

**Understanding public support for the welfare state**

Klarita Gërxhani and Ferry Koster

To appear in *International Sociology*

## **Abstract**

In this paper we explore to what extent and how individuals' welfare state attitudes relate to their subjective assessment of the available social support. Using various sociological and socio-psychological theories we first provide a theoretical analysis of the micro-macro links between perceived social support (micro), social trust in support availability (macro), and public attitudes towards welfare states (micro). An empirical test based on a large cross-country dataset of 31,122 respondents in 25 European countries shows that the more welfare is provided by the state, the less of it is desired in countries where individuals have the general belief that they can rely on each other for support. Importantly, only when considered jointly, welfare state provision and social trust in support availability become essential in explaining welfare state attitudes.

## 1. Introduction

The foundation of the modern welfare state, which has its origin in nineteenth-century Europe, lies in the responsibility taken by the state to provide economic equity, social protection and solidarity (Gangl 2007). Welfare states offer services and benefits to meet people's basic needs for education, health, income and housing. While formal institutions assembled by the state are a necessary condition for the proper functioning of a welfare state, the informal or public support of these institutions is also necessary to make the implementation of a welfare state sustainable. The literature shows that public attitudes towards welfare state policies are increasingly taken into account in the formal design of those policies (e.g., Crespi 1997, Lewin-Epstein et al. 2003). Yet, much is still unknown about the determinants of this support.

In forming their opinion about the welfare state individuals are embedded in an institutional and social context. They are repeatedly involved in an exchange relationship with the welfare state and its institutions, but also with other individuals (e.g., friends, family, colleagues, neighbors) and the society as a whole. Social relations and social support are known to facilitate the provision of basic services and benefits (Cohen et al. 2000). Social relations leading to social capital through interactions between individuals (Lin 2001) have been a frequent focus of studies looking at the relationship between social capital and the welfare state (e.g., Rothstein 2001, Scheepers et al. 2003, Kääriäinen and Lehtonen 2006, Van Oorschot et al. 2006). This relationship can be either positive or negative, known as crowding-in and crowding-out effects.

Individuals' support for the welfare state may also depend on the extent to which they feel that they can rely on others in times of need. While there are studies analyzing social capital and its relationship with welfare state provisions, the impact social capital has on public attitudes has not yet been researched. Moreover, though a number of these studies have taken 'social support' into account, they do so only indirectly, i.e., by considering it as one of the aspects of social capital (Kääriäinen and Lehtonen 2006, Pichler and Wallace 2007). The concept used refers to *enacted* social support, i.e., the extent to which people actually give

support. This aspect of social support does however not capture the variety of ways in which available support is *perceived* in different societies. For any given level of objective support, some may perceive high level of support availability within their society, while others may not.

Individuals' subjective assessment of the available social support has been overlooked in the literature on welfare state support. We aim at filling this gap by introducing elements of various theories to the analysis of public opinion towards the welfare state. Social support theory emphasizes the protective and buffering features of social support in case of undesirable physical, mental and social situations. Within this theory, not only the support itself, but mainly the perception that it is available plays an essential role. At the individual level, such a perception increases individuals' optimism and confidence in dealing successfully with various situations they may be confronted with (Barrera 1986, Cohen et al. 2000). Socio-psychological theories argue that in turn, this leads to social trust, societal integration and social cohesion at the societal level (Lin and Dean 1984, Uslander 2000, Delhey and Newton 2003). This societal cohesion is experienced either through a mutual sense of belonging and shared identity or through shared utility and obligations to cope with various situations; which will, according to sociological theories on social solidarity and deservingness criteria, lead to more solidarity and contribution to collective goods (see Van Oorschot 2000b for an extensive discussion). In short, individuals living in societies characterized by a generalized belief of available support, experience more social trust and social cohesion, and may therefore have different opinions about the welfare state than individuals living in societies where they do not expect social support from others when in need.

This paper combines socio-psychological theories with the deservingness criteria perspective to specify how the macro level of perceived social support relates to the micro level of welfare state attitudes.<sup>1</sup> In doing so we explore an important missing link in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that our implementation of perceived social support is indeed at the macro level. Though it builds on micro-level variables (how individuals perceive support), the measure we are interested in is

welfare state literature, which is the role in shaping public attitudes towards welfare states of social trust in the supportiveness of others if needed. Moreover, we investigate how the interaction between on the one hand this ‘social trust in support availability’ and on the other welfare state provision relates to individuals’ attitudes towards the welfare state. By looking at this important but under-researched aspect of social capital (i.e., social trust in support availability), this study complements the current research focusing on the causal relationship between the welfare state and social capital. In addition, it takes this research a step further by also investigating how this relationship correlates with public attitudes. An important question we will answer is whether the extent of welfare state provisions strengthens or weakens the relationship between social trust in support availability and public opinions on welfare.

## **2. Public attitudes towards the welfare state: a brief overview**

“The welfare arrangements and institutions that serve the collective interest of modern societies have a stronger legitimacy to the degree that more people are motivated to contribute to the arrangements and people have more reasons to contribute.” (Van Oorschot 2000a:18). Various theoretical perspectives contribute to understanding welfare states attitudes. The first perspective is class related and explains public support by individuals’ personal interests (Wilensky 1975, Galbraith 1992, Heinemann 2008, Halla et al. 2010). The second perspective is based on two important social ideologies: economic individualism and social equality (Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989, Shapiro and Young 1989, Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003, Lewin-Epstein et al. 2003, Lipsmeyer and Nordstrom 2003, Mau 2004). The third perspective emphasizes the role of cultural factors like morals and values (e.g., Kluegel and Smith 1986, Van Oorschot 2000a, Lockhart 2001). The fourth perspective focuses on welfare systems as institutions that not only affect individuals’ personal interests, but also have a norm-shaping function (Esping-Andersen 1990, Bean and Papadakis 1993, Svallfors 1997, Rothstein 1998,

---

the ‘general’ perception of support at the level of society. The motivation for this perspective will be extensively explained, below.

Blomberg and Kroll 1999, Andress and Heien 2001, Arts and Gelissen 2001, Jæger 2006, Larsen 2008).

In this paper, we focus on public attitudes towards a welfare state by considering public views on whether the responsibility of providing for everyone should lay on the individuals themselves or on the government. In doing so we incorporate Rothstein's (1998) view that debates on welfare policy should be about the level of general fairness regarding the relation between citizens and the state. In other words, do we want to solve our common issues individually as citizens or do we want the state to take over and provide for them? A more detailed discussion is provided below.

### **3. Socio-psychological theories on social support, social trust and deservingness**

Social support theory distinguishes between three broad categories of related concepts: social embeddedness, enacted support, and perceived social support (e.g., Barrera 1986, Hagan et al. 1996). While social embeddedness refers to the actual connections between individuals and enacted support to actual support provided, perceived social support refers to generalized beliefs about the supportiveness of others (Cohen et al. 2000). Empirically it has been shown that the perception of available support has “much stronger influence on outcomes than the actual receipt of social support” (Lincoln 2007:2). The rationale for this finding is that the beneficial outcomes on success and well-being are primarily driven by a general positivity within social relations rather than by specific aspects of relationships (Stansfeld 2002).

