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Abstract

This article asks whether salient social issues affect the generosity of welfare programmes. It argues that governments adjust the social policy generosity when related issues become more salient. However, this only occurs under two conditions: when the broader public is in favour of more government spending, and only for welfare policies that favour large groups of beneficiaries (e.g. pensions, healthcare, and education) but not for smaller programmes (e.g. unemployment). Drawing on a dataset of 14 Western European countries between 2002 and 2018, findings largely confirm these expectations. I find no evidence of government responsiveness in unemployment compensation. Pensions and healthcare show responsiveness only when the public favours more spending. For education, I find symmetric effects: governments respond to important education issues by mirroring citizen preferences. These results contribute to the welfare state literature by introducing a generalizable framework that links public opinion and welfare generosity across different policies.

Key words: social policy, welfare state, issue salience, welfare preferences.

JEL classification: I38 Government policy + Provision and Effects of Welfare Programs

1. Introduction

When do salient social issues affect the generosity of social policy programmes? In representative democracies, public opinion plays a key role in shaping government decisions (Burstein 2003; Wlezien and Soroka 2012; Wlezien 2020). Issue salience can act as a trigger for government responsiveness (Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Klüver 2020). However, most welfare state research does not systematically consider its role in shaping social policy. Some recent studies show that when issues become highly salient, governments may respond by adjusting social programmes (Armingeon and Giger 2008; Davidsson and Marx 2013; Busemeyer et al., 2020). Yet, these studies mostly focus on specific country contexts (e.g. Sharp 1999; Raven et al., 2011; Davidsson and Marx 2013) or specific policies such as education (Busemeyer et al., 2020) without offering a general theoretical account of when issue salience affects social spending reforms.

Still, this link may not be as straightforward in the context of welfare state policies as general studies of public opinion might suggest. Politicians must reconcile competing demands between the general public and organized beneficiaries, while dealing with past policy commitments and fiscal constraints (Pierson 1996; Levy 2021). As a result, even if citizens show increased attention to, for example, unemployment problems, governments might not always translate those concerns into actual policy reforms. In this case, politicians need to consider policy trade-offs to maximize their electoral prospects and focus their efforts on the most pressing social concerns in the public sphere (Bremer and Bürgisser 2023).

In this article, I turn to the following research question: what is the precise relationship between issue salience and social policy? Building on existing welfare state literature, this article argues that governments adjust the generosity of social policies in response to salient social issues but only under two conditions. First, they respond more actively when the citizens support higher spending. In this scenario, the interests of organized beneficiaries and the general public converge, creating a strong electoral incentive for policymakers to expand or maintain welfare benefits. In contrast, when the public mood favours cuts, the risk of backlash from entrenched beneficiaries may discourage policymakers from fully implementing retrenchment (see Pierson 1996; Green-Pedersen 2002).

Second, the size and influence of the beneficiaries of the policy in question. Institutionalized programmes such as pensions, healthcare, and education have large constituencies that can bring their demands to the political arena through trade unions and other interested organizations. In the case of these policies, governments have strong incentives to expand benefits in response to public opinion. In contrast, for policies that benefit smaller and less organized groups, for instance unemployment compensation, governments lack the same electoral incentives to respond to important issues (see Jensen 2011).

This article draws these insights from the welfare state literature to create a generalizable theoretical framework that links issue salience to social policy generosity across countries and policy areas. In doing so, it identifies which conditions affect this relationship, the direction of public preferences to government spending and the type of social policy programme.

To test this argument, I draw on a novel dataset covering 14 Western European countries from 2002 to 2018. This dataset includes annual data on four social policy areas: unemployment, pensions, healthcare, and education. The findings largely support the theoretical expectations. In pensions and healthcare, governments respond positively to salient social issues but only when citizens favour more spending. When the public wants to cut back, governments hesitate to impose major retrenchments—likely due to the electoral risks posed by vocal beneficiaries of these programmes. Education shows a more symmetrical response: as problems in the education system become more important, governments increase or reduce spending in line with whether the public calls for more or less intervention. In contrast, there is no evidence of government responsiveness to rising importance of unemployment when it comes to changes in unemployment compensation. This result suggests that policymakers may not see strong electoral incentives to address unemployment benefits specifically.

