e.g., Roosma et al., 2014; van Oorschot et al., 2012).

However, substantial opportunities for further development of attitude research remain. In this issue, we aim to focus on three particular points. First, and foremost, we address how the assumptive worlds of social scientists and policymakers shape the framing of welfare attitudes which may distort our understanding. Second, we address the issue of causality and limitations in our understanding of how changes in policies can lead to changes in welfare attitudes. Third, the issue of population covered in existing literature is addressed. These shortcomings are identified in the next section to highlight the contributions made by the articles in this issue.

## 2.2 | Conceptual issues and assumptive worlds

The chief conceptual issues relevant to attitude research reflect basic divisions in the assumptive worlds of social scientists. One approach, influenced by the success of the highly individual conceptual framework of neo-classical economics, understands attitudes as essentially properties of individuals (Hargreaves-Heap, Hollis, Lyons, Sugden, & Weale, 1992). This account is sometimes referred to as the “file-drawer model” (Wilson & Hodges, 1992). Attitudes are contents of consciousness which tend to be stable over time and to which people have immediate access, as in opening a file drawer to look up an attitude on a topic. They then report this to the researcher, and the findings can simply be aggregated across population groups. This contrasts with accounts which see attitudes as social, not contained within an individual filing system, but as influenced by socialization, group membership, traditions or social values. Sociological approaches typically emphasize the importance of society or of the socio-demographic group, while social psychology and psychology focus more on small group influences.

In practice, most social theory acknowledges that social concepts have an individual and social aspect, since society is, in one sense, produced and reproduced through individual actions, though, from another perspective, those actions can be categorized in terms of, and related to, social contexts. They are both individual and social actions, as summed up in Giddens' account of structuration (Giddens, 1986). Accordingly, most researchers would accept both individual and social approaches to attitudes, but would stress one or the other in their own work, and this is reflected

in methodology. The individual perspective leads to social surveys based on individual interviews. These range from a highly-structured quantitative method with a random population sample to more open-ended interviews and to qualitative and in-depth interviews. A more social approach would favor group methods, including small group studies of social psychology (Tajfel, 1981), the widely used focus group method in which perhaps eight to 12 people debate a topic following a schedule with the discussion regulated by a moderator (Finch & Lewis, 2003), and more extended group discussion such as democratic forums (see Taylor-Gooby et al., 2018), in which groups discuss an issue with the minimum of researcher direction over several days (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Fishkin, 2011). In all these cases, group members can be chosen to represent a particular social group, to contrast two or more specified groups, or to include groups across the population.

A number of studies point to the limited knowledge that many people have of the topics on which they answer questions in a survey (see Coughlin, 1980). For example, many people's knowledge of key features of the topics covered in the British Social Attitudes survey on which they answer attitude questions promptly is strikingly weak. Over half the sample believe that spending on unemployment benefits is more than one and a half times that on pensions, whereas in fact it is about one-tenth, a conception relevant to their views on public spending priorities (Taylor-Gooby, Hastie, & Bromley, 2003). A similar proportion overestimate the size of the private sector in medical treatment and education by more than 100%. Whether or not popular ideas correspond to those of experts or policymakers, or to the real world, they relate to widely-held attitudes which may influence behavior and political preferences, and are valuable in understanding them, especially where misunderstandings are on such a scale.

More broadly, respondents may use different conceptual frameworks to situate and inform attitudes, and be aware that they are doing so. However, the frameworks may not be evident to researchers and may be overlooked. One important reason for this is that different people may use similar language but, in fact, refer to different things. For example, many attitude surveys find that German and UK samples share similar attitudes to inequality and redistribution. For example, the proportion agreeing that government has a responsibility to reduce income differences between rich and poor is 67% in both West Germany and the UK (GESIS, 2017). This puzzles some researchers, given the very different welfare state traditions in the two countries. A cross-national focus-group study (Burkhardt et al., 2011; Taylor-Gooby & Martin, 2010) shows that people in different countries interpret the idea of equality differently: in Germany, discussion tends to be framed in terms of equality of outcome, but in the UK, the dominant concept is equality of opportunity. Participants use similar language to refer to attitudes towards different objects and give similar responses to pre-coded questions, but nonetheless value different conceptions of equality.

