Public attitudes to benefits systems and their users: deservingness, stigmatisation and policy design

Thursday 31 March – Friday 1 April 2022
Online

Convenors:

Dr Daniel McArthur, University of Oxford

Dr Tom O'Grady, University College London

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This is an online conference with speakers participating virtually on Zoom webinar, all times shown are UK time.

Day 1: Thursday 31 March 2022

13:00 – 13:15   Welcome and introduction by convenors

13:15 – 14:30   **Session 1: Deservingness trends and theories**

Chair: Dr Daniel McArthur (University of Oxford)

Dr Femke Roosma (Tilburg University)

Two decades of perceived deservingness: trends in solidarity and conditionality

Dr Tom O'Grady (University College London)

Deservingness perceptions and elite discourse over the long run: Great Britain as an 'extreme case'

Audience Q&A

14:30 – 14:45   Break

14:45 – 16:00   **Session 2: Deservingness trends and theories**

Chair: Dr Daniel McArthur (University of Oxford)

Tijs Laenen (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

The design - deservingness model of popular support for welfare state schemes

Professor Charlotte Cavaille (University of Michigan)

Explaining differences in perceptions of deservingness: A review and preliminary theory

Audience Q&A

16:00   End of day 1

Day 2: Friday 1 April 2022

10.40 – 10.45	Welcome and Introduction to Day 2
10:45 – 12:00	**Session 1: Stereotyping and stigmatisation of benefits claimants**
	Chair: Dr Daniel McArthur (University of Oxford)
	Ben Baumberg Geiger (University of Kent)
	Suspicious minds? The perception of disability benefit claimants and the misrecognition of media effects
	Dr Robert de Vries (University of Kent)
	How has the pandemic affected the British public's welfare attitudes? An awakening of solidarity, or 'COVID exceptionalism'?
	Audience Q&A
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch break
13:00 – 14:50	**Session 2: New developments in the politics of welfare**
	Chair: Dr Tom O'Grady (University College London)
	Dr Daniel McArthur (University of Oxford)
	Why are the highly educated more sympathetic towards welfare recipients?
	Dr Tim Vlandas (University of Oxford)
	Welfare state consequences of income stagnation
	Professor Hanna Schwander (Humboldt University Berlin)
	The distributive implications of the green surge: demand and supply
	Audience Q&A
14:50 – 15:00	Break
15.00 – 15.30	**Discussion and closing remarks**
15.30	End of conference

Conference Paper Abstracts

Day 1 Session 1   **Dr Femke Roosma** (Tilburg University)

Two decades of perceived deservingness: trends in solidarity and conditionality

Since the seminal work of Van Oorschot on deservingness perceptions among citizens of European welfare states in 2006, studies examining deservingness of target groups of social policy have taken off. In this study Van Oorschot uses data of the European Value Survey (EVS) from 1999 and finds that people are more solidaristic with elderly people, and with people who are sick and disabled, than with unemployed people, while solidarity with immigrants is weakest. In addition Van Oorschot examines to what extent people differentiate among the different target groups of social policy, claiming that people who differentiate more, are more conditional in their solidarity.

In this paper I expand on the work of Van Oorschot (2006) in two ways. First of all, utilizing the availability of two new ways of the EVS survey (in 2008 and 2017), I study the trends in levels of solidarity with different target groups (the elderly, the sick and disabled, the unemployed and immigrants) and trends in the conditionality of solidarity. Second, making use of an increased amount of contexts (countries in different years), I try to explain variation in solidarity and conditionality with economic circumstances and social policy characteristics.

Results show that conditionality in solidarity has increased since 1999; people differentiate more in their solidarity with target groups of social policy. Solidarity with the elderly and sick and disabled (and to a lesser extent with immigrants) has increased, while solidarity with the unemployed has decreased. The perceived deservingness of target groups seems to be drifting apart. In addition, results show that in times of economic hardship conditionality in solidarity is lower, seemingly because people are more concerned with the living conditions of the unemployed under these circumstances. Moreover more generous social protection spending makes people differentiate less among different target groups of social policy; people are more concerned with the living conditions of the unemployed and less with the conditions of the elderly and sick and disabled (controlled for economic circumstances) in contexts with higher social spending levels. Remarkably, higher degrees of spending on means-tested benefits (as a percentage of total social spending) lowers the level of conditionality. Means-tested social spending increases levels of solidarity for all target groups, but mostly for the unemployed.