The remainder of the article is structure as follows. In Section 2, I review the literature on public opinion and government responsiveness, and then discuss whether the main theoretical expectations carry to welfare politics in times of tight fiscal constraints. In Section 3, I outline the methodology of the article. Section 4 discusses the empirical results in detail. The article concludes with a reflection on the broader implications of these findings from both an academic and substantive perspective. I also identify some limitations of the article and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Government responsiveness and social policy

In representative democracies, governments are responsive to public opinion (Burstein 2003; Wlezien and Soroka 2012; Wlezien 2020). Elections link public opinion to policy through two mechanisms. The first is *agent selection*. Voters choose candidates whose preferences and promises will best implement their preferred policies. As a result, the views and priorities of elected representatives reflect, at least to some extent, the public preferences at the time of voting. The second mechanism is the *anticipatory representation* (Mansbridge 2003). Representatives adjust to public opinion during their mandates to improve their re-election prospects on election day (Stimson et al., 1995; Adams et al., 2005; Weßels 2007). This happens because policy decisions can have significant electoral consequences. Importantly, unpopular policies jeopardize politicians' chances during elections, as voters retrospectively evaluate their performance and vote accordingly. In contrast, popular policies improve their prospects for re-election. Politicians therefore have strong incentives to align policy decisions with voter preferences (Strøm 1990; Adams et al., 2005; Duch and Stevenson 2008).

Existing literature identifies two facets of public opinion that influence democratic responsiveness: the policy positions of voters and their issue priorities. There are two main perspectives on how governments react to public opinion.

The first perspective focuses on voters' preferences relative to the *status quo* (Stimson et al., 1995). In this vein, responsiveness is viewed as politicians strategically adjusting their positions to align with public sentiment, typically measured by shifts in support for more or less government intervention (Wlezien 1995). Although these studies primarily consider voter positions, they often include issue salience as a moderating factor. Of course, these studies hinge on the assumption that voters need adequate information about government actions to update their preferences. However, tracking developments across all policy areas is unrealistic. As a result, voters focus on issues they consider most important, which allows them to monitor politicians on key topics without excessive informational demands (Burstein 2003). This dynamic constrains politicians, prompting greater responsiveness on clear, broad-ranging, and salient issues (Page and Shapiro 1983; Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Lax and Phillips 2012). In this view, policy responsiveness is incremental, tracking gradual changes in public preferences over time.

The second perspective centres on issue salience as the main trigger for government responsiveness (Franklin and Wlezien 1997). Political parties respond to the issue priorities of citizens to achieve electoral gains (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Spoon and Klüver 2014; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Klüver 2020). Like voters, politicians also have information constraints. Politicians cannot process all available information and must prioritize certain policy issues (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Mortensen 2009, 2010). As a result, governments respond primarily when issues become salient, often triggered by events such as economic crises, media coverage, or political actions (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Lowry and Joslyn 2014; Green-Pedersen and Jensen 2019; Fernández et al., 2024). This perspective sees responsiveness as a *punctuated equilibrium*: stable policy periods interrupted by rapid and substantial reforms addressing emerging issues (John and Margetts 2003; Mortensen 2009). Policy mood may further shape the direction of reforms once an issue gains attention (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In other words, governments respond when public signals are *loud* and *clear* (Busemeyer et al., 2020).

This article adopts the second perspective, as its focus is on specific social policy domains rather than general budgets. Welfare reforms are expected to follow a punctuated equilibrium pattern: long periods of stability interrupted by bursts of programme-specific change. On the demand side, this pattern is driven by fluctuations in issue salience, which is typically larger and less stable than preferences for social spending. Greater volatility in salience means that public attention can rapidly shift towards certain issues, creating windows of opportunity for major policy change while other areas remain stable. Consistent with this claim, the data used in this article show that within-country variation in the salience of social issues (0.80 standard deviations for unemployment, 0.52 for pensions, 0.56 for healthcare, and 0.70 for education) is two to three times greater than the variation in spending preferences (0.26). On the supply side, politicians do not monitor every policy area continuously—such as unemployment, education, pensions, healthcare, or housing—but focus on these when they become salient among the public.

