

Welfare attitudes in Europe:

Topline Results from Round 4 of the
European Social Survey

ESS Topline
Results Series

2

Issue

Accessing the European Social Survey Data and Documentation

The European Social Survey provides free access to all of its data and documentation. These can be browsed and downloaded from its website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

Specific initiatives have been developed to promote access to and use of the growing dataset: these include EduNet, an e-learning tool, and NESSTAR an online data analysis tool. Both can be accessed through the ESS website.

EduNet

The ESS e-learning tool, EduNet, was developed for use in higher education. It provides hands-on examples and exercises designed to guide users

through the research process, from a theoretical problem to the interpretation of statistical results. The materials have been prepared by survey experts. Eight topics are now available using data from the ESS.

NESSTAR

ESS Online Analysis package uses NESSTAR which is an online data analysis tool; documentation to support NESSTAR is available from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (<http://www.nesstar.com/index.html>) and accessing it via the ESS website will bring users to dedicated information.

Public attitudes matter in democratic societies. They reflect what citizens believe, want, fear and prefer. They are difficult to measure, are often unexpressed, and cannot be inferred from electoral choices alone. Nor can they be gleaned from media opinion polls which tend to give momentary and incomplete glimpses of attitude formation and change. The European Social Survey provides detailed accounts of public attitudes and behaviour utilising high quality scientific methodologies and repeat measures over time.

The ESS Topline Results Series provides an introduction to key issues in European societies from leading academic experts in the field. The series goes beyond a simple presentation of the data, providing references to theory and detailed academically informed analysis. It is hoped not only that the series is informative but also that it will inspire others to utilise this rich data resource.

Rory Fitzgerald

ESS Director

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Welfare attitudes in Europe: Topline Results from Round 4

Stefan Svallfors

Introduction

The welfare state may be seen as a particular trademark of the European social model. An extensive set of social and institutional actors provides protection against negative consequences of common life-course risks, for example by offering economic support in periods of hardship or by ensuring access to care and services. But the European welfare states have recently undergone profound restructuring as a result of demographic, economic and political pressures. New forms of risk have arisen. These are related to precarious labour markets and shifting household situations and have taken different shapes across welfare states. Rising concerns about welfare state demographic sustainability and the slowly growing influence of European Union standards and regulations of welfare policies are other common challenges across the continent.

Given this background, the attitudes of the European public towards the welfare state are of growing importance. Since the public both receive and ultimately finance welfare policies, their views about the extension and form of the welfare state are of paramount importance for the legitimacy of contemporary European polities.

“What kind of state intervention do people in various European countries ask for? How satisfied are they with what the welfare state achieves?”

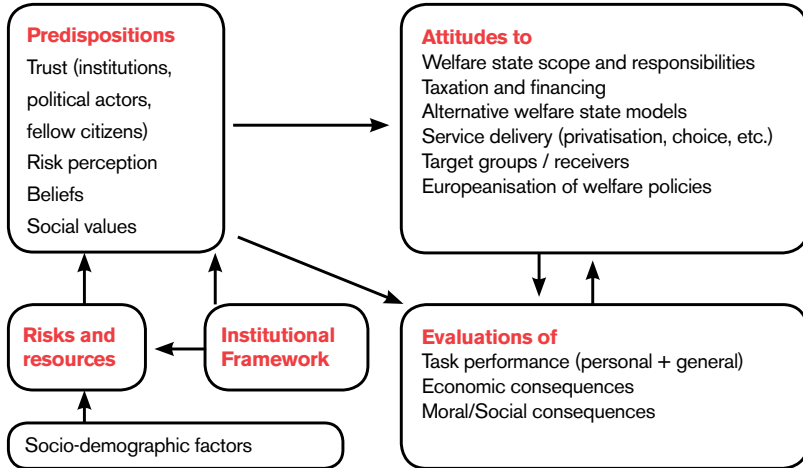
The ESS Round 4 module “Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe” was designed to tap the attitudes of the European public towards the welfare state and its policies. Fieldwork

was conducted towards the end of 2008 in 29 countries across Europe. A conceptual model of the welfare attitudes module is provided in Figure 1. The main focus of the model is on welfare attitudes composed of orientations toward (a) welfare state scope and responsibilities (b) collective financing (c) different models of welfare (d) service delivery and (e) the target groups and receivers of welfare. It also considers evaluations of the welfare state in terms of (a) the task performance of the welfare state (b) the economic consequences of welfare policies and (c) the moral and social consequences of welfare policies. One may expect a reciprocal relationship between attitudes and evaluations so that attitudes are influenced by evaluations but also influence them in return.