Dr Tom O'Grady (University College London)

*Deservingness perceptions and elite discourse over the long
run: Great Britain as an 'extreme case'*

This presentation summarises Dr. O'Grady's recent book on the politics of
British welfare reforms, entitled "The Transformation of British Welfare
Policy: Politics, Discourse and Public Opinion." Focusing on policies that
provide relief from unemployment, poverty and disability, in the book he
uncovers why Britain's welfare system has been reformed so radically and
why, until recently, the public enthusiastically endorsed this
programme. Using a comparative and historical perspective, it traces the
evolution of British welfare policy, politics, discourse, and public opinion
since the 1980s, arguing that from the 1990s a long-term change in
discourse from both politicians and the media caused the British public to
turn against welfare by 2010. That, combined with the financial crisis, left the
system uniquely vulnerable to cuts. The book explores the roots of public
opinion on the welfare system, the motives of politicians who have
revolutionised it, and the ways in which the system and its users have been
spoken about. It is an account of how the public came to consider deserving
recipients of help as scroungers; of when and why politicians and the media
vilified them; of political parties whose discourse and policies were
transformed, almost overnight; and of Britain's journey from providing
welfare as generously as the average European country in the 1970s to
becoming an outlier today.

Day 1 Session 2 **Tijs Laenen** (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

*The design - deservingness model of popular support for
welfare state schemes*

This presentation starts from the consistent finding in public opinion research
that some welfare state schemes are more (or less) popular than others.
These differences in the level of popular support are interpreted from the
perspective of the two explanatory frameworks that are most frequently used
in the literature. On the one hand, this refers to the deservingness explanation,
which argues that support for welfare schemes depends on the perceived
deservingness of their respective target groups (which is in turn determined
by how they are evaluated on the so-called "CARIN" criteria). On the other
hand, there is the design explanation, which holds that such support depends
on the institutional design of welfare schemes, with more-universal schemes
being more popular than selective ones. These two explanations –which have
for the most part lived rather separate lives– are subsequently pieced together
into an integrated theoretical model which postulates that popular support for
a welfare scheme is driven by the specific *combination* of its institutional
design and the perceived deservingness of its primary target group. The
presentation concludes with a number of methodological strategies and
examples on how to test this "'design-deservingness" model empirically.

Professor Charlotte Cavaille (University of Michigan)

Explaining differences in perceptions of deservingness: A review and preliminary theory

Why do people come to different conclusions regarding the deservingness of benefit recipients? One line of inquiry draws on research on ideo-attribution effects and emphasizes the role of ideology, namely the tendency for conservatives to prefer dispositional explanations and for liberals to prefer situational explanations for social problems. Another, drawing on research on parochial altruism, emphasizes the importance of racial stereotypes and anti-immigrant sentiment. A third draws on research on boundary formation to single out the role of status threat in shaping perceptions of deservingness. In this paper, I argue that these families of argument cannot account for the well-known, yet overlooked, correlation between perceptions of deservingness on the one hand and what is often called "libertarian-authoritarian attitudes" on the other. Furthermore, I show that evidence in support of ideo-attribution effects, parochial altruism and status threat is at least partly an artifact of this robust correlation. In other words, moving research forward requires theories that can account for this correlation. I tentatively argue that, underpinning this correlation, is a more fundamental disagreement over how to best address social dilemmas, i.e. how to maximize pro-social behavior and minimize free riding. I provide preliminary evidence for this line of inquiry and conclude by discussing implications for future research.

Day 2 Session 1   **Ben Baumberg Geiger (University of Kent)**

Suspicious minds? The perception of disability benefit claimants and the misrecognition of media effects

The media are often blamed for widespread perceptions that welfare benefit claimants are undeserving in Anglo-Saxon countries – yet people often justify these perceptions by citing claimants they know. In this paper, we explain this contradiction via a new theoretical account in which media frames (and ideology/trust) shape how we interpret ambiguous interpersonal contact. We use disability benefits as a most-likely case, and test our hypotheses using novel data from the UK and Norway (n=3,691). In Study 1, we find strong evidence that a randomly-assigned 'benefits cheat' story leads respondents to interpret a hypothetical claimant as less deserving. Study 2 examines people's judgements in everyday life, finding that readers of less negative newspapers, right-wingers and those with low social trust are much more likely to judge neighbours as non-genuine – but with much weaker effects on judgements of close family claimants. Britons are not however more likely than Norwegians to perceive known claimants as non-genuine (despite more negative discourses), partly because of different conceptions of 'non-genuineness' in the two countries. In conclusion, because the media can shape how we interpret everyday experiences, media effects may be 'misrecognised' as personal experience – thereby enhancing their power and making them harder to challenge.

Day 2 Session 1   **Dr Robert de Vries (University of Kent)**

How has the pandemic affected the British public's welfare attitudes? An awakening of solidarity, or 'COVID exceptionalism'?