This approach aligns with recent welfare state research, which increasingly emphasizes the importance of issue salience in the dynamics of welfare politics. At the level of preference formation, citizens prioritize certain social policies over others (Häusermann et al., 2022). Issue priorities increasingly matter beyond general support for the welfare state, shifting public and political attention to specific policies (Garritzmann et al., 2018; Neimanns et al., 2018; Busemeyer and Garritzmann 2022; Bremer and Bürgisser 2023). Salient social issues can also shape electoral outcomes when they dominate campaigns (Armingeon and Giger 2008). In addition, case studies show that public concern over specific issues—such as unemployment in Germany and Sweden—has driven social democratic governments to reform unemployment insurance (Davidsson and Marx 2013), while issue salience has also been linked to education reforms (Busemeyer et al., 2020).

However, there is still no general theoretical framework specifying when the salience of social issues affects specific social policies. In what follows, I address this gap by drawing on welfare state literature to theorize the role of issue salience within welfare policy domains.

2.1 Why social policy differs from general policy responsiveness

Public opinion and government responsiveness are closely linked, but what distinguishes social policy spending from general government spending as a trademark of government responsiveness? Welfare state research points to a key difference: social policies create large groups of direct beneficiaries with vested interests in maintaining or expanding these programmes (Pierson 1996). Their sheer number makes them electorally relevant.

Furthermore, they also organize around unions and interest groups with the aim of safeguarding their interests in the political arena (Pierson 1994).

This does not mean that the general electorate always supports more welfare spending. Research shows that voters weigh both redistribution and economic performance and do not unconditionally favour higher spending (Giger and Nelson 2013). However, large beneficiary groups—who tend to be more supportive of welfare spending than the average voter—may exert disproportionate influence on policymaking. There are three main reasons for this.

First, the losses from welfare cutbacks are usually concentrated among organized groups, which have both the resources and motivation to mobilize politically. By contrast, any gains from cutbacks are spread thinly across broader, less organized groups. This creates an imbalance, made worse by voters' negativity bias: people react more strongly to losses than to gains (Bonoli 2012; Elmelund-Præstekær et al., 2015).

Second, interest organizations not only mobilize their members but also shape public debate about welfare reforms. By framing policy issues and controlling how information is shared, they can amplify opposition to cutbacks (Immergut and Abou-Chadi 2014). As a result, governments find it much harder to use blame-avoidance tactics to hide or soften the effects of cuts (Pierson 1994; Green-Pedersen 2002; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Vis 2016). Governments are often forced to negotiate directly with these organizations to secure support for reforms and share political responsibility (Lindvall 2010).

Third, organized interests are frequently involved in the decision-making process. Their participation can block or limit large-scale reforms, effectively making these groups veto players (Bonoli 2012).

Taken together, these factors make it hard for governments to cut welfare benefits, even if public opinion is sceptical about government spending. Retrenchment is possible, but these constraints create a strong tendency towards policy stability or even expansion (Levy 2021). From the perspective of government responsiveness, this discussion highlights two critical conditions for governments to address salient social issues.

First, the direction of policy changes demanded by public opinion. Politicians are likely to expand benefits to respond to salient social issues when public opinion is in favour more government spending. Here, the interests of the general public align with those of organized beneficiaries. Politicians thus have strong electoral incentives to address those concerns and introduce policy reforms that align with the demands from citizens.

However, politicians should be less likely to cut back benefits when public opinion supports less government spending. In this case, they must deal with conflicting signals (Busemeyer et al., 2020) between the general public and beneficiaries who should oppose cuts to policies that benefit them. Since retrenchment entails significant electoral consequences, governments should restrain from following public mood. There is a rather critical nuance to this argument, however, that not all social policies have equally influential constituencies.

Second, the political and electoral strength of the groups associated with specific social policies should also affect government responsiveness. Governments have strong incentives to respond to public demands but only for policies that benefit large and politically organized constituencies. Prominent examples include welfare programmes such as pensions, healthcare, and education. These programmes address life-cycle risks that most individuals face at some point in their lives, making them broadly popular (Jensen 2011). Not only that, but their beneficiaries also—either pension recipients or workers in the healthcare and education sectors—are often organized in trade unions and other interest organizations, which gives them more legislative bargaining in social policymaking even during hard times (Immergut and Abou-Chadi 2014; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021).