The model explains these welfare attitudes and evaluations as a function of a set of predispositions including interpersonal and institutional trust, risk and threat perceptions, beliefs about welfare policies, social values, and personal experiences. At the individual level these predispositions, in turn, are expected to vary as a function of the risks to which individuals and groups are differentially exposed and the resources with which they are endowed.

This report summarises European attitudes towards welfare in three respects: attitudes to government responsibilities; satisfaction with welfare state performance; and views about government quality. What the public want government to do; how satisfied they are with what is delivered; and whether they trust government agencies to be fair and efficient are clearly of key importance in the relationship

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for analysing attitudes to welfare policies



Source: European Social Survey Round 4, 2008

between the states and citizens across Europe. Attitudes on these issues will be of interest to policy makers as they take decisions on what actions should or should not be undertaken by governments and seek public support for these decisions.

Attitudes to government responsibilities

To begin we consider what people in different European countries want from the welfare state. Respondents were asked how far they thought it should be the government's responsibility to do each of the following:

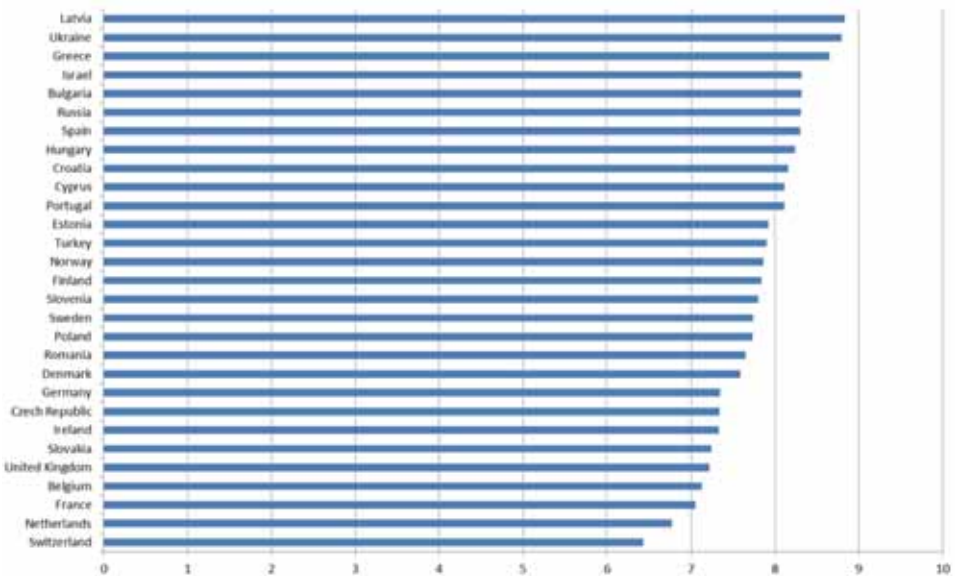
- ...ensure a job for everyone who wants one;
- ...ensure adequate health care for the sick;
- ...ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old;
- ...ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed;
- ...ensure sufficient child care services for working parents; and

...provide paid leave from work for people who temporarily have to care for sick family members.

Responses were given on a 0-10 scale where 0 means it should not be the government's responsibility at all, and 10 means it should be entirely the government's responsibility. In order to provide a summary index of how far-ranging people think government intervention should be, responses to these items were summed and then divided by six. The value 0 now indicates that the respondent thinks that none of the mentioned activities should be at all the government's responsibility, and 10 indicates that the respondent thinks that all these activities should be entirely government's responsibility.