There were good reasons to think COVID-19 would increase public support for welfare: it was a time of apparent increased solidarity in the face of a collective crisis; of clearly 'deserving' claimants; and of a substantial broadening of direct and indirect experience of the benefits system.

We use two datasets to explore changing attitudes to welfare over the course of the pandemic: (i) bimonthly data collected by YouGov from 2019-2021, which provides comparable, high-resolution information on attitude changes over time; and (ii) a nationally representative survey we conducted as part of the Welfare at a (Social) Distance (WASD) project in June 2021, which explored COVID-19-related attitudes in unique detail.

We find that, as tapped by conventional welfare attitude measures, public attitudes have been largely unaffected by COVID-19. However, using data from the WASD survey, we find evidence that this surprising stability is driven by 'COVID exceptionalism'. COVID claimants are considered to be qualitatively different than 'conventional' pre-COVID claimants; hence more generous perceptions of the former do not perturb general welfare attitudes, which are more strongly driven by perceptions of the latter.

Day 2 Session 2   **Dr Daniel McArthur (University of Oxford)**

Why are the highly educated more sympathetic towards welfare recipients?

Stigmatising stereotypes about welfare recipients play a crucial role in building public support for welfare retrenchment. Existing literature finds that the highly educated are more sympathetic towards welfare recipients. This is surprising given the economic advantage associated with educational attainment. Furthermore, educational attainment has increased even as sympathy for welfare recipients has declined. I address these puzzles using three decades of British survey data and find that it is the socially liberal attitudes rather than the economic advantage associated with higher education that explains why this group is sympathetic towards welfare recipients. These findings reveal an educational cleavage in stereotypes about welfare recipients, which is based on non-economic concerns, and has implications for support for welfare retrenchment and policies such as increased conditionality. This cleavage is weaker in more highly educated regions, implying that there are diminishing returns from increasing educational attainment in terms of sympathetic attitudes towards welfare recipients.

Day 2 Session 3   **Dr Tim Vlandas (University of Oxford)**

Welfare state consequences of income stagnation

What is the effect of income stagnation on the welfare state? To answer this question, we develop a simple political economy model linking income stagnation to greater political support for welfare state retrenchment via three distinct mechanisms: (1) an *altruistic mechanism* where stagnation reduces altruistic motives for welfare state redistribution; (2) an *insurance as 'luxury good ' mechanism* where stagnation decreases the relative perceived gains from insurance; and (3) a *subjective cost of taxation mechanism* where stagnation heightens the relative costs of taxation. To test our argument, we combine novel data on the evolution of income to existing datasets at the micro level on individual preferences and electoral behaviour on the one hand and at the macro level on welfare state retrenchment on the other hand. Our micro-level empirical analyses are consistent with our expectations. First, individuals facing stagnant or lower incomes support spending cuts and tax cuts to a greater extent. Second, individuals penalise government for retrenchment when their incomes are growing, but reward them if their income are stagnating. Thus, governments have electoral incentives to implement spending cuts when incomes stagnate. In turn, at the macro level, fixed effect regressions reveal that retrenchment is more pronounced in countries experiencing lower income growth. Taken together, our findings link the literature on income stagnation to comparative political economy studies of changing welfare states. In contrast to accounts focusing on the level of income and risk, this article helps us make sense of the puzzle why governments find it politically attractive to retrench their welfare states, not despite but because of difficult economic times. Income stagnation does not only undermine the fiscal sustainability of welfare states, it also saps its political foundation.

Professor Hanna Schwander (Humboldt University Berlin)

The distributive implications of the green surge: demand and supply

In recent years, a realignment process within the left has taken place in Western Europe: social democratic parties are losing electoral support, while Green parties are surging. In this article, we study the implications of this realignment for the welfare state from a demand-side perspective. In this, our project goes beyond general welfare state support but centres on the content of distributive conflicts. Based on the material self- interest and the ideological predisposition of green voters, we develop an argument about green voters' welfare state preferences on the two dimensions which shape the politics of the welfare state in the 21st century. Focusing on the goals of welfare states, we consider the preferences of green voters for passive consumption versus active investment policies. Second, we consider the position of green voters in the debates about who gets access to the entitlements and benefits that the welfare state provides. To this end, we examine preferences towards two possible welfare state reforms, namely a welfare chauvinistic vision of the welfare state that grants protection and security mainly to the native population and the idea of a European welfare state where protection is equalized across Europe. The results based on data from the ESS show that green voters are strongly committed to the welfare state but favour different social policies and welfare state reforms

than social democrats. They are more likely to support social investment than social consumption and endorse a universal and unconditional access to social benefits. Our results imply that the realignment within the left may have important implications for the welfare state.