In contrast, smaller social policies that target narrow or less organized segments of the electorate typically have less electoral impact. Because these policies generally hold a lower priority for citizens (Bremer and Bürgisser 2023), policy changes are less likely to directly influence election outcomes. Of course, governments can still respond to salient social problems with wider policy reforms in respond to unemployment programmes—from expanding social protection to activation and flexibilization of labour-markets (Przeworski 1986; Davidsson and Marx 2013; Ólafsson et al., 2019; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021). However, governments often lack electoral incentives to expand or cut back these specific programmes. This is the case of unemployment compensation, which addresses labour-market risks that predominantly affect individuals at the lower end of the income distribution (Jensen 2011). Importantly, governments may not respond to public opinion but rather introduce reforms closer to their political agendas (Busemeyer et al., 2020). Empirical research supports this expectation, as partisan effects appear to exert a stronger influence in unemployment programmes rather than large welfare policies (Bandau and Ahrens 2020).

Together, these studies illustrate why the link between public opinion and social policy change can follow different dynamics from general government spending. However, most work has largely focused on government partisanship, party competition, existing welfare institutions, policy legacies, and organized interests (Esping-Andersen 1990; Pierson 1996; Beramendi et al., 2015; Manow et al., 2018). Nevertheless, while there are fewer studies, some do examine welfare state change from a public opinion perspective.

In the European context, aggregate spending preferences seem to affect the generosity of welfare states. However, this effect is often conditioned by institutions. For instance, governments in Nordic and continental European countries tend to be more responsive than those in Liberal regimes (Brooks and Manza 2006a,b). Responsiveness is also higher in political contexts characterized by more electoral competition and fewer veto points that could obstruct policy changes (Abou-Chadi and Immergut 2020).

There is also some evidence that the type of social policy also affects government responsiveness. However, much of this research focuses on specific national contexts. In the USA, Sharp (1999) finds that governments respond thermostatically to public preferences regarding welfare policies (which, in the context of the USA, are primarily targeted at the poor), but not for social security. In the Netherlands, Raven et al. (2011) find that governments are more responsive to public opinion on new policies still not fully established—such as childcare and active labour-market policies. In contrast, they observe no evidence of government responsiveness in more institutionalized social security programmes.

These country-specific findings focus on spending preferences but do not address policy priorities. As I discussed earlier, in an era of fiscal constraints, the importance of social issues in a specific context determines whether governments respond to public demands. A recent study by Busemeyer et al. (2020) addresses this point by bringing issue salience to their analysis of education reforms. Exploring policy changes across eight European countries, the authors find that governments are more likely to respond to public opinion when education is a highly salient issue and when a large share of the population considers it important. However, responsiveness is lower when public preferences on education are not coherent. In such cases, the ideology of governing parties is likely to have a stronger impact on policy reforms. In addition to that, when education is not an important issue among people, interest organizations and bureaucrats appear to play a more prominent role in policymaking.

While their work makes an important contribution to the literature, it has some limitations. First, its reliance on cross-national survey data precludes a dynamic analysis of how change in issue salience and the direction of public over time affect responsiveness. Second, the study focuses exclusively on education policies. As I argued before, there are strong theoretical reasons to believe that government responsiveness changes over time and across different welfare policies. Large social programmes, which benefit significant numbers of recipients and are supported by strong interest groups, are more likely to elicit government responsiveness, especially when public opinion favours more spending. In contrast, smaller programmes tend to generate weaker public signals and thus prompt less responsiveness (see Jensen 2012).

To move beyond these limitations, this article proposes a broader theoretical framework to explain when salient social issues prompt changes in the generosity of different welfare programmes. Governments are expected to expand the generosity of social policies when the salience of a related social issue increases, provided that public opinion favours greater government spending. This happens because this signal from public opinion entails the expansion of spending generosity. Aligning public opinion with clear benefits for large electoral constituencies, politicians have clear electoral incentives to respond to public demands. This leads me to the following hypothesis:

> H1: An increase in the salience of a social issue is associated with increased spending generosity in corresponding welfare policies when public opinion favours more government spending.