“Europeans are in favour of quite wide-ranging government responsibility for various welfare measures.”

Figure 2 shows that almost all countries fall between 7 and 9 on the 0-10 scale, which

Figure 2: Public support for government intervention (0-10 summary index): by country

Source: *European Social Survey Round 4, 2008*

indicates support for quite far-ranging government involvement in the well-being of its residents.

A second finding is that index values vary among countries, but not dramatically so. We find that, on average, people living in Eastern Europe ask for the most wide-ranging government responsibility, followed by people living in Southern Europe. The lowest index values are found in some of the Western European countries. But as we have seen, none of the countries fall below 6 on the 0-10 scale, so country differences in views about what the welfare state ought to do are not very large.

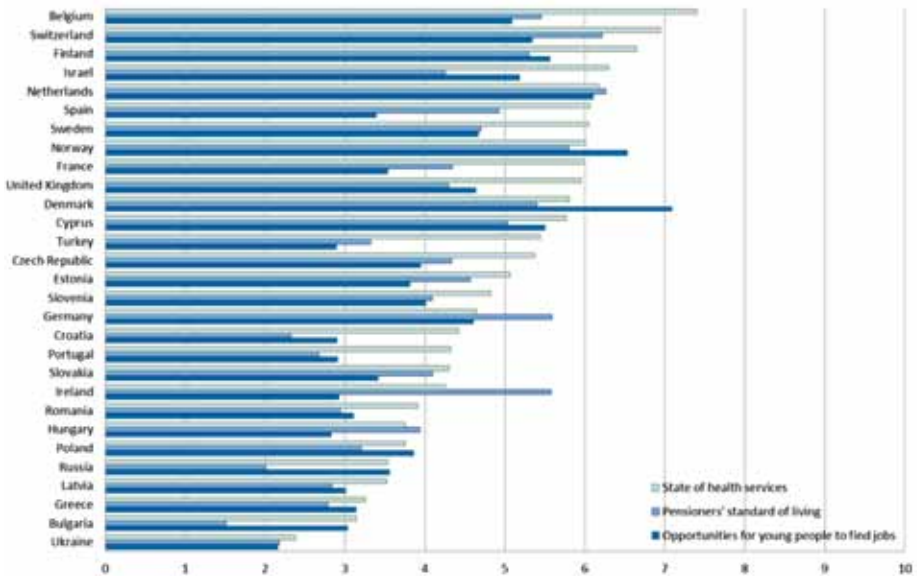
Caution is of course needed when comparing levels of attitudes across countries. Survey questions are always answered in the context in which respondents are embedded, including the current level of welfare provision. Since country differences are not overwhelming it may not necessarily be the case that people in countries

expressing weaker support for government intervention really want the state to do less for them in absolute terms than people in countries expressing stronger support. The East-West differences in attitudes towards what the welfare state ought to do should nevertheless be taken seriously and could be interpreted both in terms of the historical legacy of communism and current economic hardship contributing to stronger support for government provision in Eastern Europe.

Satisfaction with government performance

If people want quite far-ranging government involvement in different policy areas, are they satisfied with what the welfare state actually achieves? Figure 3 shows respondents' satisfaction with three aspects of welfare state performance: the state of health services; the standard of living for pensioners and

Figure 3: Satisfaction with welfare state performance (0-10 scale): by country



Source: European Social Survey Round 4, 2008

opportunities for young people to find their first full-time job¹. Satisfaction was rated on a 0-10 scale where 0 indicates very low satisfaction with the outcomes in the policy area (“extremely bad”) and 10 indicates very high satisfaction (“extremely good”).

“We find that satisfaction with the welfare state is much lower than support for welfare state provision, and much more dispersed across Europe.”