Perceived social support is derived from subjective information (based on interactions) that leads an individual to believe (1) that she is cared for and loved (emotional support); (2) that she is esteemed and valued (esteem support), and (3) that she belongs to a network of mutual obligations (network support) (e.g., Lin and Dean 1984). As indicated in Figure 1 - link [1], there are two ways through which this information may be beneficial. One that is more individual-related predicts that one's beliefs in the availability of support affect appraisals of stressful and difficult situations which in turn *buffer* the effect of such situations on one's well-being and success. The other mechanism is through *self-esteem* and social

cognition. The more one believes that one can rely on the supportiveness of others, the more one will observe supportive behavior and be supportive oneself, in turn reinforcing others' perceptions of social support. The more these individuals believe that others are to be trusted in making their support available if needed, the more they will be motivated to be supportive themselves, thus reinforcing the virtual circle of trust. This process creates a 'generalized' belief about others' support (e.g., Pierce et al. 1997, Cohen et al. 2000), which will further increase self-esteem and optimism, and thereby will positively affect an individual's well-being and success.

-----  
Figure 1: A theoretical conceptualization  
-----

Personality traits like optimism and self-confidence have been argued to lead to higher levels of social trust (Allport 1961, Uslaner 2000). Social trust (a.k.a. generalized trust) is a belief in the trustworthiness of strangers in one's society. Socio-psychologists view social trust as a product of individual characteristics developed through one's life experiences. The societal approach to trust, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of societies and their formal institutions on the formation of generalized trust (Putnam 2000, Newton 2001, Berggren and Jordahl 2006). Empirical studies seem to support the socio-psychological view, however, by showing that optimism leads to more success and well-being, and that the latter are positively associated with social trust (e.g., Delhey and Newton 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Above, we derived from social support theory that success and well-being are also positively affected by a self-enforcing generalized belief that support will be available if needed (link [1] in Figure 1). This means that there is a link from individual trust in others' supportiveness leading to a generalized belief in such support to increasing success and well-being, and finally yielding social trust (link [2] in Figure 1). Thus, individuals' perceived

---

<sup>2</sup> Delhey and Newton (2003) also find that subjective measures of success and well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) are more closely associated with social trust than objective ones related to economic circumstances (e.g., occupation and income).

social support becomes a social property in the form of social trust as long as their confidence in the supportiveness of others leads to a general optimism and associated satisfaction and well-being (links [1] and [2]).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, in addition to personal traits and societal institutions, social trust is also the product of confidence and optimism about living in a ‘helpful and cohesive environment’ (Barrera 1986). Trusting behavior becomes thus a norm at the societal level (Letki 2006). We conclude that a measure of generalized belief in the availability of support (i.e., a measure at the macro-level) is needed for our analysis.

Returning to the issue of the welfare state and its public support, this discussion leads to the following questions: Does the generalized belief in a society that others are to be trusted in making their social support available if needed, affect individuals’ attitudes towards the welfare state?; and if so, how?

Sociological theories on social solidarity, with their origin in the work of Durkheim and Weber, argue that when individuals experience a common fate they will be more willing to contribute to collective goods. Individuals’ feelings and perceptions seem to be an important factor underlying these shared identity and utility (Cook 1979). “The degree to which people feel attracted to one another and are loyal at the micro level, and the degree to which they perceive a collective identity and we-feeling at the meso level are decisive for their willingness to contribute to the common good” (Van Oorschot 2000a:17). We know from socio-psychological theories that the stronger the perception of the supportiveness of others (micro level), the higher is the level of social trust, social cohesion and a collective identity of being supportive (meso/macro level) (links [1] and [2] in Figure 1). We can thus theoretically predict that a higher perception of social support at the macro level leads to more solidarity and higher support for welfare states (Koster 2007). This link can be best explained by engaging the literature on deservingness criteria (de Swaan 1988, Van Oorschot 2000a, 2000b). The main contribution of this literature is that in deciding whether to support welfare

---

<sup>3</sup> In their socio-psychological study on social support, Lin and Dean (1984) suggest that though measured at the individual level, social support can also be conceptualized in a larger context, for an entire community or society.

provisions,<sup>4</sup> individuals consider various criteria among which, *identity* and *reciprocity* are the mechanisms driving the link from the social trust in a helpful and cohesive society (denoted here as ‘social trust in support availability’) to more individual support for welfare (link [3] in Figure 1). A helpful and cohesive society contributes to a we-feeling or a collective identity, which in turn makes it justifiable to contribute to the welfare state. In addition, living in a society characterized by social trust in support availability will lead to a general confidence of people being reciprocal in times of need. The society will then be characterized by ‘generalized reciprocity’ (Szreter 2002), which will make it easier for individuals to consider more government responsibility for the needy as deserving.

The following macro-micro link (link [3] in Figure 1) can be hypothesized:

*Hypothesis 1: The level of social trust in support availability is positively related to public support for more state responsibility.*

#### **4. Welfare state, social capital and perceived social support**

Various studies have analyzed the relationship between the welfare state and social capital (e.g., Scheepers et al. 2003, Kääriäinen and Lehtonen 2006). The main discussion is whether the formal institutions of a welfare state stimulate or erode a more informal way of meeting needs. One line of research predicts an erosive effect, also known as the crowding-out hypothesis (e.g., Etzioni 1995, Fukuyama 2001, Arts et al. 2003), while another, known as the crowding-in hypothesis, argues that social capital can develop and prosper in a well-institutionalized welfare state (Taylor-Gooby 1985, Kuhnle and Alestalo 2000, Rothstein 2001, Szreter 2002). Empirical tests find more support for the latter, especially at the individual level (Van Oorschot and Arts 2005).

Because of its multidimensional character, social capital is usually captured either by membership in associations, generalized trust, social norms, social networks, or a combination of these aspects. Though positive, the correlations between these aspects are

---

<sup>4</sup> Van Oorschot (2000a) emphasizes that welfare support should not only be related to the degree to which individuals are willing to pay for it but also to their preferences for the rationing of welfare.

generally quite low (e.g., Rothstein 2001, Van Oorschot et al. 2006), leading to the conclusion that one must carefully distinguish between the various aspects of social capital in order to better understand its relationship with the welfare state (Van Oorschot and Finsveen 2009).

In this paper, we introduce and explore another important aspect of social capital –social trust in support availability.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, this differs from generalized trust in social institutions and in other people (e.g., Putnam 2000, Narayan and Cassidy 2001, Rothstein 2001). While the standard measure of generalized trust refers to the extent to which there is a belief that people can generally be trusted, the measure used in this paper refers to social trust related to a specific aspect, i.e., social support being available when needed. We believe that due to this specific focus, our measure of social trust deals with an often-heard criticism of the standard measure, which is its vague and imprecise information on the radius of trust within a society (Fukuyama 2001).