When public opinion favours less government spending, the effect of issue salience is expected to be weaker. Governments face a trade-off between responding to general public preferences and preserving the interests of concentrated and politically organized beneficiary groups. As retrenchment often entails electoral risks, governments are likely to maintain existing policy levels to avoid backlash. Thus,

> H2: An increase in the salience of a social issue is not associated with changes in spending generosity in corresponding welfare policies when public opinion favours less government spending.

The type of social policy further conditions responsiveness to salient social issues. Governments are likely to adjust spending on large programmes that benefit broad constituencies, such as pensions, healthcare, and education. These programmes are backed by politically organized groups, making them electorally important. In contrast, narrowly targeted programmes, such as unemployment benefits, affect smaller and less politically influential groups. Consequently, governments have fewer incentives to respond to changes in issue salience for such policies. Thus,

> H3: An increase in the salience of a social issue affects spending generosity in large social programmes (e.g. pensions, healthcare, education) but has no effect on small social programmes (e.g. unemployment benefits).

3. Methodology

The empirical analysis focuses on fourteen Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) from 2002 to 2018 across four social policy areas: unemployment, pensions, healthcare, and education. This yields approximately 210 observations for each program (see Table 3). This case selection prioritizes external validity by including as many cases as possible within the context of mature welfare states. Meanwhile, the sixteen-year timeframe allows for a dynamic assessment of public opinion, showing how issue salience affects spending priorities when the public demands either more or less government spending. These different scenarios allow me to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. The four policy areas are selected to evaluate Hypothesis 2 by comparing government responsiveness across large welfare programmes—pensions, healthcare, and education—and the smaller labour-market programme, unemployment compensation (see Jensen 2012).

I use separate cross-national, time-series linear models for each policy area. All models include an interaction term between the two main independent variables—issue salience and government preferences. The models also introduce an additional vector of control variables that act as potential confounders. These independent variables are observed before the dependent variables. This ensures that the direction of the relationship in empirical findings follows that of the theoretical expectations. All specifications include fixed effects and Huber-White standard errors, thus controlling for structural country-level effects and providing robust statistics to heteroskedasticity in the errors. This approach removes the need to include control variables for all potentially relevant institutional characteristics and other structural factors that previous comparative studies have shown to affect government responsiveness and social policy generosity. These include, for instance, welfare regimes, electoral systems, and the number of institutional veto players. Crucially, the main theoretical focus in on public opinion and not the (moderating) impact of institutions. The use of fixed effects thus accounts for institutional factors while allowing for a parsimonious model. In what follows, I explain how I operationalize all the variables included in the analysis and Table 3 provides summary statistics for each.

3.1 Dependent variables

The dependent variables capture percentage changes in generosity spending levels over time. Using percentage changes aligns with the theoretical expectations, which focuses on shifts in the policy *status quo* rather than absolute expenditure levels. I construct these variables in three steps.

First, I capture public and mandatory private spending within specific welfare programmes, adjusted for constant prices to account for price changes over time. Data on unemployment compensation, pensions, and healthcare come from the *Social Protection Expenditure* dataset, while education spending data are drawn from the *Government Expenditure* dataset (Eurostat 2023).

Second, I weight these adjusted values to social needs by using demographic groups that reflects the beneficiaries of each policy based on Eurostat's (2023) *Population* data and the *Annual Unemployment* dataset based on the Labour Force Survey. The social programmes and their respective beneficiary groups are detailed in Table 1. This measurement scheme is designed to bring expenditure data in line with the primary concerns of comparative welfare

Table 1. Welfare programmes and social needs.

Issue-policy area	Social policies	Beneficiary groups
Unemployment	Unemployment cash benefits (except transfers for vocational training)	Number of unemployed people
Pensions	Full, partial, and survivors' pensions	Number of people aged 65 years old or older
Healthcare	Healthcare expenditure	Total population
Education	Primary, elementary, secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary education	Number of people aged between 4 and 17 years old

state research, which emphasizes the quality of social policy provision. Instead of measuring changes in budget sizes—the variable most used in public opinion research—the dependent variables follow the welfare state literature's focus on assessing benefit quality. Indeed, previous studies within this research tradition have shown that expenditure data, once adjusted for social needs can serve this purpose (Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al., 2010; Kuitto 2011; Ronchi 2018).