These points suggest that it is important to conduct open-ended, qualitative work to contribute to questionnaire design, and to compare results between qualitative and quantitative studies (e.g., Goerres & Prinzen, 2012a; Goerres & Prinzen, 2012b; Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018; Ullrich, 2002). The increased availability of material gathered by both methodologies for secondary analysis facilitates this. It is also important to consider the complexity of the relationship between the various themes in people's ideas. Goffman (1974, p. 21) used the notion of framing in his seminal work *Frame Analysis* to refer to "schema of interpretation" that allow social actors to "locate, perceive identify and label" aspects of their social experience. Framing simplifies and organizes experience, generating meanings and helping to guide actions. The concept is applied widely in research in mass communications, psychology, politics, economics, and journalism, and forms the conceptual basis for the some welfare attitude research (e.g., the ESRC Risk program: Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006). In attitude research, it is often used pragmatically to refer to the ways in which issues are presented in social communications and linked together and understood by different groups of citizens.

For example, studies of increasing sophistication examine the relation between media portrayal of benefit claimers, ideas about responsibility and deservingness and attitudes to welfare benefits (Mau, 2003). The media reporting provides a framework that links together moral ideas, evaluations, and attitudes. Slothuus (2007) demonstrates that positive or negative presentation of claimants in fictitious newspaper stories exerts a strong influence on people's assessment of them. In a five-year study of media treatment of different social groups in Denmark,

Sweden, the UK, and the United States, Larsen (2013) shows that the relationship between the middle and the bottom of society is shown differently in the more liberal countries, and is not supportive of social cohesion. A recent study that links claimants' feelings of stigma to the treatment of claimants in the newspapers they read shows a strong link between receipt of stigmatic messages and feelings of stigma (Baumberg, Bell, & Gaffney, 2012). These studies show a link between media treatment with often crude presentations of claimants as deserving or undeserving of support and people's attitudes to this group. In this issue, we move beyond the influence of top-down media portrayal to examine how people frame welfare issues for themselves, and in particular the interplay of moral and self-interested ideas in their accounts.

The contribution to this issue by Kootstra and Roosma (2018) explores the use of moral as opposed to economic arguments in discussion of welfare conditionality, and in particular whether putting the issue positively or negatively makes a difference. The research, a persuasion experiment, shows that arguments against welfare benefit sanctions are generally more effective in reducing support for the policy than arguments for sanctions are in increasing it. Furthermore, moral arguments, focusing on the welfare of claimants, have the edge over economic arguments which are concerned with the impact on welfare spending. This result was applicable for both the Netherlands and the UK, although the extent of change is greater in the Netherlands. This indicates that normative concerns can have an important influence in debates about welfare, and shows that a moral frame of reference can have a strong effect compared with an economic one.

Cappelen et al. (2018) in their contribution to this issue pursue framings in relation to policies to cut welfare spending. Austerity programs are in place across many European countries, and retrenchment policies are not uncommon. Against this background, the article provides a unique insight into how people would trade off restrictions to eligibility criteria (which would mean that fewer people are entitled) against cuts in benefit levels (which would protect the number receiving welfare but reduce what they get) and benefit durations (which would protect the number of people and the benefit levels, but would reduce the length of time they can receive benefits). This study is useful in that, rather than asking people about their preferences towards retrenchment versus maintenance or expansion of the welfare state, it provides three options within the retrenchment scenario. Furthermore, the question is posed in a way that presents respondents with a framing in which welfare cuts are inevitable. The results of the study show that in accordance with self-interest, labor-market insiders typically support tighter eligibility criteria (since they themselves are more likely to still be included among those entitled), while outsiders typically favor cuts in benefit levels so that they themselves remain at least entitled to something. The really striking difference lies in political ideology: those on the right prefer tighter eligibility, and those on the left prefer to preserve the range of groups entitled. Both self-interest and ideology (which reflects moral ideas) interact in attitudes to the way retrenchment should be pursued, and the framing of the issues in this article allows researchers to address the interaction between them.

