Public opinion on welfare – the bedrock of public policies?

Biased perceptions, limited knowledge and measurement of welfare attitudes.

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"As good democrats, we like to think, that government policy stems, directly or indirectly, from the Will of the people. If it stems instead from such irrelevant quirks of voter psychology as myopia, misperceptions, and responsiveness to campaign spending, the warm glow seems distinctly diminished." (Bartels 2008: 127)

1. Introduction

Most research on public opinions towards the welfare state or its single programs is motivated by the belief, that the preferences of the citizens are the "bedrock" of policy-making in democratic systems. Social policy reacts to "what the people want". Governments are responsive to gain the acceptance of the electorate. Only if social policies match to the problems the people perceive and their notions of social justice or fairness, governments are re-elected or parties attain a majority. Without such a basis in public support, politicians not only risk to be *blamed* by the voter, but also their social programs lack legitimacy and find no acceptance (Brooks/Manza 2006, 2007). The argument is familiar that welfare states persist in spite of liberal retrenchment attempts because of citizen's demand for social security in old age and in the case of illness or unemployment, or that certain reforms are necessary to meet the demands of the people. In times of rising inequality, redistribution is demanded by the median voter, leading to policies that partly correct the unequal distributive outcomes of markets (Iversen 2010). As in democracy theory in general, also in social policy research the policy preferences function as "bedrock" of the ensuing political process.

However, such a role of the mass attitudes was criticized (Bartels 2003a). Firstly, it is argued that the preferences of citizens themselves are not particularly reflected or stable enough to qualify such attitudes to form the (legitimatory) basis of democratic political decisions or social policy legislation. Secondly, the claim that government legislation responds to the demands of citizens was criticized to be overly optimistic. Representation may be limited, as currently being debated in the US with regard to unequal income distribution, which can hardly be explained by the preferences of the broad majority of citizens (Hacker/Pierson 2010). Rather, representation would appear to be unequal (Gilens 2005; 2010).

The present article picks up the first of these arguments which claims that *preference formation* itself needs more scrutinity. What can social policy research contribute to this skeptical view of the role of preferences in democratic social policy process? The paper observes directions in public opinion and welfare attitudes research that focus on how preferences themselves react to information, to political discourses, to implemented reforms and to the media. It is argued that this re-orientation is combined with a change in research methods, where (survey) experiments are becoming more common, which can more easily test *preference formation* and effects of framing. Another innovation, the use of online surveys and the opportunities they offer in investigating preference formation, are discussed.

The next chapter reconstructs the arguments in comparative welfare state theory and political economy which repeat the democratic ideal of an enlightened voter that demands those programs that help solve his problems. Chapter 3 gives an overview of approaches to a closer examination of *preference formation* like experimental designs and describes the widening use of online surveys. Chapter 4 introduces different online-surveys and tests, if the survey mode matters by comparing distribution and correlation structures of a few variables, i.E. support for redistribution. The analysis draws on publicly available data of random probability online surveys in Germany.

2. The relevance of preferences – bottom up and top town perspective

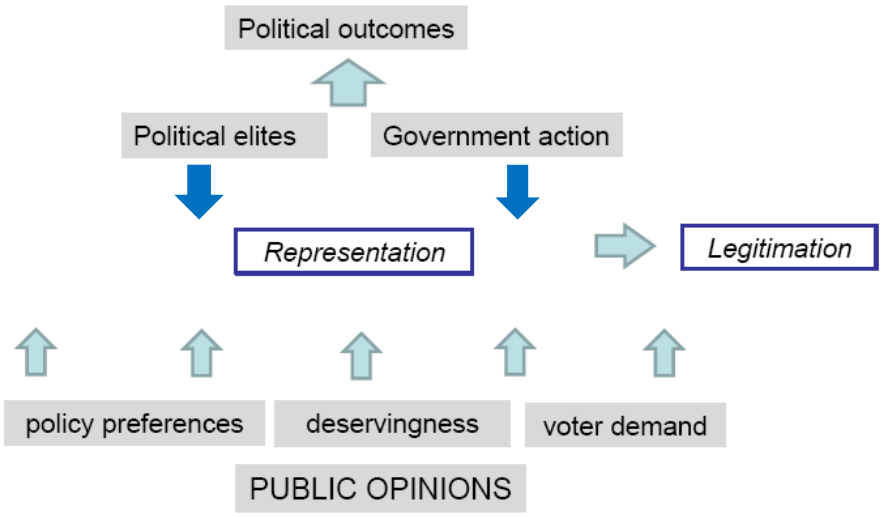
The introduction of the democratic right to vote, with one vote per citizen, has distributed political power equally (Burstein 1986). Now, only policies accepted by citizens can be pushed through. Therefore, explanations of social policy research and political economy consider governmental policies as being the result of demands by citizens, to which politicians react accordingly (Offe 1987). Already the power-resources approach in welfare state theory gives preferences such a fundamental role. Under the heading of "politics against markets" (Esping-Andersen 1985) it started from the self-interests of "workers" as the decisive factor on which the implementation of different social policy programs depended. The power-resources approach soon realized that the political influence of workers is too small, and therefore redirected its attention to "cross-class-coalitions" between the middle and poorer classes (Esping-Andersen 1990, Korpi 1983; Huber/Stephens 2001; Manow 2009). Because of different social structures in different countries with specific *cleavages* – socio-economic groups with their respective organization and representatives – different coalitions emerged in history. These coalitions shaped the varying arrangement of social security systems (welfare regimes). Research on social policy preferences initially analyzed whether the social political preferences actually converge with regime-specific policy patterns. However, this could never be firmly established empirically, and is still contested (Svallfors 1997; Gelissen 2000; Linos West 2003; Jaeger 2006). The power-resources approach represents a *bottom-up* perspective on the causal relationship between voter demands and political reactions which very clearly follows the democratic ideal mentioned above.