Third, I compute changes in these values across different time frames—after 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years from the initial observation at time *t*, each calculated separately. This follows the recommendations of welfare scholars to avoid model specifications with annual lags between the explanatory and dependent variables (Starke 2006). This is because year-over-year differences are often too narrow to meaningfully capture what governments do with social policy as changes may take time to materialize (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Clasen and Siegel 2007). There are several ways to solve this problem. Some authors propose running separate analyses on various variables that capture changes over different time intervals (see Raven et al., 2011; Breznau 2015). Others suggest selecting a time difference backed up by sound theoretical or empirical reasons—for instance, observing changes between the start and the end of a crisis (Deken and Kittel 2007; Schmitt 2016). I opt for the first one, as it is more attuned to a quantitative approach, where specific theoretical reasons may not always be identifiable for every single observation. Arguably, this strategy offers a good balance between a more comprehensive look at reforms with slower roll-out while still offering a meaningful picture of short-term dynamics in government responsiveness.

3.2 Independent variables

3.2.1 Issue salience

Turning to the independent variables, this article measures issue salience by looking at the percentage of individuals that consider specific social problems to be affecting their country. These data are collected from thirty-eight European Commission (2020) surveys conducted biannually between 2001 and 2018, posing the following question:

> What do you think are the most important issues facing (our country) in the moment?

Respondents are allowed to select up to two options per round, with choices including unemployment, pensions, the healthcare system, and the education system. I match each of these issues to their respective policy field in the analysis.

3.2.2 Citizen preferences for government spending

To assess citizens' preferences for government spending, I draw on Caughey et al.'s (2019a) work on *Policy Ideology in European Mass Publics*. This research introduces a measure of relative economic conservatism that captures preferences regarding (1) overall government spending, including spending on social protection, education, and support for the poor; (2) taxation policies for individuals with high, medium, and low incomes; (3) business regulations; and (4) the government's role in ensuring citizen well-being (Caughey et al., 2019b).

The authors calculate this measure by aggregating responses from multiple surveys conducted across European countries. They apply item response theory models to synthesize the responses into an unobserved latent trait representing the public mood towards government activity. To ensure comparability across survey questions, the values are calculated for comparable demographic groups rather than the individual level (Caughey et al., 2019a). The resulting variable measures economic conservatism relative to the national policy *status quo*, where positive values indicate lower support for government spending and vice-versa. For this analysis, the original variable is reversed so that higher values represent more favourable attitudes towards government spending. Biennial figures are interpolated into annual values to align with the country-year structure of the regression models.

This measure focuses on general attitudes towards government spending. Although my theoretical framework prioritizes policy-specific measures, data limitations make extensive use of such measures infeasible. To preserve external validity, I avoid relying on sparse data points for policy-specific attitudes, which would weaken the analysis. While acknowledging that policy priorities vary across demographics, it is reasonable to assume that national-level policy-specific attitudes generally follow the same trajectory as general policy mood. If this assumption holds, positive correlation should exist among the four policy-specific areas and with the general measure. Appendix 1 analyses this using ISSP data from 1996, 2006, and 2016, confirming these expectations. Although the model estimates may be less precise, the positive correlation between policy-specific attitudes and general attitudes (both overall and in first differences) reduces concerns for bias.

3.2.3 Government partisanship

Turning to the variables concerning partisanship, this article assesses the extent to which parties in government prefer more or less funding of social policy programmes. This approach follows the recommended strategy in existing literature, which advocates for the use of specific welfare state preferences rather than relying on static measurements of party families or broader left-right orientations that include items not relevant to the research interests at hand (Döring and Schwander 2015; Horn 2017).

The analysis uses party manifestos (Krause et al., 2019) to ascertain these orientations, focusing on the role of governments in the economy, funding of social policies, and fostering equality. Table 2 outlines the items included in each dimension and their classification into positive and negative orientations:

Adopting a state-of-the-art approach to scaling policy preferences, the observed values for each party correspond to the logarithmic ratio between positive and negative

Table 2. Government orientations about the funding of social programmes.