Burlacu et al. (2018) in their contribution to this issue consider how granting new rights in health care influences attitudes in a natural experiment. Recent reforms gave citizens' new rights to a maximum waiting time for health services in Germany and Sweden. The research uses the new framing of this aspect of access to the service as a right to investigate how people's perceptions of the recognition of such rights by the state influences their satisfaction with provision. Attitude surveys conducted both before and after the changes show that respondents in both countries were more satisfied with the health system *in general* after the introduction of the waiting time guarantees as a right, even though they did not express greater satisfaction with *specifics*, such as waiting times. The implication is that people tend to operate in a framing that values the substantive worth of rights independent of their personal experience and utilization of services. This suggests that respondents tap into a normative political framework as well as a self-interest utilization one.

Lastly, Taylor-Gooby et al. (2018) in their contribution to this issue use an innovative qualitative approach, Democratic Forums, to examine how people think about welfare state issues; in particular, the range and quality of benefits and services that should be provided by national governments in the future. This article offers an in-depth analysis of a democratic forum conducted in the UK, where participants were asked to reflect on the range of benefits and services

that the government should offer in 2040. In such forums, a substantial group (in this case 34 participants) discuss a topic over an extended period (in this case, two days) with only light-touch moderation. The research gives an indication not only of the priorities that people share, but also of how they justify them and link ideas together. The strongest themes in attitudes are the perceived unsustainability of the most highly valued mass services (health care and pensions), the inefficiency and wastefulness of the state in managing welfare and the burden on welfare spending from abusers of the system, such as unemployed claimers and work-shy immigrants, who also contribute to the aforementioned problems. The moralized account of work-shy versus hard-working provides the explanation for the excessive burden on the welfare state, and the wastefulness of government explains why it will not be possible to meet the burden in the future. Most people see the way forward not through reform, redistribution, or higher spending, but through benefit cuts and workfare, as well as social investment in education, (re)training opportunities and childcare to improve the quality and availability of the workforce. Some participants argued against these positions, but the framing that linked benefit abuse and inefficiency with unsustainability and a new approach to valorize and make possible work tended to dominate discussion. Ideas about the value of immigrants to an aging society, the possibility of reforming mass services and their finance to make them more sustainable, and the importance of benefits to mitigate poverty were not linked together in an equivalent coherent framing of the value of welfare, and did not figure greatly in the conclusions to the discussion.

### 2.3 | Can welfare attitudes change and, if so, how?

In addition to contributing to our understanding of how framing of issues shape our understanding of welfare attitudes, the contributions to this issue aim to deepen our knowledge of how changes in welfare attitudes may occur. In particular, our interest lies in how changes in policies may bring about changes in attitudes. Most welfare attitude research has been focused on measuring the current level of support for the welfare state and its role in the provision of various benefits and service, and broader preferences towards redistribution and inequalities within societies. As section 2 has shown, there has been an abundance of research that shows which social groups are more prone to hold certain beliefs and why, in terms of their interests and/or their ideological beliefs. Recent research has also tried to show how different social/institutional contexts can shape an individual's welfare state attitudes and preferences. One of the underlying beliefs in the research is that if such factors drive welfare attitudes, changes in them can also lead to changes in people's welfare attitudes. For example, Chung and Meuleman (2017) examine the relationship between the coverage and quality of the existing public childcare provision and support for it in order to argue that better coverage and quality can lead to more support. However, the major limitation to this and other research that draws such conclusions is that the direction of the relationships is still unclear. We cannot tell whether better childcare generates stronger support, or whether stronger support produces better childcare. Without longitudinal data on national policy changes and individual attitudes in a cross-national comparative manner, we cannot fully account for the causality, nor can we fully understand the policy process. Furthermore, the number of cases available at the country level in the survey data that is used for secondary analysis is often limited, even in the more recent large scale cross-national comparative studies. This makes it difficult to tease out the effect of policies, while at the same time controlling for a wide range of other contextual socio-economic factors that may influence attitude change such as exogenous economic shocks. Very few articles in the field have been able to tackle this issue properly due to the lack of data. More recently, a wide range of techniques have been developed to overcome this issue—and, most importantly, welfare state scholars have been applying experiments, once used in psychology literature, to try to overcome some of these limitations.