Later approaches from an *institutional perspective* switched to a *top-down* perspective. They conceive regime-specific differences in attitudes as a result of the incentives which the welfare state institutions set. Their *institutional design* shapes the preferences of citizens. Institu-

tions define the group of beneficiaries, the preconditions and size of benefits, and thus the self-interests, the rights and duties of the citizens and the political elites. Social political institutions structure the field in which bargaining and political conflict takes place. In part, the institutions rather are seen as expressions of certain ideals, not just as an incentive for the interest formation. The institutional design is kind of *message* to the citizens on who should get what and why (Pierson 1993; Rothstein 1998; Mau 2004; Larsen 2008; Kumlin/Stadelmann-Steffen 2014). Here, individual interests are not an *independent* "demand" of voters as in political economy or power resources approaches, but shaped by the welfare state institutions. The question of how the values embedded in institutions get transformed into subjective preferences, however, is unresolved.

In the *New Politics*-approach again the citizens' preferences are the basis of the political process; now they serve as a break against *retrenchment*. The widespread self-interest among the population to be protected against social risks made the welfare state resilient against cuts – even in times of general austerity (Page/Shapiro 1983; Burstein 1998; Brooks/Manza 2006a und b, 2007). Politicians who want to get re-elected cannot neglect the social security interests of citizens. Governments get blamed for retrenchment, and seek strategies of *blame avoidance* or cease making necessary reforms at all (Pierson 1996; Krömmelbein et al. 2007). However, recent studies have shown that retrenchment policy is possible. It does not always result in vote loss of the governing parties in the next election. Rather, parties are also honored for pushing through reforms. "Blame" only occurs if the media make cuts a topic (Armingeon/Giger 2008; Giger 2012). The way a problem is presented in the media shapes awareness about its causes and solutions. Analysis on policy change asks which framing strategies make *blame avoidance* successful. Now, more and more the public policy preferences themselves are conceived as instable, mediated by political communication, arguments and frames, and exploited and designed deliberately by political elites and the media in order to convince voters.

Figure 1: Voter preferences and policies: 'Bottom up' and 'top down' perspective



Source: own presentation

The attitudes of citizens no longer are the stable basis of the further political process, but preferences themselves are seen to react to public discourses and elite arguments. It has

been examined under which conditions citizens adapt their "attitudes" to reforms, even if they mean retrenchment. Framing effects were analyzed indirectly by drawing conclusions from electoral results (vote gains and losses of parties that retrench; see Armingeon/Giger 2008; Elmelund-Praestekaer/Emmenegger 2012; Giger/Nelson 2010*)* and also by means of survey data. Not surprisingly, retrenchment gets electoral support when the welfare state is perceived as an economic burden (Giger 2011; *Giger/Nelson 2013)*. Preferences adapt to the "new realities" which reforms create, as *Naumann* (2014) shows in a study on opinion change in the context of increased retirement age in some European countries. This reform to make pension systems more sustainable was very unpopular. Nevertheless resistance decreased after laws to increase legal retirement age were passed. The awareness of the untenability of pension systems seems to rise due to public discourses on the appropriate retirement age.

Experimental designs are becoming more common to show how public opinion is shaped by different ways to present a certain issue. *Kangas et al*. (2013) tested how different frames, understood as the ideational devices which were developed in the earlier political reform debates, influence the preferences of for a centralization of social assistance in Finland.[1] In a representative telephone survey, four different frames were presented to treatment groups. *Goerres et al.* (2015) conducted framing experiments on different arguments of welfare state reform pressures with national representative survey experiments fielded in three countries (Germany, Norway, Denmark).[2] Treatment groups are offered different considerations on why "reform pressures" make the status quo *untenable* and force governments to retrench pensions.

2.2 Political economy

In the political economy of redistribution a similar trend to that seen in the new politics approach towards a dynamic relationship between preferences and policy rather than a model in which public opinion is the starting point of the ensuing political process is visible. Basically, political economy stipulates that citizens demand social policy programs according to their self-interests in certain material benefits, and governments act accordingly to get (re-)elected. The *median voter* approach, a common explanation of how the mass preferences change when the income gaps widen, sees a political majority emerging for redistributive programs (like taxes, social insurances) if the economic situation also of the middle layers of society erodes and the distance to the rich widens. Now, the political demands also of a middle majority for social policy or taxes as measures to reduce this gap, forces politicians to react and establish corresponding policies that correct the outcome of the markets (Meltzer/Richard 1981; Kenworthy/McCall 2008). This political economy explanation also requires citizens who are able to *perceive the scope of inequality* or the size of unemployment or poverty and who are able to judge, which social reforms are helpful and benefit those in need.

[1] a) Social work frame: connect transfers and advice easier at local level. b) Income transfer machine: control of recipients weak at state level, misuse. c) Rightfulness frame: people must get the benefits that the state entitles them to. d) Equal treatment for all by administration at state level.
[2] Treatments consisted in sustainability threads in 6 fields: demographic change and ageing; too few people working; western immigration; non-western immigration; economic crisis; favorable situation.

Citizens should have knowledge on who is burdened as financers and who benefits in order to form "rational" preferences. This is not self-evident (Bartels 2005).

Different authors have been questioning whether citizens infer their political demands from an analysis of their own economic situation and the advantages different social programs offer to them. These doubts are anchored in a general rejection of the rational actor model, or are merely skeptical of the ability of citizens to collect the scope of information that would be necessary for rational preference formation (Hochschild 1979; Shapiro 2002; Weaklieem/Biggert 2013). Even if certain social problems are perceived – e.g. poverty – it is not a logical consequence that citizens want government intervention. Norms of equity or deservingness may instead make citizens expect that individual effort (harder work or private donation) would be the "proper solution".[3] Research has also shown that one's own expected upward mobility prevents people to claim for welfare states to intervene (Benabou/Tirole 2006).

