

The Past, Present and Future of European Welfare Attitudes:

Topline Results from Round 8
of the European Social Survey

ESS Topline
Results Series

8
Issue

An important aspect of most democratic societies is a welfare state - government funded services that offer financial protection to its citizens, paid for by taxes. This can encompass a whole plethora of services including healthcare provision, unemployment benefits, housing costs and pensions.

The inclusion of the Welfare Attitudes in Europe module during Round 8 (2016/17) of the ESS allowed attitudes towards these services to be assessed in 23 countries. The vast majority of this module was originally included in Round 4 (2008/09) of our survey, and the new data presents a chance to revisit public opinion on the subject, beyond the initial shadow of the 2008 economic crisis.

Many countries have experienced government-imposed austerity measures since then, and many areas of public

expenditure have been stagnant, scaled back or cut completely. We can now assess whether financial restrictions on the welfare state in many countries have changed public attitudes towards it.

This new module also includes some questions fielded for the first time - most notably items assessing the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI) scheme and the implementation of a European Union-wide social benefit scheme.

As ever, we are grateful to the efforts of the Questionnaire Design Team who have authored this report and worked closely with the ESS to design a module that is comprehensive, relevant, informative and interesting.

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Introduction

In the past decades, the extended European-style welfare state became substantially challenged due to a number of major economic, social and political developments. Longer-term challenges have been exacerbated by the shock of the banking crisis in 2008, which was quickly followed by an economic recession in 2009, and a longer-lasting fiscal and debt crisis in many European states.

As a reaction to these interconnected crises, some European governments implemented far-reaching fiscal consolidation programmes, including significant welfare retrenchment and labour market reforms. Other countries launched general austerity programmes. At the same time, worldwide political and military conflicts set off sizeable refugee and migration movements towards Europe, thereby creating concerns about additional strains on existing welfare systems.

In this crisis-ridden context, the necessity and fairness of solidaristic relationships are widely debated across Europe. For instance, the intense pension debate we see in most European countries (e.g. EU 2004) is not only a manifestation of changing group interests as a result of population ageing, but also of changing views regarding the solidarity between generations. A stronger ideological emphasis on individual responsibility translates into questioning the solidarity of the rich with the poor, but paradoxically also in the renewed interest in the idea of a basic income. The EU-wide policy trend towards 'activation', manifested, for example, in a general increase in work

record requirements and increased job seeking obligations for unemployed people, reflects a renewed positioning of ideas on the distribution of rights and obligations between those inside and outside the labour market.

The debate about the integration of migrants in European societies, and about their access to social provisions, is affected to a large degree by ideas about how much they deserve welfare, which is at considerably lower levels than that of other needy groups in society. Finally, there is an ongoing European Union (EU) debate, ignited substantially by the unequal degree to which the economic crisis has hit the different countries in Europe. It regards the solidarity between Europeans, addressing the question of whether a redistribution of welfare from richer to poorer Europeans would be necessary to create cross-European social cohesion, and would be politically and economically feasible.

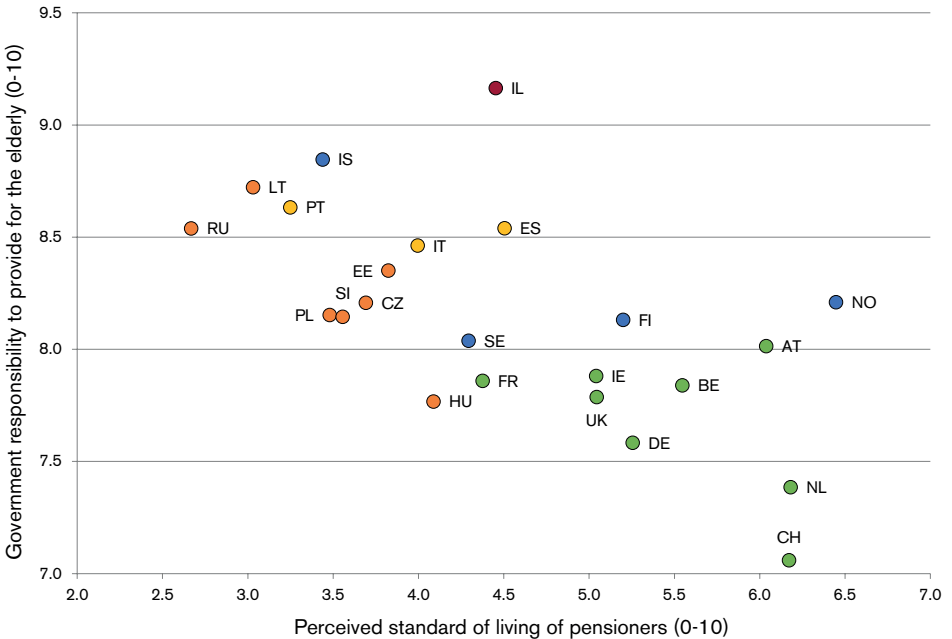
The ESS Round 8 module (fielded in 2016/17) - Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe: Solidarities under Pressure - makes it possible to shed scientific light on these debates.¹ The module partly repeats the ESS Round 4 Welfare Attitudes module (fielded in 2008/09) but also addresses new solidarity questions. This report summarises Europeans' attitudes towards solidarity with vulnerable groups, like the elderly, the unemployed, migrants and the poor, as well as attitudes towards European social policy, and the idea of a Universal Basic Income.