Positive orientations	Negative orientations
Market regulation (per403)	Free market economy (per401)
Economic planning (per404)	Supply side economic policies (per402)
Protectionism (per406)	
Keynesian management (per409)	Free trade and open markets (per407)
Controlled economy (per412)	
Nationalization (per413)	
Equality (per503)	Economic orthodoxy (per414)
Welfare State Expansion (per504)	Welfare State Limitation (per505)
Education Expansion (per506)	Education Limitation (per507)
Labour Groups: Positive (per701)	Labour Groups: Negative (per702)

Table 3. Summary statistics.

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs
Dependent variables					
Spending unemployment (Δt + 1)	−0.6	16.8	−45.1	175.6	209
Spending unemployment (Δt + 2)	−0.3	27.4	−58.5	217.6	209
Spending unemployment (Δt + 3)	0.8	38.1	−68.9	245.9	208
Spending pensions (Δt + 1)	1.1	3.2	−10.0	17.2	210
Spending pensions (Δt + 2)	2.2	5.2	−10.9	25.7	210
Spending pensions (Δt + 3)	3.1	7.1	−12.7	35.0	209
Spending healthcare (Δt + 1)	1.6	4.3	−17.3	21.4	210
Spending healthcare (Δt + 2)	3.1	6.9	−24.8	29.6	210
Spending healthcare (Δt + 3)	4.6	9.1	−34.5	36.1	209
Spending education (Δt + 1)	0.9	4.5	−19.5	12.9	210
Spending education (Δt + 2)	1.6	7.1	−31.2	26.7	210
Spending education (Δt + 3)	2.3	9.1	−34.5	31.2	210
Independent variables					
Issue unemployment	41.5	18.9	4.0	81.0	210
Issue healthcare	19.1	13.2	2.0	54.0	210
Issue education	9.2	6.5	1.2	37.0	210
Issue pensions	9.7	5.5	1.8	27.0	210
Spending preferences	0.35	0.97	−1.92	2.17	210
Left government	1.42	0.78	−0.20	3.26	210
Influence of interest groups	1.24	0.70	0	2	210
GDP growth	1.3	3.1	−10.2	24.4	210

orientations (Lowe et al., 2011). I then matched this information with cabinet composition data available in the Parlgov database (Döring and Manow 2020). For single-party governments, the variable takes on the observed value for the incumbent. In contrast, for multi-party governments, it uses the weighted average of all coalition partners, based on the proportion of parliamentary seats held by each party relative to the total held by the incumbent coalition. This weighting strategy is consistent with the approach in empirical research on public opinion and policy change (see Toshkov et al., 2020).

Note that these variables do not adhere to the country-year structure of the dependent variables. To fit with this structure, I matched these data with information on the parties in power at the time of parliamentary approval of national budgets for the fiscal year of the spending figures. Dates of budget laws were manually collected from the online law repositories of each country (Agencia Estatal Boletín Oficial del Estado 2020; Bundesministerium der 2020; Bundesministerium für Digitalisierung und Wirtschaftsstandort 2020; Civilstyrelsen 2020; Εθνικο Τυπογραφειο 2020; Etaamb 2020; Irish Government 2020; Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato 2020; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties 2020; Oikeusministeriö 2020; República Portuguesa 2020; République Française 2020; Sveriges Riksdag 2020; The National Archives 2020).

3.2.4 Strength of organized interest groups

The models also include another variable grasping the influence of organized interest groups in policy. I use an indicator from the ICTWSS dataset on industrial relations that measures the involvement of unions and employers in the social and economic policymaking processes of governments (Visser 2019).

Additionally, the models also control for economic growth (Table 3). This variable accounts for annual changes in real GDP per capita, measured in chain-linked prices. This variable is crucial in accounting for fluctuations in the levels of generosity that might not stem from shifts in public opinion but rather from the government's fiscal capacity to fund social policies. Such capacity is typically more constrained during economic downturns and more flexible during good times. This is particularly relevant for healthcare and education policies, where a significant portion of government expenditure is allocated to employee compensation, which should correlate, at least to some extent, with how well the economy is doing. The data for this variable were sourced from the Eurostat (2023).