When the demands of voters are the basis of the ensuing political process in terms of legitimation and electoral majority *the self-interest* of citizens should be "*enlightened".* Both the perception of what problems exist as well as the perceptions of how successful certain social or taxing policies tackle these problems should be grounded in sound information. The "enlightened" perception of "what is" should direct which political programs are supported. For example, if the view prevails that old age poverty is not a serious problem then support for any anti-poverty reforms in pension law will be limited. Bartels could show (2008) that preferences rather are driven by an *"unenlightened self-interest"*. Because of a lack of information public opinion often is driven not by self-interest, properly understood, but by frames media campaigns offer. The reforms of taxes on income and inheritance established by the Bush government was supported by broad majorities in the electorate even though only a small group of the affluent actually benefited. Referring to a "death tax" or emphasizing that governments are not allowed to punish people for what they have earned by "hard work and individual effort" directed public opinion (Bartels 2008, chap. 5 and 7). The ideas of the broad masses about who benefits and who is burdened by policies or tax reforms simply are biased.

There is a long research tradition on *public opinion* and *democracy* discussing how rational the voter preferences actually are. Scholars have pointed out that political preferences are dependent on the context and therefore not stable (Campbell et al. 1960; Almond/Verba 1963; Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2003a and b, 2008; Gilens 2012: 17ff.). This is also true of the *social policy preferences* of the electorate. Frames direct the perceptions and preferences, in social reality as well as in representative surveys which are used to capture preferences. Most survey based research on social policy preferences neglects preference formation and flexibility. However, as research on the survey instruments has been shown, the way of presenting problems is decisive: More general questions yield more positive answers, whereas more detailed information on the situation and on the reasons of why people are in need, limit plain support for social programs at a general level (Finch/Mason 1991; Kangas 2003). Political communication deliberately frames facts and can steer attitudes to reforms in a positive or negative direction (Kangas et al. 2013).

[3] On meritocracy and inequality see Fong (2001).

Political economy of redistribution starts from an enlightened voter. Hence, people may be mistaken regarding the degree of income inequality and their own relative position in the income structure. By comparing the subjective perceptions of the income distribution the residents of different countries have and the actual distribution in these countries, it has been shown that country-typical misperceptions exist (Niehues 2014).[4] While in some countries, such as Germany or France, the populations overestimate inequality compared to real distribution, believing that most parts of the population belong to the bottom strata, while the objective distribution or Gini indices indicate a different reality. Other populations underestimate inequality, such as the people in the US. They have a positive bias of the real inequalities. *Engelhardt* and *Wagener* (2014) have shown that *perceived* inequality can explain the demand by people for redistribution, while many attempts to explain preferences for redistribution based on actual income inequality measures failed. Subjectively perceived inequality – not the actual distribution of incomes – is strongly linked to demand for government income redistribution. This study not only "rescues" the median voter hypothesis, but also underscores the role of subjective perceptions in political economy models.

Biased perceptions of the income distribution and their consequences for the concomitant social policy preferences are of upmost practical importance and the *political economy of redistribution-approach*. To analyze the critical connection between perceived inequality and the subsequent policy preferences, research on redistribution too (as in research on retrenchment) conducts *experiments*, often embedded in surveys (Cruces et al. 2013; Karadja et al. 2014;) or in online surveys (Norton/Ariel 2011; Kuziemko et al. 2015; Gallego 2016). The experimental results underscore that the perceived inequality is sensible to the information respondents get on the income distribution and on their own position within it. Moreover, the impact of these (biased) perceptions on the ensuing preferences for redistributive or other social programs was confirmed.

Research that is aiming to a more precise analysis of preference formation and deviates from the creed that citizens rationally perceive the facts like income inequality or certain social deficits and then come to logical political demands must consider the role of information by the *media*. It is straightforward to assume that people usually receive information on inequality, on social spending, on the effectiveness of certain policies from the media. The political reactions of people to inequality should widely depend on the media representation of a topic. To date, welfare opinion research, considering how the media guides preferences is scarce (but see Duch/Sagarzazu 2014; Dupuy/van Ingelgom 2014; Kumlin 2014).

3. Trends in the analysis of preference formation

3.1 Framing experiments

[4] This study is based on the ISSP 2009 module on social inequality and the question 14a on the perceived type of society: "These five diagrams show different types of society: Please read the descriptions and look at the diagrams and decide which you think best describes your country." Five diagrams are shown, representing different ways the income distribution is shaped. The wording for type A f.e. is: "A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom", or type D "A society with most people in the middle", etc..

Research on social policy preferences is beginning to deviate from the bottom-up model and to consider that preferences themselves are no stable, unbiased starting point, but may result from selective information, from framing, or simply follow the existing institutional set-up. In order to show this, research on (social) policy preferences increasingly integrates experimental designs. This means testing the effects of "treatments", which are the "causes" that may alter attitudes. A treatment can be information, frames, media reports on reforms, expert opinions, a discussion group on a related topic before certain questions are asked and more.

An experimental design is based on randomly drawn groups, which receive a "treatment". The randomization of *treatment* and *control* groups is the main instrument of experiments. By randomly assigning people to control and treatment groups there can be no other variable that causes the change of the dependent variable, except the treatment one group receives (Slothuus 2007). Drawing random groups avoids the problem of the uncontrolled effects of omitted variables, while the usual regression design needs to include all the relevant variables into the models to avoid biased results. The second main advantage of experiments is that the *causal order* is controlled, which otherwise can be problematic in cross-sectional regression models. Since the treatment is placed before the items that measure the "effects", it is quite simple to state the causal effects.