We also take the analysis a step further by exploring the combined effect on public attitudes of welfare state provision and social trust in support availability. There are two aspects to be distinguished here. First, the way the welfare state and social trust in support availability are related to each other (link [4] in Figure 1); and second, the way the relationship between the two affects public attitudes towards welfare states (link [5] in Figure 1). As mentioned above, the first aspect (link [4]) has to some extent been previously addressed in the literature (i.e., indirectly through measures of trust in institutions and other people). The main conclusion is that a strong welfare state will increase levels of trust and cooperation by creating a societal environment of national *solidarity*, *protection*, and empowerment (Rothstein 1998, Uslaner 2000, Van Oorschot and Finsveen 2009). We argued above that social trust in support availability also contributes to a helpful and cohesive society through mechanisms such as optimism, *well-being*, and belonging. Therefore, in creating and maintaining a helpful and safe environment, the welfare state and social trust in support availability will support each other:

---

<sup>5</sup> Due to its positive association with more expansive trust that encompasses people beyond one's household, this aspect relates more to bridging- than to bonding-social capital (see Van Oorschot et al. 2006 for a detailed discussion).

Hypothesis 2: *The extent of welfare provision is positively related to the level of social trust in support availability.*

Regarding the second aspect (link [5] in Figure 1), to the best of our knowledge there is no research considering the way in which an interaction between welfare state and social trust in support availability relates to public attitudes towards welfare. In this paper, we present such an analysis. Being in a society that is perceived as cohesive, supportive and reciprocal based on the availability of social support will increase individuals' sense of fairness to share the responsibility of supporting the needy. The sharing of this responsibility can, however, take two forms. On the one hand, the higher the level of social trust in support availability, the more the individuals living in such a society will be confident of *self-organization or -governance* (Ostrom 1990). In this case, individuals may simply believe that they have no need for a welfare state because living in a society perceived as cohesive and helpful will give them the confidence that they can provide for the needy themselves. This weakens the positive relationship between trust in support availability and support for the welfare state (hypothesis 1) and leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3a: *The extent of welfare state provision weakens the relationship between the social trust in support availability and public support for more state responsibility.*

On the other hand, though living in a cohesive and helpful society, individuals may prefer to share the responsibility of supporting the needy through the state (i.e., *third-party governance*) rather than counting on their self-governance skills. In this case, they may prefer more state responsibility to support the needy. Hence the alternative hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3b: *The extent of welfare state provision strengthens the relationship between the social trust in support availability and public support for more state responsibility.*

## **5. Data, Operationalization, and Method**

### **5.1. Data**

Three datasets are used to test the hypotheses. The individual level data are obtained from the *European Values Study (EVS)* (Halman 2001). More specifically, we make use of the information gathered in 1999-2000 from the third wave of this ongoing project, conducted among 39,797 respondents in 32 European countries. These data are combined with welfare state data at the national level, which are available through *Eurostat*. Finally, data about levels of social trust in support availability within a country are provided by Fidrmuc and Gërkhani (2008), based on the *Eurobarometer survey 1998, 1999, and 2001* and the *Candidate Countries Eurobarometer survey 2002* (see also Koster 2007). These three different data sources are merged into one dataset. National level data from seven of the countries surveyed in the EVS are missing and are therefore excluded from the analyses. The final dataset includes 31,122 respondents in 25 countries.

## **5.2. Operationalization**

### Dependent variable

The dependent variable *public attitudes towards the welfare state* is measured as follows. Respondents are asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 whether they think *individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves* (1) or that *the state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for* (10). The main reason for using this measure is the fact that it best captures individuals' views on a 'fair' balance with respect to the relation between citizens and the state in solving common problems (Rothstein 1998). For example, in solving problems like healthcare, education, pensions, etc., do we want the state or the individuals to take the responsibility for it?

### Independent variables

The variable *social trust in support availability* includes two measures based on the following survey question: "If you had any of the following problems (you were feeling depressed; you needed help finding a job for yourself or a member of your family) is there anyone you could rely on to help you, from outside your own household?". One measure captures the fraction of

people that perceive support from others (outside the own household) if they needed a job and the other measures perceived support when depressed. These variables are coded 0 for people who believe they do not have someone outside own household to rely on and 1 for people who believe they do. As explained in the previous sections, our interest lies in a macro variable measuring a generalized belief in the availability of social support. This is obtained by aggregating the individual level data to the country level.<sup>6</sup> The information used is based on Fidrmuc and Gërkhani (2008) who use the Eurobarometer survey to calculate the fraction of people with perceived access to different social resources within a country.

Comparative welfare state research has generated a number of indicators for *welfare state provisions*. The most common measure is the size of the welfare state in terms of social spending relative to GDP. Social spending includes among others unemployment benefits, disability, sickness and disease benefits (see e.g., Van Oorschot et al. 2006). Other approaches focus on identifying welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990, Larsen 2008) and the associated level of decommodification, e.g., the extent to which citizens depend on the market for their individual welfare (Fraile and Ferrer 2005). This is usually measured with the so-called ‘generosity data’ (see e.g., Scruggs 2004). All these measures relate to a certain extent to the fairness issue captured by our variable of interest *public attitudes towards the welfare state*. However, given that focusing on regimes or welfare state generosity severely decreases the number of countries that can be included in the analyses, we decided to use the indicator of social spending relative to GDP, which is available for most European countries.

Finally, in order to capture the interaction between welfare state provision and social trust in support availability, we combine these two variables by calculating the product of the standardized scores on *welfare state provision* and the score on *social trust in support availability* (see Gërkhani 2004 for more details).

### Control variables

---

<sup>6</sup> Note that while individual perception of available support is measured as a zero-one variable, the aggregate confidence in supportiveness of others corresponds to the percentage of people who believe that other citizens will be supportive in times of need.

We control for several variables found to be related to welfare state support in earlier studies (cf. section 2). They include socio-demographic characteristics like the respondents' *education, age, gender, being in a stable relationship* with a partner and *employment*, but also proxies for one's social ideology like a variable measuring a person's *left-right self placement* (ranging from 1 = left to 10 = right). We also include control variables that are often used in the literature as direct or indirect measures of individuals' access to social resources through potential contacts with others.

The indirect variables include one's *religious denomination* (a dummy variable) and *town size*. These variables may affect individual access to support and therefore may influence people's attitudes towards the welfare state because, e.g., individuals belonging to a religious denomination may be more in favor of individual responsibility as long as they can receive social support from contacts established through their religious denomination. Individuals living in large towns may be more in favor of state responsibility because they lack the social resources more available in smaller villages. The direct control variables include: one's *membership of a voluntary organization* (measured as a dummy variable), the level of *generalized trust* (indicating whether the respondents think that most people can be trusted or that you cannot be too careful), and whether one *spends time with friends* (ranging from 1 = not at all to 4 = every week). The first two are expected to contribute to a feeling of shared collectivity and fate, and thus will lead to more support for state responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for (Van Oorschot et al. 2006).<sup>7</sup> The third, *spending time with friends*, captures more directly the resources individuals will be able to access to provide for themselves if needed. Hence, the more time individuals spend with friends, the less they will be in favor of state responsibility.