Speaker Biographies

Dr Femke Roosma (Tilburg University)

Dr Tom O'Grady (University College London)

Tom O'Grady is Associate Professor of Political Science at University College London. He completed his PhD in Political Science at MIT in 2017, and his research interests include political economy and political behaviour in the UK and Europe. He recently published a book with Oxford University Press on the politics of British welfare policy entitled "The Transformation of British Welfare Policy: Politics, Discourse and Public Opinion."

Tijs Laenen (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

Tijs Laenen is a social worker turned social scientist, currently working as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Tilburg University (the Netherlands) and the Centre for Sociological Research of KU Leuven (Belgium). His main research interest and expertise lies in studying popular attitudes towards differently targeted and differently designed welfare state policies.

Professor Charlotte Cavaille (University of Michigan)

Charlotte Cavaillé is an Assistant Professor at the Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. She received a PhD in Government and Social Policy from Harvard University. Her research examines the dynamics of popular attitudes towards redistributive social policies at a time of rising inequality, fiscal stress and high levels of immigration.

Ben Baumberg Geiger (University of Kent)

Ben Baumberg Geiger is a Reader in Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Kent. He has done extensive work on benefits attitudes/stigma, including the 2012 report 'Benefits Stigma in Britain', and (with Rob de Vries) a 2021 report on attitudes to benefits during Covid-19. More broadly, he is co-lead of the Welfare at a (Social) Distance project (an ESRC-funded rapid response project on the benefits system during Covid-19), and has done extensive work on disability assessment within social security,

including a secondment within the DWP itself. You can find his publications at http://www.benbgeiger.co.uk/publications.htm

Dr Robert de Vries (University of Kent)

Robert de Vries is a Senior Lecturer in Quantitative Sociology at the University of Kent. He researches diverse topics in the area of inequality and social stratification, including: attitudes towards welfare claimants, the social patterning of cultural taste, and the pernicious effects of inequality and social comparisons. He is a member of the Welfare at a Social Distance project team – a large-scale projected funded by UKRI to investigate the performance of the British welfare system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr Daniel McArthur (University of Oxford)

Daniel McArthur is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Oxford University where he works on the ERC funded project *'SCHOOLPOL - The Transformation of Post-War Education: Causes and Effects'*. Spanning sociology, political science, and social policy, his research examines the changing nature of economic inequality in rich democracies and the social and political consequences of that inequality. His most recent publication '*Why are the highly educated more sympathetic towards welfare recipients*' (European Journal of Political Research) addresses several puzzles that are crucial for understanding the stigmatisation of people in poverty in Britain. His current research focuses on understanding the ways in which geography and educational institutions interact to shape patterns of social mobility, and the consequences for public perceptions of fairness.

Dr Tim Vlandas (University of Oxford)

Dr Tim Vlandas is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Policy and Fellow in St Antony's College, both at the University of Oxford. He holds a PhD in European Political Economy from the London School of Economics and Political Sciences. His main area of expertise is comparative political economy, with a particular interest in the relationship between electoral politics, public policies and socio-economic outcomes. He has just co-authored a book entitled "Foreign States in Domestic Markets: Sovereign Wealth Funds and the West", published by Oxford University Press. His research has been published in over 25 academic journals, including *Comparative Political Studies, Political Science Research and Methods, Politics&Society, Socio-Economic Review, Scientific Reports, Work, Employment and Society, West European Politics, Social Policy and Administration, European Political Science Review,* and *Journal of Common Market Studies.* He has received awards from the American Political Science Association and the European Network for Social Policy Analysis. His work has been cited by the UK House of Commons, World Bank,

International Labour Organisation, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, European Commission, and the United Nations.

Professor Hanna Schwander (Humboldt University Berlin)

Hanna Schwander is Professor and Chair of Political Sociology and Social Policy at the Humboldt University, Berlin. Her research interests are located at the intersection between comparative politics, political sociology and political economy, guided by the overarching question how post-industrial transformations of welfare states, labour markets and societies affect various aspects of political life.She is also one of the Principal Investigators in the Social Cohesion and Civil Society. Interaction Dynamics in Times of Disruption" project, sponsored by the Berlin University Alliance Grand Challenge. Prior to joining the Humboldt University, she was Professor of Public Policy at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin and a Senior Researcher with an Ambizione-Project on women's political alignment at the Department of Political Science of the University of Zurich and a Research Fellow at the Research Center on Inequality and Social Policy (SOCIUM) in Bremen.