Experimental designs can be conducted in a "laboratory" setting or embedded in a (representative) survey. In the first case, the results possess high *internal* validity, but lower *external* validity. Results from experiments conducted with students or other selective groups and a small N sample (Slothuus 2007; Wenzelburger/Hörisch 2015; Vössing 2015) risk to be questioned, if the group involved and the experimental topic do not fit. Since the treatment groups are randomly assigned, they can still claim *internal* representativeness, but *external* validity is a problem.[5] When embedded in a representative survey, experiments combine the external validity of a random sample of respondents with the advantage of experiments (e.g. Frech et al. 2015; I shall return to representativeness in the next chapter, when the online surveys are discussed.)

Frames are "alternative descriptions or interpretations of the same information, problem or solution. Frames guide our understanding of a problem's origins and offer suggestions about how to evaluate solutions." (Nelson 2004:582) There is a difference between **equivalence** framing, where the same fact is presented from different aspects, and **issue** framing, where different aspects or context information are highlighted, in order to evoke different considerations on a topic (Druckman 2004).

Framing is not simply the indoctrination of voters. Opinion formation does not conceive the actor as an empty mind that can be deliberately influenced by communicating certain information, views and judgements. Framing experiments therefore should copy reality, where *value conflicts* or conflicting arguments are common in the public arena. Part of realistic preference formation is that people already possess information, convictions and values. Typical-

[5] *Slothuus* (2007) conducted experiments on the dependency of support for cutting unemployment benefits on perceptions of deservingness by setting frames with fictional newspaper articles (student sample of 291); Wenzelburger's and Hörisch's (2015) *voluntary* access online survey examines the varying support for cutting public pensions when framed as a demographic necessity, or when government subsidies for private pensions saving schemes are promised.

ly, in public policy controversies different reform policy propositions compete with each other. At the same time this means a value conflict, since reforms often refer to different values. For example, the question of whether universities should be obliged to install affirmative action plans is linked to a conflict between the goals of academic excellence on the one hand and equal opportunities for women or ethnic minorities on the other.[6]

Of course, settings of conflicting goals or attitudes can be modeled within the survey and laboratory experiments (Nelson 2004). To get reliable results, framing experiments try to mimic real political controversies by including conflicting points of view and conflicting arguments. Experiments use *"counter framing"* – a frame that contradicts another frame in the experiment – to make the participants in an experiment aware that different views and modes exist as to how to perceive the "facts" (Druckman 2004).[7] Another tool to model real situations of political contest are experiments on preference formation conducted with discussion groups with either homogeneous or heterogeneous members. Moreover, experimental designs can test whether the treatment effect is mediated by information acquired from the media.

Framing effects due to the alternated wording or phrasing of the same facts demonstrate that voters are not just rational observers of facts and information, but are guided by the views and valuation that political and other *public elites* transmit (Druckman 2004). Experiments are interested in the *mediators* of framing effects: Are framing effects especially strong in certain groups and why? For example, this may be the case among people very interested in politics or among those, to whom an issue is salient. Mediators of the treatment effect can be religiousness of the interviewee, previous information, or the possibility to discuss before answering questions. Another class of mediating effects asks under which *contextual conditions* framing effects occur. As in multilevel analyses, level 2 information is required.

3.2 Online surveys

A second trend in public opinion research is the growing importance of *online surveys*. These internet surveys are often criticized as being *selective*, since people must have internet access. This restriction is a true problem, but different options (see below) are tested to handle it. Another severe criticism aims at the problem of *representativeness* of a survey sample. Representativeness is achieved when the participants are randomly selected from a population. *Commercial* public opinion research offers online surveys as opt-in internet panels (or access panels), where participants are *not recruited by a random probability selection process*. But exactly this is a *sine qua non*-condition for representativeness, or the ability to

[6] Nelson describes some usual *communicative strategies* that try to resolve conflicts when values compete: Ranking policy goals or the values behind different suggestions; policy categorization ("this conflict belongs to category x and therefore is important"); institutional role assignment (underscore the "proper" goal of an institution; e.g.: universities are not obliged to conduct affirmative action since their institutional goal is the selection of the best).

[7] To mimic real life controversies, empirical studies allow different persons with different points of view to act. In Vössing's (2015) experiments, elite discourses on European integration were modeled by competing expert opinions. Interestingly, this design attained no framing results.

generalize results from a sample to the general population (Yeager et al. 2011). Without probability samples the accuracy of the results to be drawn from the data is seen as *shaky*.

If households without internet access are excluded, selectivity bias per se exists. Therefore, in some European countries *online panels* were established, recruiting the survey-participants *offline* initially, by means of a probability sampling process, *and* equipping selected offline households, who are willing to participate, with internet access and computers or user-friendly tablets: The Dutch LISS, the French ELIPSS and the German GIP.[8] The German GESIS Panel is a *mixed panel* since households without Internet or not willing to participate via Internet are interviewed by postal paper questionnaires. For these various national official online panels, households to be interviewed are *randomly* drawn by different methods (for details see Blom 2015, p. 5, tab. 2). After random selection, the households are contacted first by mail, then by face-to-face interviewers or by telephone to check their willingness to participate and to give information on an online panel. Later these members of pre-recruited panels are invited to fill in online questionnaires (self-completion mode) at certain time intervals. *Offline recruitment* is the tool to achieve representativeness.

The *different survey modes* – face-to-face, telephone or online survey - vary in more characteristics than just the sampling procedure: The interview situation differs, the panel attrition patterns may differ, etc.. The main question is, whether these differences produce results that are not representative. Data from the "official" internet surveys are used in the final chapter of this paper to compare the results of different survey modes (chap. 3.3).[9] Opt-in internet panels are not considered since I have no access to the data. However, some remarks may be helpful.