Finally, to assess the impact of country-level economic environment, we also control for the *GDP per capita*. The main argument for including such a variable is that since GDP

---

<sup>7</sup> Though membership in voluntary organizations is often used as a proxy for individual civic engagement and generalized trust (Putnam 2000), one can also argue that the potential contacts established in these organizations may provide resources that one can utilize in times of need. In this case, being a member of a voluntary organization may provide the social support needed, rendering state responsibility unnecessary and thus less preferred.

development has a direct effect on a country's social spending (Van Oorschot and Arts 2005), we expect public attitudes towards welfare states to vary according to the economic development of a country.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.3. Method

The dependent variable is measured at the individual level, whereas the independent variables are measured at both individual and country level. Multilevel regression analysis (or Hierarchical Linear Modeling) allows us to investigate effects at different levels of analysis and at the same time (Snijders and Bosker 1999). It does so by showing that the parameters at the micro level are a function of the macro level and that this relationship can be expressed in terms of the macro-level variables (DiPrete and Forristal 1994). In its general form, the multilevel model has a fixed part (the linear function of the independent variables) and a random part (in this particular case the unexplained variation at the individual level and the unexplained variation between the countries).

All variables, except the dummy variables, are grand mean centered.<sup>9</sup>

The multilevel analysis is performed in the following steps. First an empty model is computed (Model 0). The empty model is an unconditional model without independent variables and serves as a baseline by which the other models are evaluated. The control variables are added in Model I. Given our theoretical argument that welfare state provision and social trust in support availability are considered jointly when formulating an opinion on a welfare state, we specify several models accounting for their separate and combined relationship with welfare state attitudes and compare them to Model I. Model IIa includes the variable *welfare state provision* without the indicator of *social trust in support availability*, whereas Model IIb includes the measure for *social trust in support availability* but not the

---

<sup>8</sup> Note that this can be particularly relevant since our sample includes eight former Eastern-European countries that may differ considerably from other countries in the sample with respect to wealth and welfare state spending. To check whether the sample set-up affects our results, we constructed models with and without a dummy variable comparing the Eastern-European countries with the rest of the sample. Since these models do not show an effect of the dummy variable, we decided to maintain the GDP level as the only control variable. The results can be provided upon request.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of centering decisions in multilevel analysis, see Kreft, De Leeuw and Aiken (1995).

variable *welfare state provision*. Model III includes both *welfare state provision* and *social trust in support availability*. Finally, Model IV examines how the interaction between *welfare state provision* and *social trust in support availability* is related to *welfare state attitudes*. The parameters in these models are estimated by the maximum likelihood method and the regression coefficients are tested by Wald tests (Snijders and Bosker 1999). The deviance between the models is used to evaluate the fit of the different models.

## 6. Results

Table 1 gives an overview of the country-level means of the dependent variable *public attitudes towards the welfare state* (individual vs. state responsibility) and the independent variables *welfare state provision*, *social trust in support availability*, and *GDP per capita*.

---

Table 1: Descriptive statistics per country

---

Next, we ran a correlation analysis, indicating that welfare state provision and social trust in support availability are positively correlated ( $r = 0.39$ ;  $p = 0.06$ ,  $N=25$ ). As shown in Figure 2, countries with high levels of welfare state provision tend to have high levels of social trust in support availability. Though only weakly significant, this result provides direct support for Hypothesis 2. A strong welfare state and a helpful and cohesive society with high levels of social trust in support availability support each other.

---

Figure 2: Relation between welfare state provision  
and social trust in support availability

---

---

Table 2: Individual and aggregate determinants

---

Finally, we test Hypotheses 1 and 3. The former predicts a direct relationship between social trust in support availability and welfare state attitudes, while the latter predicts an indirect relationship through an interaction between welfare state provision and social trust in support availability. The results of these empirical tests are reported in Table 2. Model I investigates the relationship between the control variables and public opinion towards the welfare state. All results, except for ‘belonging to a voluntary organization’ and having a ‘stable relationship’, are statistically significant and supportive of previous findings in the literature. This model significantly improves compared to the empty model ( $deviance = 616.65, p < 0.01$ ). The results show that older people and women are in favor of more state responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. On the other hand, higher educated people, employed, and those who declare to be politically rightwing are more supportive of the idea of individual responsibility regarding own welfare. These results confirm that the preferences people have towards a welfare state are strongly related to a combination of self-interest and ideology. Furthermore, the results presented in Model I show that individuals belonging to a religious denomination, individuals spending more time with friends, and those who are more trusting towards strangers are more in favor of individual responsibility, whereas individuals living in large towns express a higher preference for state responsibility. In general terms, this confirms that individual access to social support (i.e., measured at the micro level) indeed negatively affects welfare state support.<sup>10</sup> GDP per capita seems to be negatively related to attitudes towards the welfare state, such that the higher the GDP, the less people support the welfare state. This result may be related to the thermostat function of public opinion meaning that institutions can lose public support as they pass a certain threshold (Wlezien 1995). As a

---

<sup>10</sup> Note that though negative, generalized trust in strangers is an exception since it says something more about how individuals estimate the trustworthiness of the society around them, rather than about their access to actual support.

result, the public may prefer a decrease in the level of social spending in wealthier countries, which also have more welfare state arrangements.

The relationship between the individual level control variables and welfare attitudes remains the same after including the variables at the national level, implying that this relationship is not mediated by social trust in support availability and welfare state provision. In particular, it is noteworthy that the correlation between the micro-level individual access to support and welfare attitudes does not diminish if one takes into account the country's macro-level social trust in support availability. It is the latter (and especially in interaction with the welfare state) that we are interested in, however.

Hypothesis 1 predicts a positive relationship between social trust in support availability and preference for government responsibility. As previously shown, there is a positive relationship between social trust in support availability and welfare state provision, hence these variables are first entered individually in Models IIa and IIb and then together in Model III to account for multicollinearity. The results, presented in Table 2, show that both, welfare state provision and social trust in support availability are negatively related to preference for government responsibility, but that these effects are not statistically significant. Hypothesis 1 is therefore not supported by our data.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b predict either a positive or a negative interaction effect between social trust in support availability and welfare state provision on public support for more government responsibility to provide for everyone. These hypotheses are tested in Model IV. Adding the interaction term increases the fit of the model significantly (*deviance* = 3.42,  $p < 0.05$ ). As shown in Table 2 the interaction term is negatively related to support for more government responsibility ( $b = -0.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). To help interpret this interaction term, Figure 2 displays the estimated marginal effect of social trust in support availability on public attitudes, dependent on the extent of welfare state provision.