Solidarity with the elderly

Since its early days, one of the core functions of the welfare state has been providing elderly people with adequate income because they are no longer able to work. To see whether the European public still supports this form of intergenerational solidarity in times of population ageing, respondents were asked whether they thought it should be the government's responsibility to ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old. Responses were registered on a scale from 0 to 10 (not at all vs. completely government's responsibility).

As Figure 1 shows, support for the government assuming responsibility for the living standards of the elderly is very high across Europe, especially outside Western Europe, with average scores exceeding 8. There are several reasons for this overwhelming support. One explanation is that old-age pensions are a nearly universal benefit: a majority of the people receive them after retirement and thus expect to benefit from this arrangement, now or in the future. The elderly people are also seen as highly deserving of support because of their previous contributions to society.

Figure 1. Preferences for government responsibility for the elderly and evaluation of their living standards



Note: N (item E6)=44,120; N (item E4)=43,689. Results are weighted for age, gender and education (pspweight). Colours indicate region (blue = Northern Europe; green = Western Europe; yellow = Southern Europe; orange = Eastern Europe)

A third reason is a widespread concern for the quality of the living conditions of elderly people. Respondents were also asked to evaluate *the standard of living of pensioners* (on a scale from 0 to 10). In countries where people are less satisfied with the living standards of the pensioners (especially in Southern and Eastern Europe), the support base for government intervention in favour of the elderly is stronger.

Since 2008, support for public provision for the elderly has decreased in 16 out of 20 countries. While most of these changes are relatively minor, more outspoken drops in solidarity with the elderly can be observed in the UK (a decrease of 0.72 points) and Ireland (-0.60), as well as in several Eastern European countries (Hungary: -1.01; Russian Federation: -0.62; Poland: -0.50).

Interestingly, these drops in intergenerational solidarity tend to go hand in hand with an increase in the standard of living in pensioners: Respondents have the impression that the living conditions of pensioners have improved, and see, therefore, less need for government intervention. Possibly, the economic crisis has shifted the emphasis away from the elderly towards other groups.

Solidarity with the unemployed: Between conditionality and generosity

In the past decades, European unemployment benefit systems have been characterised by a turn towards activation (Bonoli, 2010). The right to financial assistance in case of unemployment has become considerably more conditional on the fulfilment of all sorts of work-related obligations. Failure to fulfil such obligations can be sanctioned with lower benefit rates or shorter benefit duration.

The public legitimacy of this type of activation was measured by presenting respondents the situation of a *person who was previously working but lost their job and is now receiving an unemployment benefit*. Subsequently, respondents were asked what they *think should happen to this person's unemployment benefit if this person turns down a job because it pays a lot less than what they earned previously*.