Commercial online access panels do not result from probability sampling, nevertheless the recruitment strategies differ with severe consequences for data quality. The crudest method is to place a survey on online platforms (such as *Mechanical Turk*, a platform for paid work by Amazon), which of course provides no control over the sample. However, commercial providers usually offer *active recruitment*, a more elaborate mode of sample selection. A large pool of potential panelists is collected by participants of earlier surveys or by online marketing. Another method is used by Infratest dimap who recruits participants offline on the basis of payback providers.[10] From this pool, a sample of participants is drawn according to *quota***,** along the criteria age, education, sex or income (quota sampling is also done by Yougov, Respondi). Nevertheless, households without internet access do not participate. Self-recruitment is seen as inacceptable in terms of accuracy and representativeness (Faas/Schoen 2006). Ansolabehere and Schaffner (2012) compared data from an opt-in internet panel[11], telephone interviews and mail questionnaire with identical items. They found

[8] More countries of course are experimenting with online surveys to test this new method: "Understanding Society - Innovation Panel" in the UK with a mixed mode design. A pure opt-in panel is the SoSci Panel: https://www.soscisurvey.de/panel/index.php.

[9] When discussing different modes of surveying we have to keep in mind that selectivity and bias also exist in telephone and face-to-face-interviews. Telephone interviews actually seem to be even more biased (Bieber/Bytzek 2012).

[10] Yougov actively and passively recruits a pool of 160,000 panelists.

[11] It was the opt-in panel by Yougov. Within panel response rate 43% (RR1).

that results hardly differ because internet penetration and use are already high (log.cit. tab. 3). The view that survey mode does not matter, is overly optimistic.

Online panels which all collect a *random probability* sample offline in a first step are the *LISS* (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences)[12] in the Netherlands, the *ELIPSS* (Longitudinal Study by Internet for the Social Sciences) Panel in France, the *GIP* (German Internet Panel) within the SFB "Political Economy of Reforms" and the German *GESIS* Panel (actually a mixed survey). The modes[13] of drawing the sample, the incentives for participants and the age limits of the population differ (see Blom et al. 2015: 5, tab. 2 for a detailed overview; also Blom et al. 2016). These many differences in the detail and country-specific culture yield different response rates for panel registration: The LISS reports 48%, GIP 18%, and ELIPSS and GESIS about 26% (for details see Blom et al. 2015, p.9, tab. 3 and p.11). About 10% of the panel were previously without computer and internet access. Participants of online panels tend to be younger, more educated and more interested in politics than participants of other survey modes.

4. Does survey mode matter for the results?

To answer this question, data from different German surveys are compared.[14] In April/May 2014 LISS, ELIPSS, GESIS Panel (wave bb) and GIP[15] fielded a joint wave with common questions in all four panels. This wave contains selected variables identical to the ESS (European Social Survey) wave 2008/9 and to the European Election Study 2009. Below, I present just a few corresponding variables. The variables from the ESS which conducts face-to-face interviews serve as a baseline.[16]

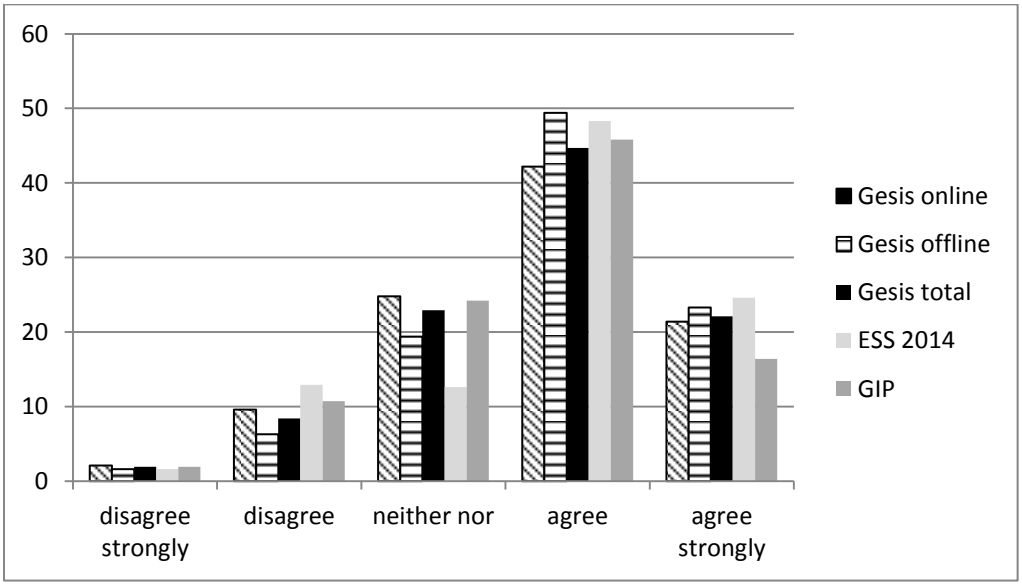
Figures 2 and 3 in the appendix show differences in the composition by age and education in different survey modes. Especially the upper middle age group (45-59) is overrepresented compared to the population, not that much the younger (18-29) or the middle (30-44) age groups. In the samples of online surveys the higher education level is overrepresented. The groups with upper secondary education level are just 28,7% of the German population (above 24 years), but 46,1% of the GIP or 54,7% of the GESIS online. Combined with the paper and pencil interviews, the GESIS Panel reaches a share of 44,8%. The ESS with about 40% of those with at least upper secondary education also is biased. The figures are not strictly comparable since the lower age limits used in the different data bases, differ. Nevertheless they testify an overrepresentation of the higher educated people. It is contested, whether the bias in favour of the higher educated (with presumably higher income) poses a problem. Of course, a survey does not just aim to describe age or educational structures,

[12] http://www.centerdata.nl/en/LISSpanel
[13] Some use national or municipal population registers, some use area probability samples.
[14] Other comparisons of survey modes see Blom 2015; Bieber/Bytzek 2012, Ansolabehere/Schaffer 2012.
[15] Data from GIP wave 11 (ZA5922), release 1.0, doi 10.4232/1.12617 (Blom et al., 2014). A study description can be found in Blom et al. (2015).
[16] The ESS is representative for the population above 15 years in private households irrespective of nationality, the ALLBUS (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften) covers the adult population over 18 years, GESIS the population from 18 to 70 years, GIP from 16 to 75 years.

but is interested in other characteristics. When these are connected to education, a bias matters. And welfare attitudes are connected to education and income. The ESS corrects overrepresentation of certain demographic groups by weighting variables.