-----

Figure 3: The interaction effect

-----

Investigated separately, neither welfare state provision nor social trust in support availability are significantly correlated with public attitudes towards the welfare state. By taking a closer look at this relationship, we conclude that social trust in support availability and welfare state provision are in fact interdependently related to public attitudes towards the welfare state.

As shown in Figure 3, the relationship between social trust in support availability and attitudes towards the welfare state depends on the extent of welfare provision. In countries with relatively low levels of welfare state provision, public preference for government responsibility decreases somewhat with social trust in support availability. In countries with relatively high levels of welfare state provision, government responsibility is favored much less, as the social trust in support availability increases. Hence, hypothesis 3a, predicting that the extent of the welfare state provision weakens the relationship between social trust in support availability and public support for more state responsibility, is supported by the data, while hypothesis 3b (predicting the reverse) is not supported.<sup>11</sup>

Our results show that, when considered separately social trust in support availability and welfare state provision are not significantly related to public attitudes towards the welfare state. When they are jointly taken into account they matter more for welfare state attitudes.

## **7. Discussion and conclusion**

Numerous studies have made useful contributions to our understanding of welfare states, their public support and the role of social capital. This paper tries to bridge these three aspects. It does so by focusing on one under-researched aspect of social capital, the social trust in support availability, and its combined effect with welfare state provision on individual attitudes towards the welfare state.

---

<sup>11</sup> As suggested by an anonymous referee, we tested the robustness of our results to exclusion of Turkey (which has an extremely low level of welfare state provision). Excluding Turkey does not seriously affect any of our conclusions.

The starting point of this research was that in forming and expressing their preference for smaller or larger welfare states, individuals not only take their personal interests and ideology into account but also the institutional and social context they are embedded in. They do so because they are repeatedly involved in an exchange relationship with a welfare state and its institutions (i.e., either through contributing or receiving provisions), but also with other individuals, known or unknown to them. In this paper we have first explored the latter aspect, which is the perception that one has about relying on unknown others in times of distress and need. According to social support theory, knowing that one can rely on others leads to individuals' optimism and confidence, which in turn increases their success and well-being, and is thus perceived as social support. Socio-psychological theories argue further that the more optimistic, happy and successful individuals are as a result of a high level of perceived social support, the higher their level of social trust will be in the supportiveness of unknown others in the society they live in. This in turn will contribute to a feeling of belonging and collective identity within the society, which according to sociological theories on social solidarity and deservingness criteria will encourage individuals to support more government responsibility rather than individual responsibility to provide for everyone.

We have considered all these theories and provided a detailed theoretical analysis of the mechanisms underlying the relationship on the one hand between perceived social support at the micro level and social trust in support availability at the macro level, and on the other hand, the relationship between the latter and welfare states attitudes. Moreover, we have taken the analysis one step further by arguing that the relationship between social trust in the supportiveness of others and public attitudes towards welfare states will be dependent on the institutional setup with respect to the extent of welfare state provision.

Our empirical results show that social trust in support availability and welfare state provision are indeed interdependently related to public attitudes towards the welfare state. The interaction between the two shows that social trust in support availability matters for welfare state attitudes when the extent of welfare provision is high.

The mirror image of this conclusion is that in countries characterized by relatively high levels of social trust in support availability, public support will be lower the larger the welfare state becomes. This finding implies that being in a society that is perceived as cohesive, supportive and reciprocal based on the availability of social support encourages individuals to share the responsibility of supporting the needy themselves (i.e., self-governance) rather than calling upon state's responsibility, the larger the welfare state becomes. Hence, the more welfare is provided by the state, the less of it is desired in societies where individuals believe they can rely on each other for support. Though the data show that welfare state provision and social trust in support availability strengthen each other, the more there is of both simultaneously the more individuals will find it fair and justifiable to call upon their own responsibility to provide for themselves. This is primarily driven by their belief that other individuals in the society they live in will be helpful in times of need.

Further contributions of this study are: first, it complements existing research on welfare state attitudes by exploring a macro-level aspect of social capital, which is social trust in support availability by others if needed. This is an important aspect because it captures the variety in which available support is perceived in different societies. As our empirical analysis shows, such a variety has important consequences at the micro level. Even though researchers have repeatedly stressed the importance of moving beyond individual level explanations, relatively few studies have done so. This may, to a large extent, be related to lack of international comparative data and therefore it is likely that more studies will be carried out as such data become more available. As this field of inquiry develops, it will become clearer how institutional variables and various aspects of social capital shape public support for the welfare state. The second contribution of this study concerns the finding that institutional (i.e., welfare provision) and social forces (i.e., social trust in support availability) do not function independently of each other. In their relationship with welfare state attitudes, they are in fact mutually dependent. Though the relationship between welfare provision and other aspects of social capital has been discussed before, especially by focusing on the crowding-in and/or

crowding-out hypotheses, the way such relationship correlates with public support for the welfare state has remained unknown, until now.

## References

- Allport, G. 1961. *Pattern and Growth in Personality*, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Andress, H., and Heien, T. 2001. Four Worlds of Welfare State Attitudes? A Comparison of Germany, Norway, and the US. *ESR* 17(4): 337-356.
- Arts, W., and Gelissen, J. 2001. Welfare States, Solidarity and Justice Principles: Does the Type Really Matter? *Acta Sociologica* 44(4): 283-300.
- Arts, W., Halman, L., and Van Oorschot, W. 2003. The welfare state: villain or hero of the piece? In Arts, Hagenaars & Halman (Eds.), *The cultural diversity of European unity*. Leiden: Brill.
- Barrera, M., Jr. 1986. Distinctions between Social Support Concepts, Measures, and Models. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 14(4): 413-445.
- Bean, C., and Papadakis, E. 1993. Popular Support for the Welfare State: A Comparison Between Institutional Regimes. *Journal of Public Policy*, 13(3): 227-254.
- Berggren, N. and Jordahl, H. 2006. Free to Trust: Economic Freedom and Social Capital. *Kyklos* 59: 141-69
- Blekesaune, M., and Quadagno, J. 2003. Public attitudes toward welfare state politics: a comparative analysis of 24 nations. *ESR* 19(5): 415-427
- Blomberg, H., and Kroll, C. 1999. Do Structural Contexts Matter? Macro-sociological Factors and Popular Attitudes towards Public Welfare Services. *Acta Sociologica* 42(4): 300-318.
- Cohen, S., Underwood, L., and Gottlieb, B. 2000. *Social Support Measurement and Intervention*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Cook, F. 1979. *Who Should be Helped: Public Support for Social Services*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Pub.
- Crespi, I. 1997. *The Public Opinion Process: How the People Speak*. Erlbaum.
- Delhey, J. and Newton, K. 2003. Who trusts? The origins of social trust in seven societies. *European Societies* 5(2): 93-137.
- De Swaan, A. 1988. *In Care of the State*. Amsterdam: Bakker.
- DiPrete, T., and Forristal, J. 1994. Multilevel Models: Methods and Substance. *ARS* 20: 331-357.
- Esping-Andersen, G. 1990. *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Etzioni, A. 1995. *The spirit of community*. London: Fontana Books.
- Fidrmuc, J., and Gërkhani, K. 2008. Mind the Gap: Social capital, East and West! *Journal of Comparative Economics* 36: 264-286.
- Fraile, M., and Ferrer, M. 2005. Explaining the Determinants of Public Support for Cuts in Unemployment Spending across OECD Countries. *IS* 20: 459-481.
- Fukuyama, F. 2001. Social Capital, Civil Society and Development. *Third World Quarterly* 22-1: 7-20
- Galbraith, J. 1992. *The Culture of Contentment*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Gangl, M. 2007. *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*. Ritzer (ed.) Blackwell Publishing.
- Gërkhani, K. 2004. Tax Evasion in Transition: Outcome of an Institutional Clash? Testing Feige's Conjecture in Albania. *EER* 48(4): 729-745.
- Halla, M., Lackner, M., and Schneider, F. 2010. An Empirical Analysis of the Dynamics of the Welfare State: The Case of Benefit Morale. *Kyklos* 63(1): 55-74
- Halman, L. 2001. *The European Values Study: 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave*. EVS/WORC.
- Hagan, J., Mac Millan, R., and Wheaton, B. 1996. New Kid in Town: Social Capital and the Life