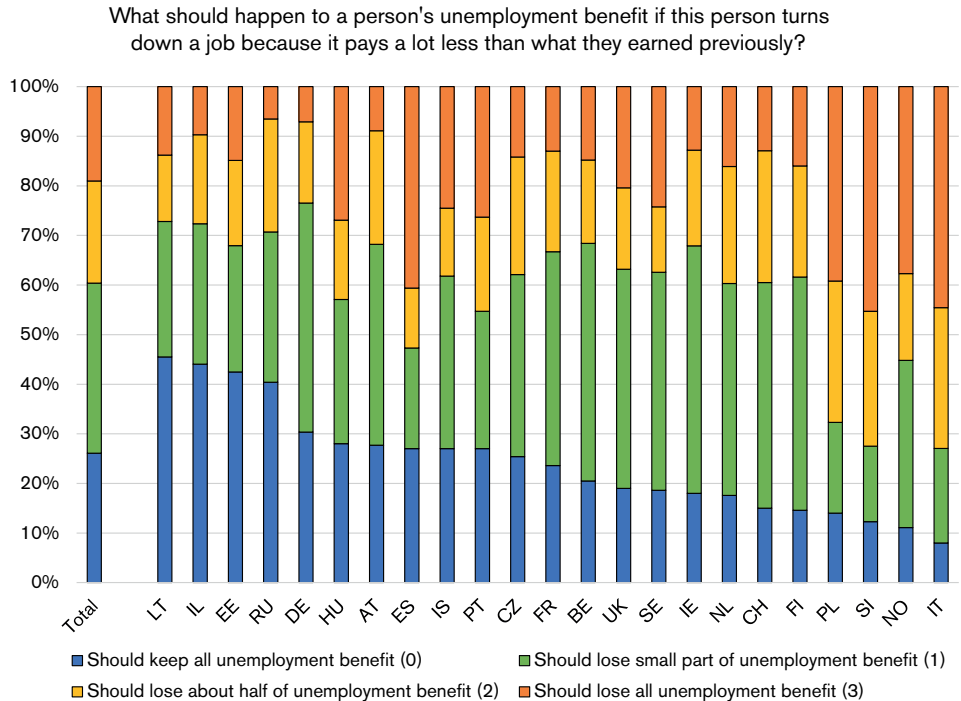
Figure 2 shows that about one in four (26.1%) Europeans feel that the unemployed person should not be sanctioned and can keep the complete benefit. While a majority approves of imposing some form of conditionality, the largest group opts for the softest sanction, i.e. cutting a small part of the benefit (34.3%). The harsher sanctions of curtailing the benefit by half or even completely are advocated by 20.6% and 19.0%, respectively. This European average conceals considerable cross-national variation. As Figure 2 shows, support for conditionality is particularly high in Italy, Norway, Poland and Slovenia, and comparatively low in Lithuania, Israel, Estonia and Russia. However, no clear-cut regional divides emerge.

It is interesting to study preferences for conditionality in tandem with attitudes towards the social rights of unemployed people (Houtman, 1997). What should be the balance between rights and obligations in the eyes of Europeans? Figure 3 displays the preferred rights-obligations trade-off per country. Regarding social rights, country averages for the question whether it should be the government's responsibility to *ensure a reasonable standard of living*

for the unemployed range between 5.9 and 7.7 (on a 0 to 10 scale). Welfare support for the unemployed is thus generally quite high, but markedly lower than what was found for the elderly (as shown in Figure 1).

For obligations, country averages of the item on the conditionality of benefits are used (scale from 0 - should lose all unemployment benefit to 3 - should keep all unemployment benefit). About half of the countries cluster in a 'central' group,