Overall satisfaction with welfare state performance is particularly low in several countries in Eastern Europe, particularly Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Russia. So we find that while people in Eastern Europe have, on average, the highest demands in terms of government responsibilities (Figure 2) they have the lowest satisfaction with what is actually delivered. Satisfaction is higher in most West European countries, but it should be noted that in only a few European countries do any of the three indicators show satisfaction reaching higher

than the midpoint of the scale. This indicates that satisfaction with what the welfare state actually achieves is not overwhelming anywhere in Europe.

Taking a closer look at the individual indicators we find that satisfaction with health services is highest in a number of continental West European and Nordic countries, and lowest in some East European countries. Satisfaction with the living standards of pensioners is also highest in some of the continental West European countries, followed by the Nordic countries. It is on average slightly lower in Southern Europe and by far lowest in a number of East European countries. The latter also goes for views about opportunities for young people to find jobs, while the Scandinavian countries Denmark and Norway display the strongest satisfaction in this regard.

So there is a fair degree of overlap between the three measures with people who are (dis)satisfied with one aspect of welfare state performance

tending also to be (dis)satisfied with the other two aspects. Some exceptions to this pattern are found, for example the very high satisfaction with job opportunities in Denmark, or the relatively high satisfaction with the living standards of the elderly in Ireland and Germany. But, overall, badly performing welfare states tend to perform badly across the board, while the opposite goes for well performing welfare states.

Views about government quality

The previous section looked at satisfaction with welfare state performance in terms of what is actually achieved through welfare state measures. In this section we focus instead on the perceived fairness and efficiency of the implementing agencies. Respondents were asked the following questions, giving their rating on a 0-10 scale in each case:

- *Please tell me how efficient you think the provision of health care in [country] is.*
- *And how efficient do you think the tax authorities are at things like handling queries on time, avoiding mistakes and preventing fraud?*
- *Please tell me whether you think doctors and nurses in [country] give special advantages to certain people or deal with everyone equally?*
- *Please tell me whether you think the tax authorities in [country] give special advantages to certain people or deal with everyone equally?*

The questions ask about tax authorities and health care providers as these are two fundamental agencies of the welfare state that the government needs to manage. For this reason they are also agencies that are found everywhere in Europe (in contrast to, say, employment agencies or child care facilities).

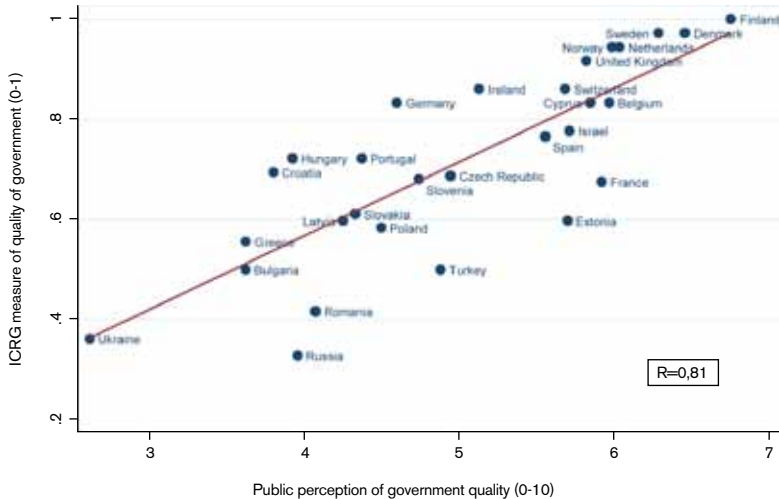
As a summary measure of perceptions of government quality all four indicators were summed and then divided by 4 to get to a new 0-10 measure of overall government quality.

Can this simple measure really tap the quality of government institutions? It could be argued that the public may be ignorant about the actual state of affairs and either exaggerate or underestimate the quality of government. Second, the public could display strongly adaptive preferences so that they adjust their expectations to whatever happens to be the case. Third, there might be something particular about taxation and health care that people respond to which need not necessarily tell us something about the overall quality of government.