The contribution from Burlacu et al. (2018) aims to overcome this problem with a unique natural field experiment examining changes in healthcare provision in two different countries to see how attitudes have changed as a result. The innovative approach they apply in their article was possible due to the timing of the data collection of the two data sets used for their survey—some before and some after the implementation of a major policy reform. They compare the attitudes towards health care expressed in surveys before and after the reform. They also apply a matching technique to overcome problems due to any discrepancies between the two groups. They show a



significant difference between the two groups. This provides better evidence of the impact of policy reforms on welfare attitudes of the population. Further, their article shows that such reforms and the coverage of the reforms may not necessarily influence people's attitude towards the precise element of policy, but may affect the general perception of the policy. The authors note this as a recognition effect, where "citizens respond to governmental recognition of their rights as a good per se, independent of their personal experience with the particular public service at hand" (Burlacu et al., 2018, p. 880).

The contribution from Kootstra and Roosma (2018) also tackles the issue of causality, but with a different angle using a survey experiment. They focus on whether attitudes change depending on the information respondents are given in a persuasion experiment. Previous studies have noted how the information people obtain through the media has an influence in shaping people's attitudes towards the welfare state, especially in relation to attitudes to benefit claimants (e.g., Baumberg et al., 2012; Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013). However, these studies focus on how existing media and their representation of benefit recipients correlate to the degree of stigmatization of this population. Yet most studies were not able to provide direct evidence to show that it was, in fact, media representation that shaped people's attitudes. In addition, based on existing studies, we do not know whether changes in the nature of the information may change people's perception, and, if so, what kind of information may be more effective in changing individual perceptions. These points are addressed by Kootstra and Roosma (2018) through a survey experiment in which respondents are asked about their attitudes towards welfare conditionality and given counterarguments to see whether this can change people's attitudes. Moral and economic arguments were provided to the respondents at random. Thus they can show how the direction and nature of the persuasion can change people's perceptions, when other influential factors are controlled. Further, they examine the persistence of this change using a longitudinal approach. Their findings show that support for welfare conditionality is high, but when arguments against sanctions are provided, they can reduce support for such policies.

## 2.4 | The issues of the population represented in studies

Many of the existing studies on welfare attitudes have largely focused on the general population. The result is that there is little consideration of the variance within different sub-groups of the population. The welfare attitudes of the population towards immigrants, but also of migrant groups themselves, are especially of interest, due to the political discourse across Europe about immigration, the rise of welfare chauvinism, and the growth in size of immigrant populations (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). Although previous studies have examined the welfare attitudes of migrant groups (e.g., Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2015), few have distinguished the different sub-groups of migrants. Lubbers et al. (2018) in their contribution to this issue were able to overcome this problem through a new and original dataset that distinguishes, in all, 11 ethnic groups of migrants across three different countries. This level of detail makes it possible to examine with much more sophistication how far variations in ethnicity and culture and the economic affluence of the host countries and country of origin have an influence over welfare state attitude formation, as opposed to the self-interest and political/social ideologies of the migrant groups. What they find, unlike previous studies, is that self-interest and ideologies alone cannot completely explain away the differences between migrants and natives in their welfare attitudes. Furthermore, the differences in these welfare attitudes largely depend on the different countries the migrants have originated from—showing how the welfare and other country contexts of the host and origin countries have an influence over the attitudes migrants hold. This helps researchers to develop a much more advanced and nuanced account of how immigrant attitudes change as they spend time in European societies, and to consider the likely future political and social impact of immigration from different regions.