Figure 2. Support for welfare conditionality, per country

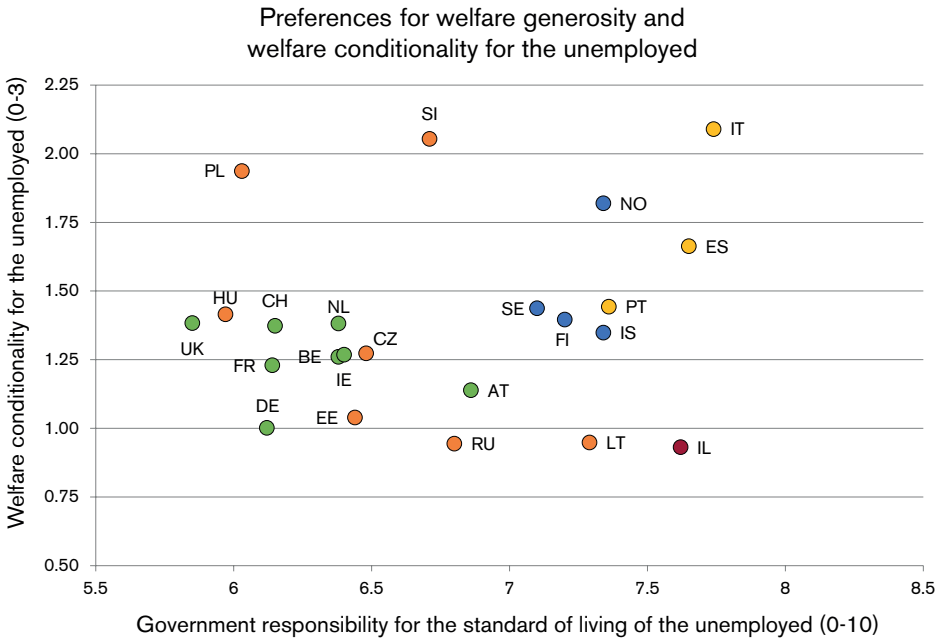


Note: N=10,712 (ESS item E21 was asked to a random subsample of respondents). Results are weighted for age, gender and education (pspweight) and population size (pweight).

with conditionality scores between 1 and 1.5, and government responsibility scores in the range of 6-7. Interestingly, the Mediterranean and Nordic countries deviate from this pattern, and instead combine strong support for social rights with comparatively high conditionality scores. Italy is the most extreme case: Italians are the most conditional but at the same time also the most generous of all Europeans. Slovenian and Polish

respondents have a similar level of support for social obligations but are considerably less generous. In particular, the Polish appear to argue for relatively low-level unemployment protection coupled with tough sanctions for those who do not comply with work obligations. Quite the opposite pattern is found among Israelis and Lithuanians, who are the most generous and the least conditional of all Europeans.

Figure 3. Preferences for welfare generosity and welfare conditionality for the unemployed



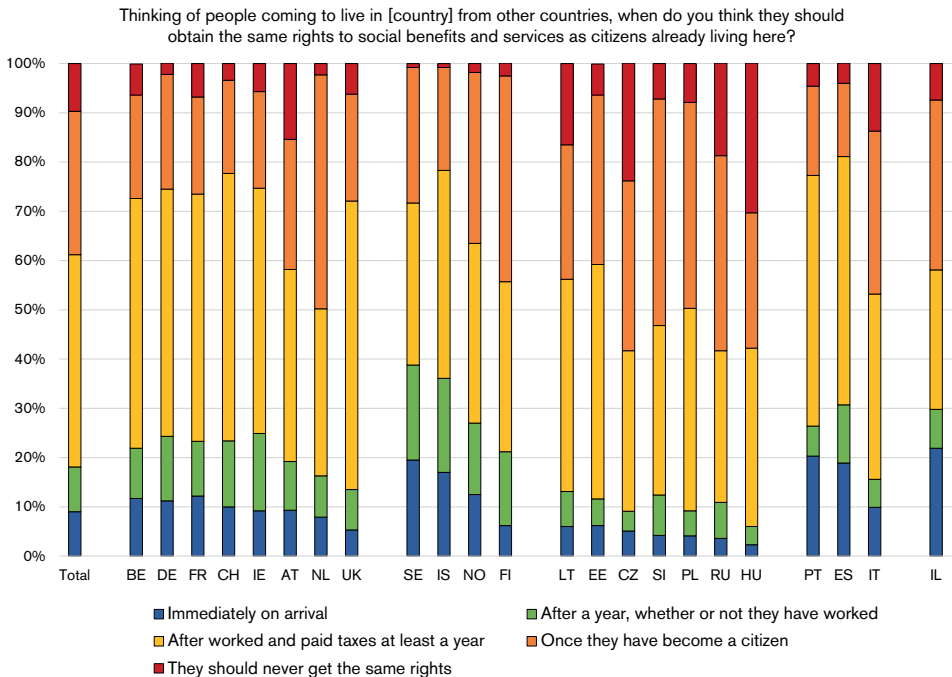
Note: N=10,641. Results are weighted for age, gender and education (pspweight). Colours indicate region (blue = Northern Europe; green = Western Europe; yellow = Southern Europe; orange = Eastern Europe)

Solidarity with migrants: Welfare chauvinism vs. universality?

Increased population movements and the recent refugee crisis have fuelled public debates on the relationship between migration and the welfare state. What are European respondents' beliefs regarding the social rights of newcomers in society? In the Welfare Attitudes module, respondents were asked at what point people migrating from other countries *should obtain the same rights to social benefits and services as citizens already living here* (Figure 4).