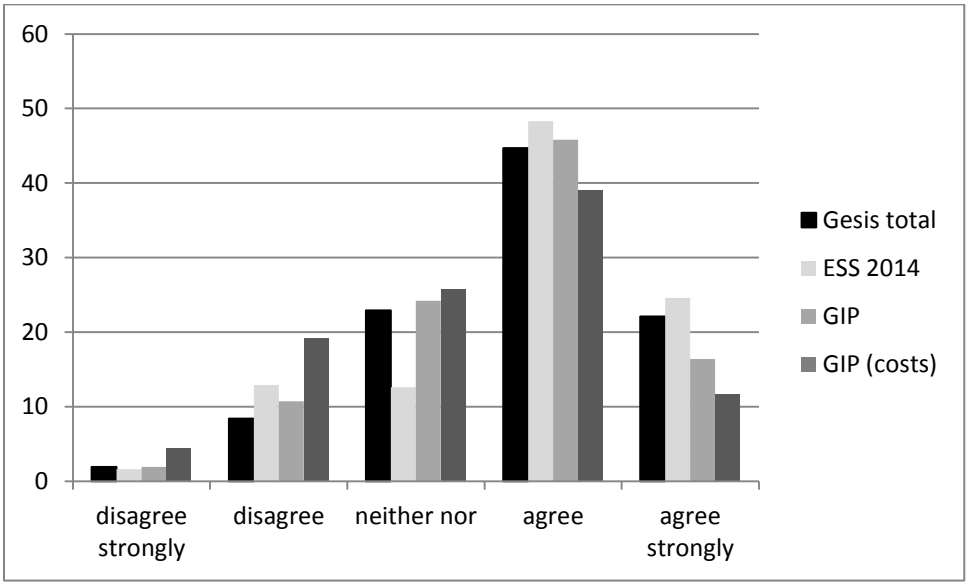
Do researchers risk biased results when working with variables on *(social) policy opinion* because of possible biases of the online (or mixed) survey mode? To answer this question a variable widely used in welfare attitudes and political economy research is analyzed: "Government should reduce the difference in income between the poor and the rich." I begin with descriptive results. According to *figure 4a* the most remarkable difference between the survey modes is in the middle answer category. In face-to-face interviews by the ESS, fewer respondents choose the answer *"neither/nor"*. The presence of an interviewer seems to engender more effort to give a substantial answer. Disagreement with redistribution is expected to be especially strong among respondents with better education and higher incomes und thus should be highest in the online surveys. But this is not the case. Disagreement with government redistribution is not more frequent in the online surveys. The face-to-face respondents of the ESS, which are missing in the middle category have filled the "disagree", and also the "agree" category. Whether the anonymous situation in online and paper survey (Gesis offline) making it easier to report having no clear opinion, is a drawback or merely more realistic, is hard to answer.

Figure 4a: Government must reduce income differences



Sources: Different surveys. ESS 2014 - www.europeansocialsurvey.org; GIP Wave 11/ ZA5922; GESIS panel April/May 2014 wave bb/ ZA 5665, doi 10.4232/1.12709; Question wording in GIP: "Please indicate how much you agree with the following or how much you reject it: 'The government must take measures to reduce income differences."

Figure 4b: The effect of pointing to the *costs of redistribution in a GIP experiment.*



Sources: Different surveys, see notes figure 4a and GIP costs Wave15/ ZA5926. Question wording of the GIP: "Please indicate if you agree with the following statement: 'Government must take measures to reduce income differences.' The bar for GIP (costs) adds: "Please consider that such measures must be financed by taxes, i.e. by deductions from wages."

Figure 4b gives an example of how an experiment with a framing changes the distribution of answers. In the GIP wave 14 in November 2014, the "government redistribution" question was enlarged by a hint on the *financial burden* of policy measures to reduce income differences: "Please consider that such measures must be financed by taxes, i.e. by deductions from wages." This increases the share of respondents who *disagree* with the proposed governmental redistribution, especially when we compare the results of the enlarged GIP-online and the ESS question. The difference in the two agreement categories is remarkable: 48% of the ESS respondents agree, but only 39% of the respondents who reacted to an item that hints to the costs, agree. The difference in the "strongly agree" category is even larger. This not only underlines that framing influences the way respondents react, but is an important hint especially to research on public opinion on social policies. These policies often have financial implications for taxes or social security contributions. The measurement of attitudes to policies in this field or the measurement of more general dimensions like the acceptance of redistribution tends to neglect the costs of public policies (Winter/Mouritzen 2001). Reminding respondents to the costs of their decision makes measurement of redistribution and equality demands more reliable. This is true for other social policy preferences, too.

Social sciences are not just interested in the distribution of certain variables, but its main task is the analysis of causal relations, of theories which explain (social) policy attitudes. The next step therefore gauges whether the different survey modes yield the same results on these causal relations. *Table 1* presents a multivariate regression on demand for government income redistribution with just a few explanatory variables. The ESS can serve as a benchmark. A remark on the database regarding the GIP: The multivariate analysis does not use the joint wave from April/May 2014, since the number of cases in this wave was still small. GIP enlarged the number of participants afterwards. So, I draw on wave 14 in Nov. 2014 (number ZA5925, doi 10.4232/1.12620) with more cases.