Also in relation to sampling, and again related to methodological challenges, many of the experimental studies on welfare attitudes have been limited in their generalizability. This is due to the specific nature of experiments, which in most cases are undertaken using a small sample of people—many of whom are students. The two experiments included in this issue are unique in that both were able to carry out an experimental study using a nationally representative sample. In the case of Burlacu et al. (2018), this was due to the natural coincidence of the timing of a large scale

data collection and policy reforms. In the case of Kootstra and Roosma (2018), this was possible due to the scale of the project which allowed the experiment to be conducted with a longitudinal survey with a larger representative sample. This enabled both articles to overcome the limitation of some of the previous experimental studies in being able to provide a more representative picture of the general population, the influence of policy reforms, and the exposure to information on such reforms.

### 3 | CONCLUSION

Research on welfare state attitudes is of particular importance at the present time. The European welfare state is under severe pressures, and may be at a turning point. Whatever happens, what people think, what they value and what changes they will accept will be crucial in shaping policy. At the same time, information on attitudes allows political scientists, sociologists, and social policy experts to test theories about the factors driving political and social change, and the way in which popular ideas about society are generated. Practitioners may also benefit from such studies in order to get a better understanding of attitude formations and how recent socio-economic and political developments are being perceived by the majority of the population in various countries.

This article has traced the recent development and current state of play of attitude research in this field, and reviewed some of the shortcomings that have been identified, as well as the strengths and versatility of existing work. There is a basic distinction between approaches to attitudes that see them as stable and individual, and those that see them as essentially social and as responding to social change. This distinction reflects the division between positivism and realism in social science. Other distinctions lie between approaches that take survey findings at face value, and those that suggest that the preconceptions of researchers shape and frame the way in which attitudes are addressed and measured, casting emphasis on some issues and downplaying or ignoring others. Equally, shortcomings in measurement techniques and in the instruments used, as well as in the samples available for analysis, may obscure some issues.

This issue brings together five articles that use innovative methods to generate new data leading to policy-relevant findings in relation to immigrants' attitudes, evaluations of deservingness among different groups of benefit claimers, the impact of some of the most significant recent institutional changes and how they shape attitudes, and the whole range of welfare state issues that strike ordinary people as important. These articles illustrate ways in which the range of concepts addressed can be expanded, and new causal questions can be addressed, and in which the way people conceptualize issues can be explored outside a framing imposed by researchers. Attitude research has expanded rapidly in sophistication, in the range of methods and instruments used, and in the topics to which attitude data is applied. It has made considerable progress in recent years, and is continuing to do so. More remains to be done. In particular, the range of qualitative methods applied in welfare attitude research needs to be expanded, and the techniques for relating qualitative and quantitative research need to be developed. The use of survey experiments in welfare attitude research is still in its infancy, and offers rich opportunities for improving our understanding and should thus be explored further. We also need to relate attitudes more closely to other measures of ideology and discourse in mass media, the political sphere, and social communication. We show how the innovations presented in this issue can extend the capacity of researchers to generate new important material, and demonstrate that attitude studies have a substantial role to play in policy research. We hope that these innovations and the contributions of this issue will provide valuable insights for researchers dealing with welfare attitudes in the future.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research forms part of the 'Our Children's Europe' project, funded through the NORFACE Welfare Futures programme, Grant Number 462-14-050. We would like to thank Bent Greve for his comments on this regional article, and his invaluable help in making this issue possible.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> <https://welfarestatefutures.org/> (accessed February 27, 2018).

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**How to cite this article:** Chung H, Taylor-Gooby P, Leruth B. Political legitimacy and welfare state futures: Introduction. *Soc Policy Admin*. 2018;52:835–846. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12400>