The three survey-based measures were therefore correlated with a set of different expert-based measures such as the International Country Risk Guide indicator of Quality of Government (ICRG), the Transparency International Corruption index, and the World Bank Estimate of Government Efficiency (all taken from the Quality of Government Institute's database at Göteborg University)². Although the measures indicate slightly different aspects they yield very similar results. Results for the ICRG and the ESS survey-based quality of government measure are displayed in Figure 4.

We find very strong correlations between the experts' judgements and the public's perceptions of government quality. The correlation coefficient is 0.81 which indicates that the measures are very strongly interrelated. Looking at the plot we find the Nordic countries and the Netherlands clustered in the top right corner indicating a perception of high government quality both among experts and among the public. In the bottom left corner we find a number of East European, mostly former communist, countries which are judged as having low government quality by both the public and experts.

Figure 4: Expert judgements and public perceptions of the quality of government



Source: European Social Survey Round 4, 2008

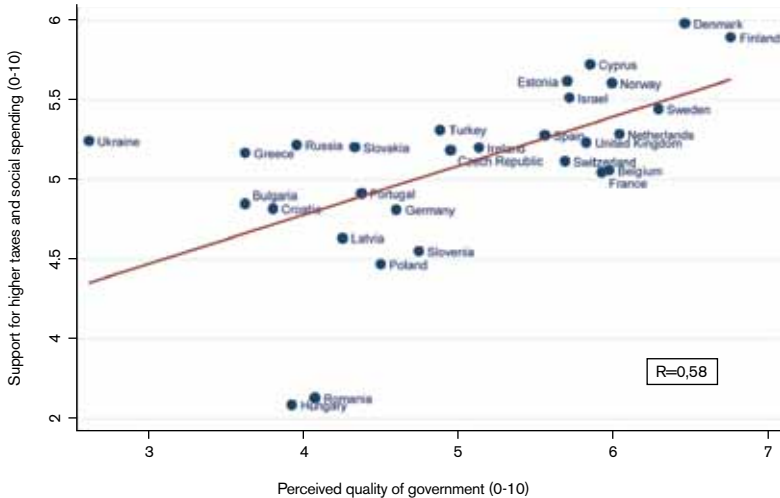
A few outliers may be detected: Russia and Turkey are both judged more leniently by the public than by experts, while the contrary goes for Germany. But, overall, there is a strikingly strong correspondence between the public and expert views.

Does government quality affect the public's willingness to provide resources for the welfare state? A useful measure of the latter is the desired balance between taxes and social spending. Respondents were asked what they thought the government should do given a choice between increasing taxes and spending more on social benefits and services or decreasing taxes and spending less. Answers were coded on a 0-10 scale where 0 indicates government should decrease taxes a lot and spend much less on social benefits and services, and 10 indicates government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on social benefits and services.

Figure 5 displays the association between the perceived quality of government and attitudes to taxes and social spending. There is a clear relationship:

“Countries where the public perceives a better quality of government are also countries where support for increased social spending is stronger.”

This result emerges in spite of the fact that countries with a high quality of government are also countries that already spend more on the welfare state than countries with lower quality of government³. Yet their citizens lean more towards further increases in social spending than citizens in other countries. This result holds up even when one takes into account the egalitarian values that people in different countries hold, and a host of other control variables such as those related to demographic and economic factors⁴. So it seems government quality is an important, and so far largely neglected, factor behind attitudes to the welfare state.

Figure 5: Perceived quality of government and attitudes to social spending

Source: *European Social Survey Round 4, 2008*

Conclusion: where next?

What emerges most clearly from the presented findings is the strong East-West divide in Europe. People living in Eastern Europe want quite far-ranging government responsibility for various welfare measures. At the same time they are quite, or in many cases very, dissatisfied with welfare state performance, and they think poorly of the efficiency and fairness of their public institutions. In Western Europe, including the Nordic countries, the demands for public responsibility are somewhat smaller, and people are much more satisfied with welfare state outcomes and the quality of public institutions. There are of course exceptions to this pattern but overall this East-West divide overshadows other country differences. This should not necessarily be interpreted only as an historical legacy from the communist years, but also as an indication of current hardships in terms of poverty and unemployment.