According to the column with the ESS results (data were weighted), income and education level are highly influential for the demand for redistributive policies of governments, age is somewhat less important. Since the highest value 5 means "disagree strongly", the results are positive: higher income and education make people disagree with government redistribution to make income distances smaller. Most studies use a recoded dependent variable, where the values are switched and a larger number indicates support for government redistribution. Nevertheless, the results in table 1 for the ESS mean the same. Does the online mode resp. the mixed mode of GESIS also mimic previous research? Yes, more or less. Both the online and offline versions of the GESIS Panel and also the *GIP* data identify income as most important determinant. This variable is highly significant and positive. The stronger t-statistics and coefficients in both online-surveys GESIS and GIP in the first instance are striking. Since the measurement of income differs (see notes below table 1), no final conclusion can be drawn if this is a systematic effect of the online survey mode.

The effect of education is significant, except in the GIP column. The p-value for education is not even close to the threshold (.457). Since especially the online panels have high shares of people with higher education (both in the GIP and the GESIS online part, see figure 3), a weighting variable would be necessary; but the dataset didn't contain one when the data analysis was done (2016, July). The puzzling story is that the GESIS online part yields the expected positive result for the educational level variable.

Tab. 1: Regression on "Government must reduce differences between poor and rich" (5=disagree strongly)

	face-to-face ESS	online Gesis	offline Gesis	total Gesis	online GIP
Household income (groups)	.059*** *.007* (8.40)	.101*** *.011* (9.17)	.089*** *.015* (6.05)	.098*** *.009* (11.1)	.098*** *.007* (13.32)
Education	.051** *.017* (3.08)	.125*** *.032* (3.90)	.09* *.036* (2.50)	.110*** *.024* (4.55)	.014 *.019* (0.74)
Age	-.001* *.0006* (-2.21)	-.042^{+} *.023* (-1.84)	-.070* *.032* (-2.16)	-.049** .019 (-2.63)	-.017* *.007* (-2.33)
Cons	1.73*** *.073*	1.4*** *.135*	1.66*** *.162*	1.47*** *.121*	1.77*** *.105*
R Sq. adj.	4%	7%	6%	7%	7%
N	2692	2044	957	3001	2680

Notes: Entries are unstandardized coefficients. Standard error in italics, t-statistics in brackets.
The measurement of the independent variables is not identical. The ESS measures household income with 10 categories, the GIP with 15, the GESIS panel with 9 categories. Age is sometimes a metric variable (GESIS Panel, ESS), sometimes grouped (GIP, 13 groups). Results do not change when age groups are harmonized. Education enters as highest completed school grade (see fig.3).

It would be hasty to see the result as a final answer to the question as to whether problems occur when surveys are conducted completely online. The single GIP waves differ in terms of the number of missing answers in the income variable; not for each topic, the information on income is as important as in analyses of demand for redistribution. Another anomaly in my

regression is the small effect of education, which is usually an important determinant for support for governmental redistribution.

5. Discussion

Public opinion is an important element in many theories of welfare policies, as this paper has demonstrated by gauging arguments from political economy and new politics approaches. Therefore, a long research tradition has analyzed citizens' preferences resp. public opinion directed to social policies. The perspective prevails that public opinion is the democratic "bedrock" of legitimated and accepted social policies. The paper pointed to other trends in research on (social) policy attitudes that criticize this bottom-up model and rather consider a more complex process of *preference formation* in which attitudes themselves are influenced *top-down.* What kind of social policy the citizens prefer or what voters want is also directed by frames, the media and political communication. Parallel to this conceptual shift, I observed a development towards the use of (survey) experiments and surveys conducted via internet. Both allow greater flexibility in testing the effects of framing, of biased information on income distribution and other features or the feedback effects of social policy institutions.

The paper deals with new methods in the analysis of political preferences, which develop in the research on public opinion, and discusses how social policy research can benefit from it. To check the data quality of internet panels and to get indications on how typical variables of welfare attitude research fare, the paper compared results of different *survey modes*. It selected Germany as a country for which baseline results on certain demographics are available from official statistics and were different types of internet surveys, the GIP and the GESIS-Panel as a mixed panel survey, are conducted. The European Social Survey data for Germany served as a point of reference, because the study is a high quality probability sample and conducts face to face interviews which are conceived as most accurate. The selected online surveys are based on probability samples and offline participant selection, methods to yield representativeness. *Online access panels* as offered by commercial providers could not be considered in this comparison of survey modes because data are not publicly available as the online panels of different European countries are.[17]

Commercial providers usually use *non-probability sampling procedures* which are criticized to yield no accurate data (Yeager et al. 2011). Even quota sampling and post-stratification weights would not achieve satisficing data quality. However, further research has to explore the proper weighting methods for these non-probability samples to improve their quality. In the respective comparative test of commercial online panels by Yeager et al. (2011) the weighting procedures of commercial companies were quite intransparent. At this point improvements are possible. It seems consent, that non-probability samples are appropriate to test relations, conduct experiments and scrutinize theories, not to make point estimate (Faas/Schoen 2006; Bieber/Bytzek 2012; Ansolabehere/Schaffner 2012).

This comparison of data gathered by different survey modes is not as systematic and elaborated as the one by Yeager et al. (2011). It is no straightforward contribution to method-

[17] And this paper had no budget to commission commercial online surveys to get the material for a wider comparison as other studies did. See Yeager et al. 2011.

development but wants to direct the attention of researchers on (social) policy preference to new developments in their field. Yet, even this restricted aim gives valuable indications on the quality of online panels. Also those based on a probability sample must be used carefully, since selectivity of participants occurs. More analyses are necessary with variables that can be compared to benchmarks and users need weighting variables in the datasets. The offline recruitment of panel members and strict probability methods for the selection of cases does not preclude any bias. As the example of the higher educated showed, bias should be corrected by weighting. Corresponding variables are still not in the publicly available data.