- Course Effects of Family Migration on Children. *ASR* 61: 368-85.
- Hasenfeld, Y., and Rafferty, J. 1989. The Determinants of Public Attitudes toward the Welfare State. *Social Forces* 64(4): 1027-1048.
- Heinemann, F. 2008. Is the Welfare State Self-Destructive? A Study of Government Benefit Morale. *Kyklos* 61(2): 237-257.
- Jæger, M. 2006. Welfare Regimes and Attitudes towards Redistribution: The Regime Hypothesis Revisited. *ESR* 22(2): 157-170.
- Kääriäinen, J., and Lehtonen, H. 2006. The Variety of Social Capital in Welfare State Regimes - A Comparative Study of 21 Countries. *European Societies* 8(1): 27-/57.
- Cluegel, J., and Smith, E. 1986. *Beliefs about inequality: American's views of what is and what ought to be*. NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Koster, F. 2007. Globalization, Social Structure and the Willingness to Help Others. A Multilevel Analysis across 26 Countries. *ESR* 23(4): 537-551.
- Kreft, I., De Leeuw, J., and Aiken, L. 1995. "The Effect of Different Forms of Centering in Hierarchical Linear Models." *Multivariate Behavioral Research* 30(1): 1-22.
- Kuhnle, S. and Alestalo, M. 2000. "Introduction: Growth, Adjustments and Survival of European Welfare States." Pp. 3-18. *Survival of the European Welfare State*. Kuhnle (ed) Routledge.
- Larsen, C. 2008. The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes: How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support. *CPS* 41: 145-168.
- Letki, N. 2006. Investigating the roots of civic morality: Trust, social capital, and institutional performance. *Political Behavior* 28(3): 305-325.
- Lewin-Epstein N., Kaplan A., and Levanon A. 2003. Distributive Justice and Attitudes Toward the Welfare State. *Social Justice Research* 16(1): 1-27.
- Lin, N. 2001. *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lin, N. and Dean, A. 1984. Social support and depression. A panel study. *Social Psychiatry* 19: 83-91.
- Lincoln, K. 2007. *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*. Ritzer (ed) Blackwell Publishing.
- Lipsmeyer, C., and Nordstrom, T. 2003. East versus West: Comparing Political Attitudes and Welfare Preferences across European Societies. *Journal of European Public Policy* 10(3): 339-364.
- Lockhart, C. 2001. *Protecting the elderly: how culture shapes social policy*. Pennsylv. State Univ.Press.
- Mau, S. 2004. Welfare Regimes and the Norms of Social Exchange. *Current Sociology* 52(1): 53-74.
- Newton, K. 2001. Trust, social capital, civil society, and democracy. *IPSR* 22(2): 201-14.
- Narayan, D. and Cassidy, M. 2001. A Dimensional Approach to Measuring Social Capital: Development and Validation of a Social Capital Inventory. *Current Sociology* 49 (2): 59-102.
- Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pichler, F. and Wallace, C. 2007. Patterns of Formal and Informal Social Capital in Europe. *ESR* 23: 423-35.
- Pierce, G., Sarason, B. and Sarason, I. 1997. *Handbook of Social Support and the Family*. Plenum Press. NY.
- Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone*. NY: Simon&Schuster.
- Rothstein, B. 1998. *Just Institutions Matter: The Moral and Political Logic of the Universal Welfare*

- State*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rothstein, B. 2001. Social Capital in the Social Democratic Welfare State. *Politics and Society* 29(2): 207-241.
- Scheepers, P., Ten Grotenhuis, M., and Gelissen, J. 2003. Welfare States and Dimensions of Social Capital: Cross-national Comparisons of Social Contacts in European Countries. *European Societies* 4(2): 185-207.
- Scruggs, L. 2004. Welfare State Entitlements Data Set: A Comparative Institutional Analysis of Eighteen Welfare States, Version 11.
- Shapiro, R., and Young, J. 1989. Public Opinion and the Welfare State: The US in Comparative Perspective. *PSQ* 104(1): 59-89.
- Snijders, T., and Bosker, R. 1999. *Multilevel Analysis: An Introduction to Basic and Advanced Multilevel Modeling*. Sage.
- Stansfeld, S. 2002. Review of Cohen, Underwood, Gottlieb (2000). *Social Support Measurement and Intervention*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Svallfors, S. 1997. Worlds of Welfare and Attitudes to Redistribution: A Comparison of Eight Western Nations. *ESR* 13(3): 283-304.
- Szreter, S. 2002. The State of Social Capital: Bringing Back in Power, Politics, and History, *Theory and Society* 31: 573-621.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. 1985. *Public opinion, ideology and state welfare*. London: Routledge.
- Van Oorschot, W. 2000a. Why Pay For Welfare? A Sociological Analysis of Reasons for Welfare Solidarity. *The Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences* 36(1): 15-36.
- Van Oorschot, W. 2000b. Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public. *Policy and Politics*, 28(1): 33-49.
- Van Oorschot, W., and Arts, W. 2005. The Social Capital of European Welfare States: The crowding out Hypothesis Revisited. *Journal of European Social Policy* 15(1): 5-26.
- Van Oorschot, W., Arts, W., and Gelissen, J. 2006. Social Capital in Europe: Measurement and Social and Regional Distribution of a Multifaceted Phenomenon. *Acta Sociologica* 49-2: 149-167
- Van Oorschot, W. and Finsveen, E. 2009. The Welfare State and Social Capital Inequality. *European Societies* 11(2): 189-210.
- Uslaner, E.M. 2000. Producing and Consuming Trust. *PSQ* 115(4): 569-90.
- Wilensky, H. 1975. *The Welfare State and Equality: Structural and Ideological Roots of Public Expenditure*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Wlezien, C. 1995. The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending. *American Journal of Political Science* 39: 981-1000.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics per country