One might speculate that the current economic crisis will increase the North-South division in Europe since the Mediterranean countries have been much harder hit than those of North-Western Europe. At the same time it should be emphasised that attitudes towards, and evaluations of, welfare policies tend to be quite stable and slow-moving so we should not expect dramatic changes in the short-term.

Regardless, this points to the importance of future replications of the welfare attitudes module. The 2008 data were collected in the early phases of what has turned out to be a major European economic, political and social crisis. Subsequent data would allow researchers to address issues of the dynamics and malleability of welfare attitudes in the face of major transformations of the political economies of Europe.

Further reading:

The European Social Survey Round 4 module on welfare attitudes has been extensively used, for example in the research programme "Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe" (WAE) financed by the European Science Foundation. A few key references from that programme are listed below, covering topics such as perceived socio-economic security and perceptions of welfare state consequences in addition to the topics covered in this report:

Mau, Steffen, Jan Mewes, & Nadine M. Schöneck (2012). What determines subjective socio-economic insecurity? Context and class in comparative perspective, *Socioeconomic Review*, First published online March 22, 2012, doi:10.1093/ser/mws001.

Oorschot, Wim van, Tim Reeskens & Bart Meuleman (2012) Popular perceptions of welfare state consequences. A multi-level, cross-national analysis of 25 European countries, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 22: 181-197.

Svallfors, Stefan (2012) (Ed.) *Contested Welfare States. Welfare Attitudes in Europe and Beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Svallfors, Stefan (2012) Government quality, egalitarianism, and attitudes to taxes and social spending: a *European comparison*, *European Political Science Review*. First published online July 16, 2012, doi:10.1017/S175577391200015X.

Further details of the ESS can be found at www.europeansocialsurvey.org, including details of participating countries, sample sizes, questionnaires and response rates.

- [1] Additional questions tap satisfaction with education, child care services, and living standards for the unemployed. Since education is not obviously part of the welfare state as traditionally defined, and the latter two items are hard to compare across countries, the discussion focuses on the remaining three items.
- [2] Teorell, J., Charron, N., Samanni, M., Holmberg, S. & Rothstein, B. 2011. *The Quality of Government Dataset, version 6Apr11* University of Gothenburg The Quality of Government Institute, <http://www.qog.pol.gu.se>.
- [3] Rothstein, B., Samanni, M. & Teorell, J. 2012. Explaining the Welfare State: Power Resources vs. the Quality of Government. *European Political Science Review*, 4, 1-28.
- [4] Svallfors, Stefan (2012) Government quality, egalitarianism, and attitudes to taxes and social spending: a European comparison, *European Political Science Review*. First published online July 16, 2012, doi:10.1017/S175577391200015X.

About the ESS

The ESS is a biennial survey of social attitudes and behaviour which has been carried out in up to 34 European countries since 2001. Its dataset contains the results of over 200,000 completed interviews which are freely accessible. All survey and related documentation produced by the ESS is freely available to all.

ESS topics:

- Trust in institutions
- Political engagement
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- Social exclusion
- National, ethnic and religious identity
- Well-being, health and security
- Demographic composition
- Education and occupation
- Financial circumstances
- Household circumstances
- Attitudes to welfare
- Trust in criminal justice
- Expressions and experiences of ageism
- Citizenship, involvement and democracy
- Immigration
- Family, work and well-being
- Economic morality
- The organisation of the life-course

The ESS has applied to become a European Research Infrastructure Consortium, hosted by the UK

Current governance arrangements

Supported up by a formidable array of multinational advisory groups (a Scientific Advisory Board, a Methods Group, Question Design Teams and National

Coordinators) the ESS is designed and coordinated by seven institutions

(its Core Scientific Team):

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GESIS, Mannheim

NSD, Bergen

University Pompeu Fabra,

Barcelona

The Netherlands Institute

for Social Research/SCP,

The Hague

Catholic University of Leuven

University of Ljubljana

Find out more about the ESS and access its data at www.europeansocialsurvey.org



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

European Research Area

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