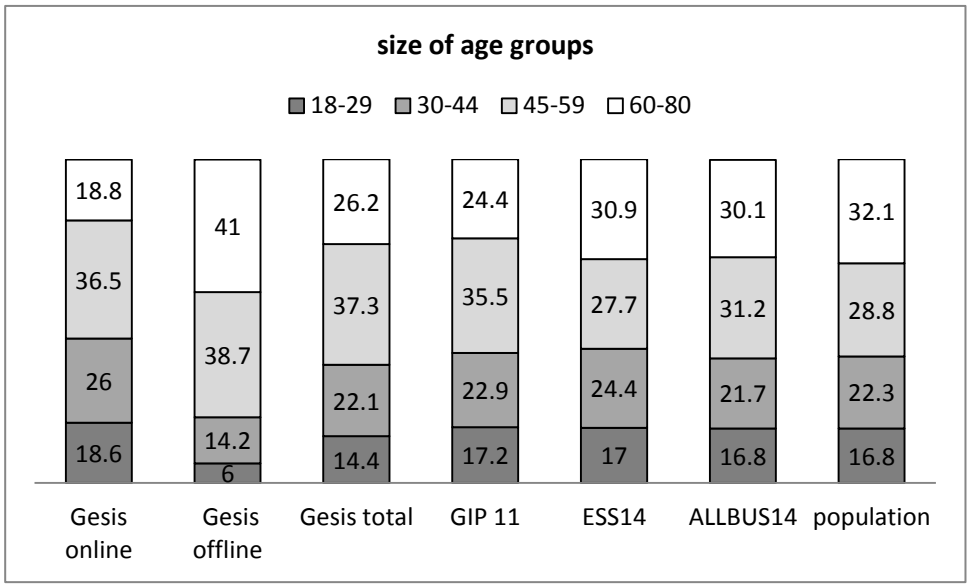
The interview situation, the lack of an interviewer, incorporates differences: It is easier to express attitudes which are not socially desirable and it is easier to report a non-attitude. Both is an advantage and makes data more reliable. Whether giving offline households internet access (as the internet panels mentioned in the paper like the Dutch LISS, the French ELIPSS and the GIP) helps to improve the representativeness of online surveys is an open question. The *mixed methods approach* of the GESIS Panel showed robust results. The combination of paper and pencil method with a probability online sample yields accuracy compared to the ESS. The distribution of demographic variables like education or age are highly biased in the online part, but balanced by the paper and pencil-part.

Further research in public opinion and welfare state attitudes should pick up the opportunities by experiments and online surveys to test standard variables and often used measurements. The present paper gave just a short impression of the change an altered measurement of a classical construct, redistribution demand, yields. Prizing the option the interviewee has to rate, makes peoples generosity shrink remarkably. Experimenting with frames, information, expert opinion and "media stories" offers a wide range of possibilities for social policy attitude research to test reliable measurement methods and to come closer to what the "people really think".

Recent trends like populism, the electoral success of the Brexit- campaign or of politicians like Trump who aim at the emotions of voters ("Make America great again") create doubts as to the correctness of the assumed public opinion as bedrock of democracy. More complex models of political preferences are required. The paper tried to work in this direction.

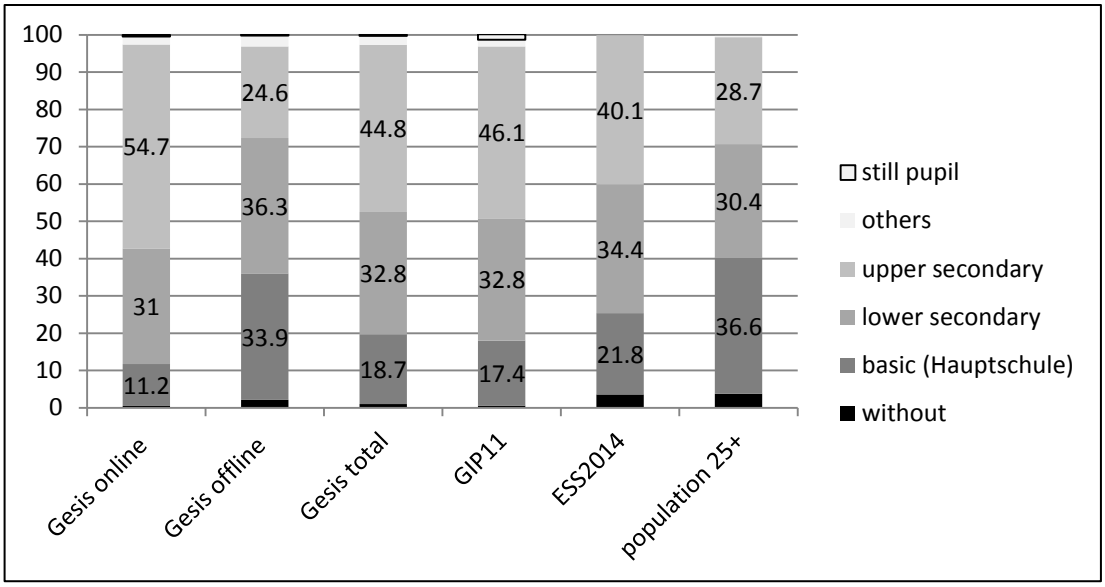
Appendix

Figure 2: Size of different age groups (in years) in different survey modes



Sources: ESS 2014 - www.europeansocialsurvey.org; GIP Wave 11/ ZA5922, doi 10.4232/1.12617; GESIS panel April/May 2014 wave bb/ ZA 5665, doi 10.4232/1.12709; population Destatis 2016: .

Figure 3: Education level in different survey modes (2014)



Sources as fig.2; population Datenreport 2016, Tab. 12 Allgemeiner Schulabschl. der Bevölkerung ab 25 Jahre. https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/Datenreport/Downloads/Datenreport2016Kap3.pdf
Data are not strictly comparable since the different data resources use different age limits. F.e. "population" includes people 25+years, the ESS those aged 15 and over, the GIP includes 16+, the GESIS-panel 18+. The probability of having completed upper secondary education level differs. But only few are "still pupil".

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