Strict welfare chauvinism - that is, the idea that welfare benefits should be reserved for the native population - clearly is a minority position: only 9.7% of Europeans think that immigrants should never get equal social rights (Figure 4). Yet, the stance that newcomers should immediately be granted full access to benefits and services is endorsed by an equally small minority (9.0%). Most Europeans defend a middle position, and prefer to condition social rights on the acquisition of citizenship (29.1%) or residence and payment of taxes for at

Figure 4. Preferences regarding the granting of social rights to immigrants, by country and region

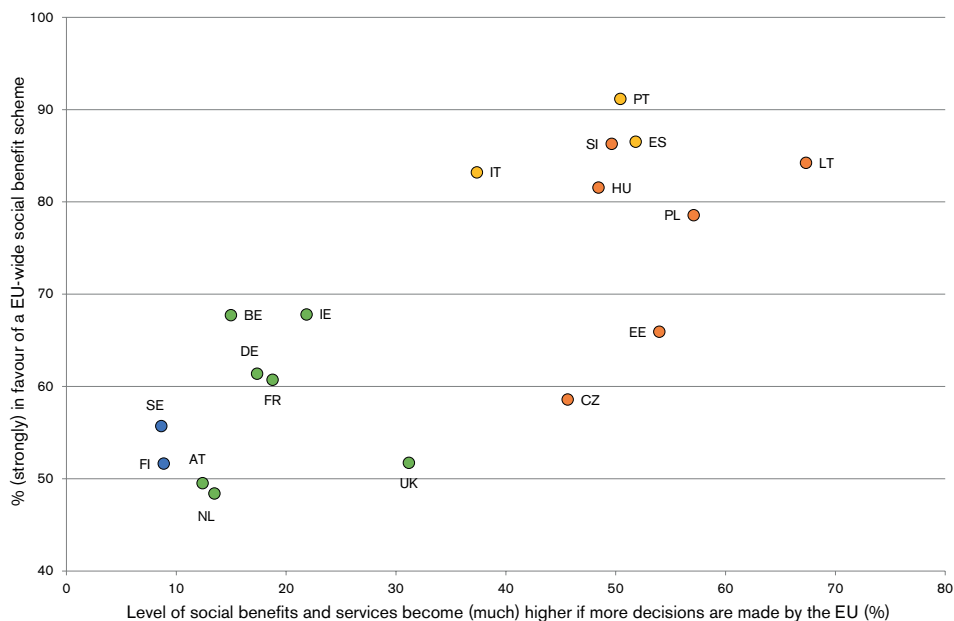


Note: N=42,403; Results are weighted for age, gender and education (pspweight).

least a year (43.1%). In 2008/09, very similar results were found using exactly the same question: 7.9% completely opposed granting social rights to immigrants, while 9.2% favoured unconditional rights for newcomers (see also Mewes & Mau 2013). Clearly, the refugee crisis did not trigger a wave of welfare chauvinist sentiments across Europe. In Portugal and Spain, the percentage indicating that newcomers should receive social rights upon arrival has even increased substantially (from 9.6 to 20.3% in Portugal; from 11.7 to 18.9% in Spain).

In Northern and Western Europe, granting rights based on reciprocity (having paid taxes for at least one year) is the most popular position by far. Eastern European respondents are considerably more reluctant to provide social rights for immigrants. Citizenship is seen as the primary condition for social rights, and the percentage of welfare chauvinists is also higher than in other regions. This might be surprising, as Eastern Europe has relatively low immigration rates and levels of social expenditure. Apparently, welfare chauvinism can prosper in a climate of dissatisfaction with the social protection system combined with relative unfamiliarity with immigrants.

Figure 5. Public support for an EU-wide social benefit scheme and expectations that Europeanisation will increase benefit levels



Note: N (item E37)=31,764, N (item E38)=32,587. Results are weighted for age, gender and education (pspweight). Colours indicate region (blue = Northern Europe; green = Western Europe; yellow = Southern Europe; orange = Eastern Europe)

Towards a Social Europe?

Over the years, the EU has gradually assumed a more active role in social policy making (Falkner, 2016). This raises the question whether European respondents support this evolution, or whether they see the development of a Social Europe as a threat to their national welfare arrangements.

The Welfare Attitudes module gauges whether respondents think *the level of social benefits and services in their country would become higher or lower if more decisions were made by the European Union rather than by national governments*. On average, three in ten Europeans (30.5%) believe that increased EU involvement would lead to higher or much higher levels of social protection. By contrast, 69.5% expect benefit levels to stay the same or become lower as a result of more European decision-making.

