

Who supports family policy?

Mare Ainsaar

mare.ainsaar@ut.ee, University of Tartu, Institute of Sociology and Social Policy

Abstract

Despite of the discussion about the magnitude of role of family policy on fertility or other family aspects, the support from society is essential component which shapes well-being of children. Public attitudes might also have the decisive role in understanding the future development of the welfare state. However, our knowledge about the formation of attitudes is still limited. A great amount of research has been dedicated to the investigation of attitude formation in psychology, but only a limited number of analyses can be found about the nature of social policy attitudes, and even less about family policy attitudes. The presentation analyses family policy support in 18 European countries and compares results with support to other social policy target groups.

European Social Survey data from 2008/2009 are used as an empirical data source. Multilevel modelling allows detect both individual and country level factors which shape the support.

Results demonstrate that families with children tend to support more government responsibility for domains that are more relevant to families with children and give lower scores towards actions in favour of other welfare recipients. On the other hand, families without children evaluate more highly the need of government action in domains not related to young children, and less in children related domains. The other consistent result was the dependency of attitudes on individual vulnerability and identity related indicators, such as income, education, gender, perception of a just society, left-right positioning, the perception of the benefits compared with the costs of a welfare system and individual value systems. The levels of security needs and benevolence were also statistically important factors in all models, after controlling for gender, income and ideological preferences.

Introduction

Attitude formation is a complex and dynamic process, which is influenced simultaneously by several individual and social factors. While unselfish solidarity cannot be denied in societies, a substantial amount of literature concerning welfare refers also to self-interest as a possible factor in attitude formation. Using the case of people with children, we are interested in examining whether parents are more empathic or selfish in character. We analyse what kind of individual and country-level factors might shape these attitudes.

Method

Multilevel analyses were used in order to investigate the interaction between attitudes, environment and individual background. Data from eighteen countries in the European Social Survey round 4 (ESS4) was used for the analyses. Countries were selected according to the availability of data (not all EU countries participated in ESS4) and after grouping the sample into subgroups with children at home, the country samples had to still contain a statistically relevant number of cases for analyses. Data was collected at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 and was acquired from the Norwegian data archive (ESS, 2008). The period 2008-2009 is characterised by economic recession, and therefore it fits particularly well for social policy analyses, but the results might be also influenced by some prevailing policy changes.

The survey instrument included statements about the preferred role of the government in different domains of social protection: actions to reduce income differences, quarantining the protecting employment, sickness policy, old age living conditions, unemployment, day care services and paid leave for people taking care of sick family members.

We used a sample of 25 to 55 year old people with children (up to age 18) living at home, and a sample of 25 to 55 year old people without children at home as a reference group for the analyses. The limited age range is used in order to avoid substantial life-stage impacts. After preliminary analyses, age was excluded from the final models as being non-significant for this limited age group. Preliminary analyses demonstrated that this particular age group were generally less supportive of the statement that the standard of living for the old and the standard of living for the unemployed is the responsibility of governments. No differences were revealed in attitudes towards employment policy. With regard to other domains, the support for government actions was stronger than the country average, although some country differences were also revealed. We analysed the differences in attitudes about three statements: 1, that government should make efforts to reduce differences in incomes; 2, that government should support child related policies; and 3, that government should make efforts to help other target groups.

Preliminary analyses of welfare state attitude statements demonstrated a close association between attitudes towards day care and towards leave policies for people taking care of a sick family member

(Cronbach's Alpha = 0.701). Both measures are mostly taken up by families with small children. Based on these two questions we formed an index of child-related policy in the analyses.

Attitudes towards other vulnerable groups, excepting income policy, also demonstrated close associations (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.740). Therefore, agreements with the statements that the responsibility of governments includes "to secure jobs for everyone", "health care for the sick", "the standard of living for the old" and "the standard of living for the unemployed", were summarized into the second index that expresses solidarity with "other" vulnerable groups.