	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Individual vs. state responsibility<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Welfare state provision<sup>(b)</sup></b>	<b>Social trust in support availability<sup>(c)</sup></b>	<b>GDP per capita</b>
Austria	1522	4.00 (2.57)	55.66	0.79	24195
Belgium	1912	4.99 (2.73)	47.06	0.73	22623
Bulgaria	1000	5.11 (2.89)	44.98	0.54	1563
Czech Republic	1908	4.86 (2.57)	44.75	0.80	5521
Denmark	1032	4.39 (2.15)	52.10	0.82	29993
Estonia	1005	6.05 (2.42)	40.04	0.63	4106
Finland	1038	4.57 (2.46)	53.87	0.73	23292
France	1615	3.99 (2.51)	53.77	0.78	22548
Germany	2036	4.73 (2.70)	56.94	0.66	23114
Great Britain	1000	4.45 (2.39)	47.40	0.80	24151
Greece	1142	5.63 (2.58)	44.90	0.63	10497
Hungary	1000	6.09 (2.84)	33.30	0.72	4697
Ireland	1012	4.54 (2.54)	42.76	0.90	25271
Italy	2000	5.63 (2.68)	50.90	0.78	19269
Latvia	1013	6.68 (2.67)	43.18	0.56	3302
Lithuania	1018	5.42 (2.83)	45.00	0.64	3263
Luxembourg	1211	4.47 (2.47)	53.50	0.80	46278
Malta	1002	5.12 (2.76)	20.60	0.67	9932
Netherlands	1003	4.68 (2.11)	46.06	0.86	24270
Poland	1095	5.73 (2.62)	51.56	0.68	4455
Portugal	1000	4.83 (2.73)	46.86	0.79	14422
Romania	1146	4.82 (3.23)	42.19	0.59	1651
Spain	1200	5.65 (2.40)	46.86	0.86	14422
Sweden	1015	4.22 (2.22)	52.87	0.79	27287
Turkey	1206	5.26 (3.42)	12.46	0.60	2956
Mean	1245	5.01 (2.72)	46.20	0.73	16270

*Note:* A total of 31,122 respondents in 25 countries

Sources: EVS, Eurostat and Eurobarometer

<sup>(a)</sup> 1 = individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves; 10 = the state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. Mean score, standard deviation between brackets.

<sup>(b)</sup> as percentage of GDP

<sup>(c)</sup> Mean shares of people who believe that other citizens will be supportive in times of need.

**Table 2:** Individual and aggregate determinants of public attitudes towards the welfare state

	(I)	(IIa)	(IIb)	(III)	(IV)
<b>National level (Level 2)</b>					
Welfare state provision		-0.01 (0.01)		-0.00 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)
Social trust in support availability			-0.27 (0.73)	-0.27 (0.73)	-0.71 (0.73)
Welfare state provision X Social trust in support availability					-0.16* (0.07)
<b>Control variables</b>					
<b>National level (Level 2)</b>					
GDP per capita	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
<b>Individual level (Level 1)</b>					
Educational level	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)	-0.08** (0.01)
Age	0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (0.0)	0.01** (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)
Gender (1 = female)	0.15** (0.03)	0.15** (0.03)	0.15** (0.03)	0.15** (0.03)	0.15** (0.03)
Stable relationship (1 = yes)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)
Employed (1 = yes)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)	-0.15** (0.01)
Left-right self placement (1 = left to 10 = right)	-0.31** (0.04)	-0.31** (0.04)	-0.31** (0.04)	-0.31** (0.04)	-0.31** (0.04)
Religious denomination (1 = yes)	-0.11* (0.04)	-0.11* (0.04)	-0.11* (0.04)	-0.11* (0.04)	-0.11* (0.04)
Town size	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Belong to voluntary organization (1 = yes)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Spend time with friends (1 = not at all to 4 = every week)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.10** (0.02)
Generalized trust (1 = most people can be trusted)	-0.14** (0.04)	-0.14** (0.04)	-0.14** (0.04)	-0.14** (0.04)	-0.14** (0.04)
Intercept	3.91** (0.15)	3.91** (0.15)	3.91** (0.15)	3.91** (0.15)	4.01** (0.16)
Deviance	616.65**	0.08	0.13	0.22	3.42*
ICC	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03

Note: A total of 31,122 respondents in 25 countries

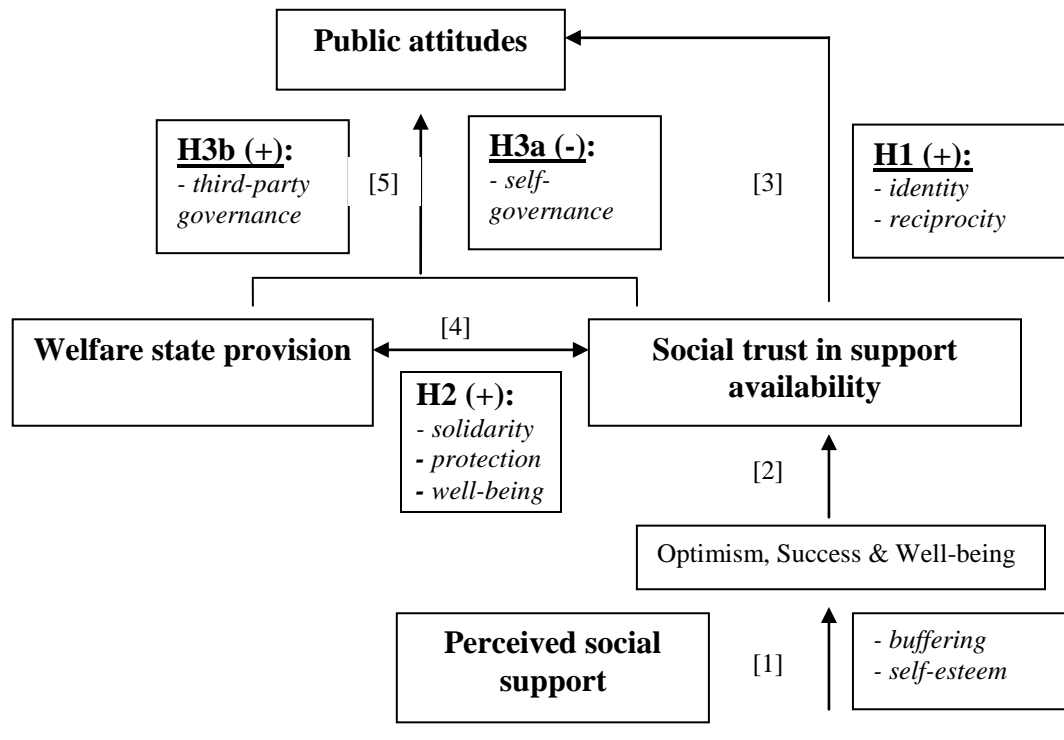
Sources: EVS, Eurostat and Eurobarometer