Despite these relatively widespread concerns about Social Europe, 67.1% of Europeans express their support for an *EU-wide social benefit scheme that would guarantee a minimum standard of living for the poor*. Both attitudes are neatly aligned: in countries with strong expectations that Europeanisation will increase benefit levels, public support for an EU-level benefit scheme is comparatively strong as well (Figure 5).

The generosity of national welfare systems is a crucial driver of the sizeable cross-national differences in attitudes towards Social Europe. In the strongly developed Nordic welfare states, few respondents

expect improvement from Europeanisation of social policy, and support for EU-level benefits is relatively low. In the Eastern and Southern European countries, where social expenditure is considerably lower, respondents more often see the EU as an agent that could improve social protection.

Support for a Basic Income

The idea of a Universal Basic Income is both simple and radical and has gained increasing attention in public debates and among policymakers across Europe (De Wispelaere & Stilton 2004; OECD 2017). Yet, providing a sufficiently high income for *all*, regardless of their need for support and *without* work obligations, is fundamentally at odds with the foundations of European welfare systems, where reciprocity and need play a crucial role.

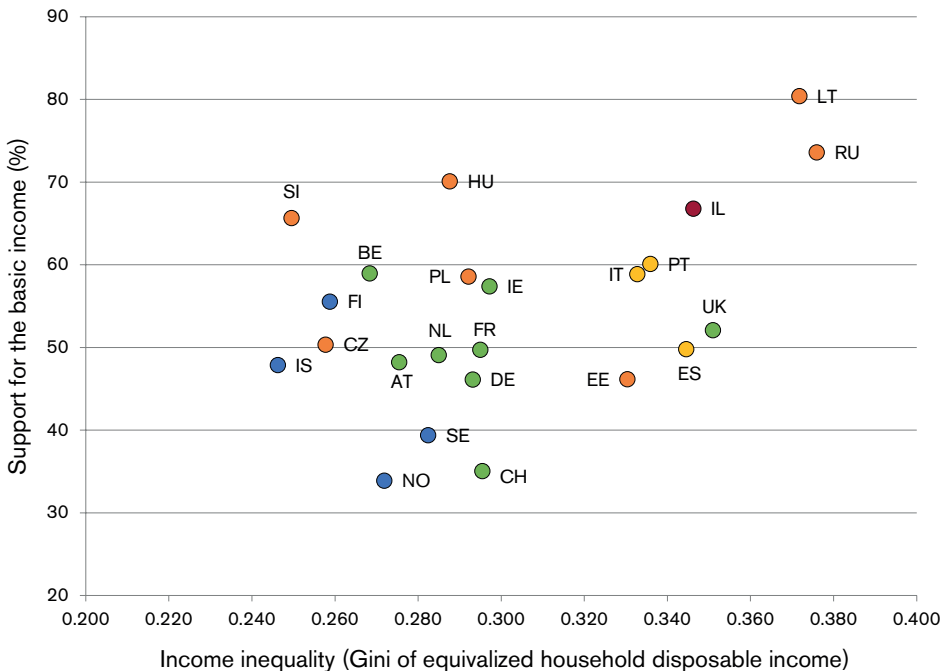
The ESS Welfare Attitudes module includes - for the first time in academic cross-national research - a question on the introduction of a Universal Basic Income. Respondents were asked whether they are against or in favour of a basic income scheme, defined as follows:

- *The government pays everyone a monthly income to cover essential living costs.*
- *It replaces many other social benefits.*
- *The purpose is to guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living.*
- *Everyone receives the same amount regardless of whether or not they are working.*
- *People also keep the money they earn from work or other sources.*
- *This scheme is paid for by taxes.*

The percentage of respondents that (strongly) support the introduction of a universal basic income scheme varies widely, from 33.9% (Norway) to 80.4% (Lithuania). Support for basic income seems to be lower in more affluent countries in Northern and Western Europe, and higher in the less wealthy welfare states in the East.

Figure 6 plots support for a basic income per country against income inequality (measured by the Gini coefficient). Support for a basic income scheme is strongest in highly unequal countries (such as Lithuania and Russia), and weakest in the equalising welfare states of Norway and Sweden. This pattern suggests that a basic income is welcomed as a way to improve social welfare rather than as a replacement for well-performing welfare systems.