Explanative background indicators are divided into four groups: individual vulnerability, individual identity, individual ideological leaning and country-level variables.

According to theory, we would expect vulnerable persons to have generally more supportive attitudes towards the activities of government in all spheres. Individual identity is measured using education, individual achievement value, individual security needs and benevolence. According to present knowledge, all these factors can influence attitudes about social security. Specifically, more confident people and those with higher locus of control and lower protection needs, might have generally lower support attitudes.

Individual ideological leaning variables (agreement with the statement "for a society to be fair, differences in people's standard of living should be small", self-evaluation of the position on the left-right scale, perceived benefits and costs of social benefits) are according to existing literature usually one of the strongest determinants of attitudes. Individuals who believe that all people should be equal and believe in the welfare state, support redistribution more than do others.

The benevolence index is calculated on the basis of three statements: "It is very important to him/her to help people around them", "He/she wants to care for their well-being" and "It is important to him/her to be loyal to their friends. He/she wants to devote themselves to people close to them". We would assume that people with higher benevolence scores will demonstrate higher support for all domains, because they think that this is right thing to do.

Results

Simple comparisons of the attitudes of families with and without children demonstrate that families with children indeed tend to support more child-oriented activities compared with other domains, and families with children place higher values on child-related policies than do people without children. However, the attitudes of families with children are statistically different from the other group only in Cyprus, the United Kingdom, Slovenia and Slovakia.

The multilevel model, which includes also a complex of the individual and country-level background, features the shape the attitudes demonstrated that attitudes about the government's role in child-related policies indeed depends on the presence of child(ren) in the household. Further, other individual factors such as gender, income, educational level, perception of a just society, cost-benefits evaluation of the present social support system, individual security needs and benevolence

values, together with left-right attitudes, all have important implications for attitudes. Women, the lower educated, people on lower incomes and people with higher individual needs for security or benevolence attitudes, agreed more that it is the government's responsibility to guarantee day care or sickness leave. All individual ideological attitudes were related to more positive attitudes towards government action in the domain of child-related policies. Country-level indicators did not demonstrate any significant influence on these attitudes.

While the mean attitudes of families with and without children regarding the need to support other groups did not differ greatly within countries, multilevel analyses demonstrate statistical differences between family types. Families with children gave weaker support to government responsibilities in other domains than did families without children. All the other individual variables in the model demonstrate the expected results and with a similar direction as in previous models. The most influential factors for attitudes about the government's role in supporting other vulnerable groups were ideological principles, belief in an income just society and the evaluation of welfare state benefits being higher than costs. From country-level variables, only wealth turned out to have some role in the model.

Discussion and conclusions

We were interested in whether people will support the responsibility of government generally, or only in those domains related to their own life cycle. The attitudes of families with and without children were compared in different life domains. Analyses of data seem to give more support to the idea of the selfish nature of people. For the present analyses we see that families with children tended to support more government responsibility for domains that are more relevant to families with children and gave lower scores towards actions in favour of other welfare recipients. On the other hand, families without children evaluated more highly the need of government action in domains not related to young children, and less in domains related to children.

The other consistent result was the dependency of attitudes on individual vulnerability and identity related indicators, such as income, education, gender, perception of a just society, left-right positioning, the perception of the benefits compared with the costs of a welfare system and individual value systems. The levels of security needs and benevolence were also statistically important factors in all models, after controlling for gender, income and ideological preferences.

Differences in attitudes resulting from gender might indicate persistent differences in gender equity. The difference was more notable in attitudes about child-related policies and other vulnerable support schemes than in the case of income policy. Lappegard (2008) believes that gender differences in respect of family are dependent on the general gender equality situation, e.g. the more equal the genders are in societies, the more equal should be their attitudes. The present study revealed continuous gender differences even after controlling for many vulnerability indicators.

References

Lappegard, T. (2008), Changing the gender balance in caring: Fatherhood and the division of parental leave in Norway. *Population Resources Policy Review* 27, 139-159.