Standardized regression coefficients are reported, standard errors in parentheses

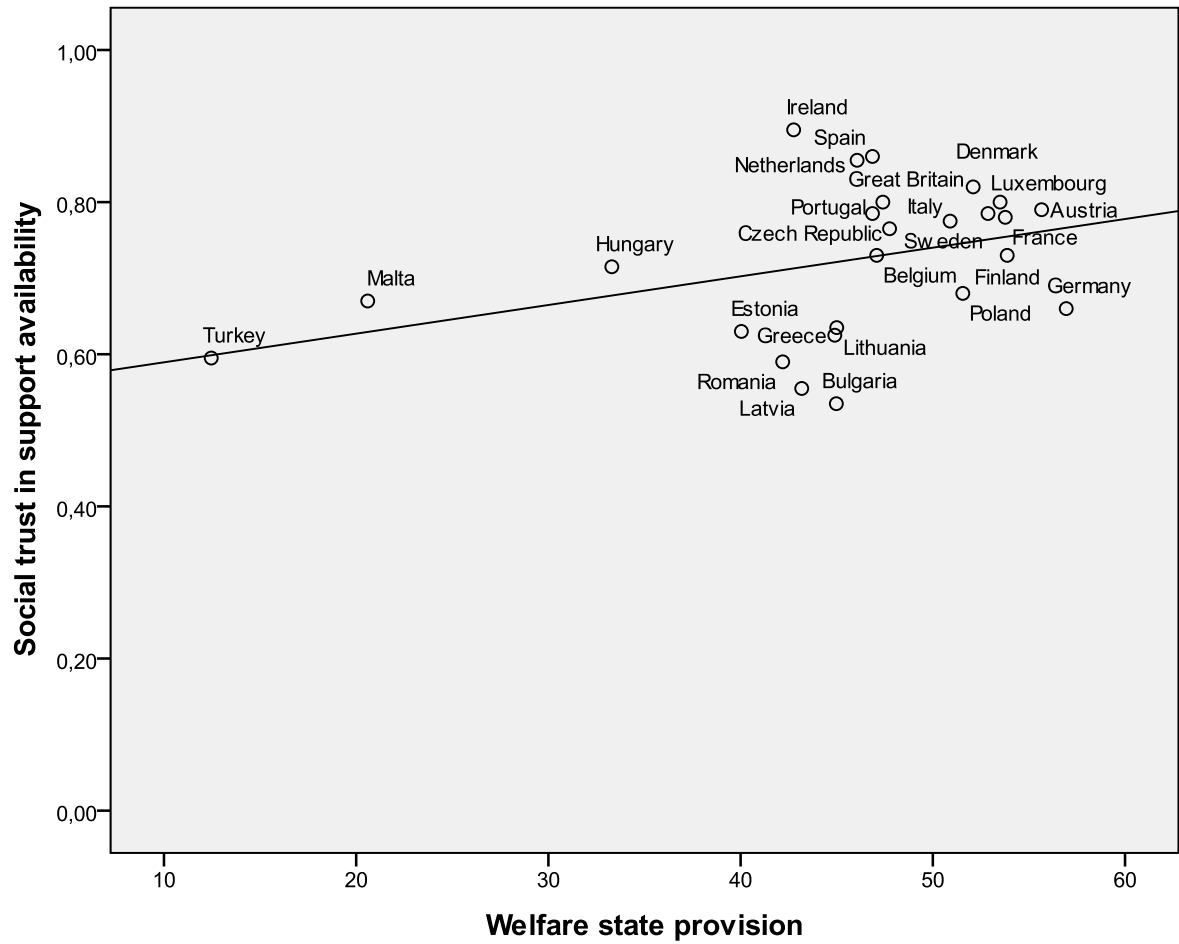
Empty model: -2 Log Likelihood = 109,255.80; Intraclass Correlation = 0.06

\*p < 0.05 \*\*p < 0.01

**Figure 1:** A theoretical conceptualization of social trust in support availability, welfare state provision and public attitudes towards the welfare state

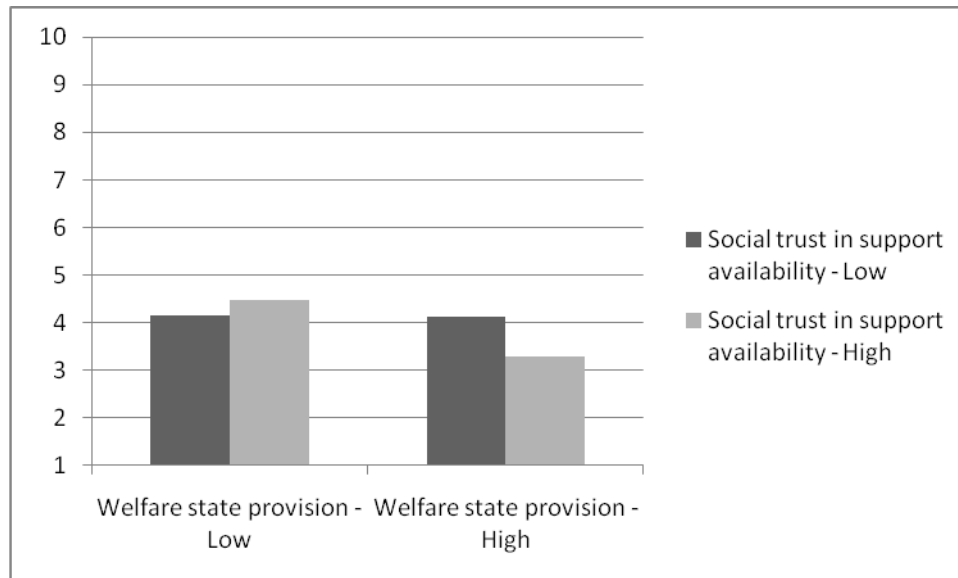


**Figure 2:** The relationship between welfare state provision and social trust in support availability



*Note:* Figure 2 shows the bivariate relationship between the level of welfare state provision and the country level mean of social trust in support availability

**Figure 3:** The interaction effect of social trust in support availability and welfare provision on public attitudes



*Note:* Figure 3 graphically represents the interaction effect of *welfare state provision* and *social trust in support availability* on *public attitudes* towards the welfare state. The interaction effects are computed using the plus and minus 1 standard deviation above and below the mean value. The bars represent the coefficients for low (-1 standard deviation), and high (+ 1 standard deviation) values of the variables.