Figure 6. Support for basic income and income inequality (OECD, 2016)



Note: N (item E36)=40,712. Results are weighted for age, gender and education (pspweight). Colours indicate region (blue = Northern Europe; green = Western Europe; yellow = Southern Europe; orange = Eastern Europe)

Conclusion

The ESS Round 8 Welfare Attitudes module shows that there is great support among Europeans for welfare redistribution. The idea that national governments have a responsibility for the wellbeing of vulnerable groups is widely endorsed. The context of multiple crises has not eroded the legitimacy of the welfare state. A comparison with ESS data from 2008/09 shows patterns of stability rather than marked change.

Nevertheless, the findings presented here evince that Europeans are more enthusiastic about some solidarity relationships than about others. While support for provision in favour of the elderly is nearly unanimous, redistribution towards the unemployed and newcomers is met with opposition by a considerable share of the population. These differences can be largely understood in terms of deservingness criteria (van Oorschot et al. 2017). The elderly are generally seen as a relatively deprived group (the need criterion) who have previously contributed to society (reciprocity). The unemployed,

conversely, are sometimes deemed to be responsible for their situation (control), while preferences for the in-group (identity) block solidarity with immigrants.

Besides the classic schemes of redistribution - i.e., towards the elderly, the unemployed, the sick - new solidaristic relationships are at the centre of public debates. European respondents stand widely divided on new policy proposals, such as the implementation of an EU-wide benefit schemes or a Universal Basic Income. Striking cross-national differences are present regarding these new proposals that challenge the foundations of the nationally bounded welfare state. In the more developed welfare states of Northern and Western Europe, there appears to be considerable reluctance to replace the existing arrangements. In Eastern and Southern Europe, dissatisfaction with current provisions is more widespread, and new proposals are looked at as an opportunity to improve living conditions. These findings evidence clear feedback effects of current institutional settings on welfare state legitimacy.

Endnotes

¹ Round 8 of the ESS was fielded in 23 countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

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ESS data and documentation

The European Social Survey (ESS) has undertaken 381,351 face-to-face interviews since Round 1 was fielded in 2002/03. All the documentation and data - collected over the subsequent waves up to and including Round 8 (2016/17) - is available to download or view online (europeansocialsurvey.org).

The ESS became a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) in 2013, meaning all participants contribute to the budget of the project. During Round 8, there were 23 participating countries, including 17 ERIC Members.

By using the tools detailed below - EduNet and NESSTAR - you can join over 125,000 people who have registered to access ESS data.

Analysis of ESS data was used in 3,554 academic journal articles, books and chapters, working and conference papers published between 2003-16.

EduNet

The ESS e-learning tool, EduNet, provides hands-on examples and exercises to guide users through the research process, from a theoretical problem to the interpretation of statistical results.

NESSTAR

The ESS Online Analysis package uses NESSTAR - an online data analysis tool. Documentation to support NESSTAR is available from NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data (nesstar.com).

Topline Results Series

This is the eighth issue in our Topline Results series of publications. All nine issues are available to view or download on the ESS website. Other issues in the series include:

1. Trust in Justice (also available in Croatian)
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3. Economic Crisis, Quality of Work and Social Integration
4. Europeans' Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy (also available in Albanian, Bulgarian, Italian, Lithuanian and Slovak)
5. Europeans' Personal and Social Wellbeing (also available in Albanian, Lithuanian, Russian, Slovak and Slovene)
6. Social Inequalities in Health and their Determinants (also available in Danish, French, German, Irish Gaelic, Romanian, Slovene and Spanish)
7. Attitudes towards Immigration and their Antecedents (also available in Georgian, German, Hebrew, Norwegian, Slovene and Spanish)
9. European Welfare Attitudes to Climate Change and Energy

About the ESS

ESS is an academically-driven survey that has been conducted across Europe since 2002. The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of diverse populations in more than thirty nations. Undertaken every two years with newly selected, cross-sectional samples, the full dataset contains the results of over 380,000 completed interviews.

The European Social Survey has been a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC) since 2013. It continues to provide freely available cross-national data about public attitudes and behaviour over time.

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23 countries participated in Round 8 of the ESS, fielded in 2016/17.

Members:

Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK

Observer:

Switzerland

Other Participants:

Finland, Iceland, Israel, Russia and Spain

Multi-national advisory groups to the ESS ERIC General Assembly are the Methods Advisory Board (MAB), Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) and Finance Committee (FINCOM).

The ESS ERIC Headquarters are located at City, University of London.

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The National Coordinators' (NC) Forum involves national teams from all participating countries.