4. Results

Following the approach outlined in the Methods section, I run separate cross-national, time-series linear models for the four social policy programs of the analysis—unemployment, pensions, healthcare, and education. Table 4 presents the results for changes in these programs' spending generosity, measured from time t (when the independent variables are observed) to time $t+1$, $t+2$, and $t+3$, respectively. Recall that Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 argue that the impact of issue salience on spending priorities depends on the direction of citizens' preferences towards government spending. This relationship is modelled with the interaction effect. However, the direction and significance level of this slope are not enough to fully convey this conditional impact. To make the interpretation clearer, these interaction effects are visualized in the accompanying figures for each model in Figs 1–3. In addition, I calculate the marginal effect of issue salience at two symmetrical points of the distribution of the spending preferences variable—at the 10th percentile and the 90th percentile. This comparison is made in two ways: first, by comparing the marginal effect of issue salience at these two points of the distribution, and second, by comparing the difference in the absolute size (i.e. ignoring the direction) by subtracting one coefficient from the other. These two comparisons are depicted in Table 5. Finally, to test Hypothesis 3, I use

Table 4. Regression results.

	Unemployment			Pensions			Healthcare			Education		
	t + *1*	*t* + *2*	*t* + *3*	*t* + *1*	*t* + *2*	*t* + *3*	*t* + *1*	*t* + *2*	*t* + *3*	*t* + *1*	*t* + *2*	*t* + *3*
Issue salience	−0.06	−0.04	0.08	0.06	0.10	0.19	0.08	0.15*	0.18*	−0.00	0.02	0.04
	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.15)
Spending preferences	4.58	3.04	0.63	−2.08	−3.97*	−5.61*	−3.24**	−6.08***	−8.68***	−3.57*	−5.63*	−5.09
	(4.81)	(8.33)	(10.86)	(1.19)	(1.62)	(2.24)	(1.12)	(1.72)	(2.15)	(1.61)	(2.18)	(2.70)
Issue salience ×	−0.12	−0.09	−0.03	0.13	0.26**	0.32**	0.11*	0.27***	0.36***	0.29***	0.51***	0.50**
Spending preferences	(0.09)	(0.15)	(0.19)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.15)
Left government	−3.94	−8.73	−14.34*	0.44	0.78	1.06	−0.35	−1.20*	−1.84**	0.07	−0.00	−0.60
	(3.33)	(5.21)	(6.77)	(0.27)	(0.49)	(0.65)	(0.45)	(0.52)	(0.63)	(0.38)	(0.55)	(0.71)
Interest groups	0.60	3.53	6.87	1.45	3.23	5.44*	1.70	2.85*	4.49**	0.51	0.37	−0.42
	(2.08)	(4.36)	(5.92)	(1.15)	(1.96)	(2.70)	(1.08)	(1.20)	(1.44)	(1.00)	(1.31)	(1.70)
GDP growth	0.76*	1.92**	2.86**	−0.01	0.19	0.37	0.37**	0.78***	1.09***	0.35**	0.75***	1.15***
	(0.36)	(0.70)	(1.00)	(0.10)	(0.18)	(0.27)	(0.12)	(0.21)	(0.25)	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.26)
Intercept	6.71	7.79	6.10	−1.67	−3.79	−6.76	−0.99	−0.82	−0.67	0.74	1.61	3.25
	(7.56)	(12.64)	(16.01)	(1.57)	(2.66)	(3.60)	(1.41)	(1.83)	(2.20)	(1.26)	(1.72)	(2.33)
N	209	209	208	210	210	209	210	210	209	210	210	210
Countries	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14	14
Adj. R^2	0.04	0.13	0.20	0.05	0.16	0.21	0.14	0.31	0.36	0.11	0.21	0.25
Prob > F	0.24	0.03	0.02	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Dependent variable: Percentage differences in spending generosity between t and t + 1, t + 2, or t + 3, respectively. Models include fixed effects by country. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*$P \le .05$.

**$P \le .01$.

***$P \le .001$.

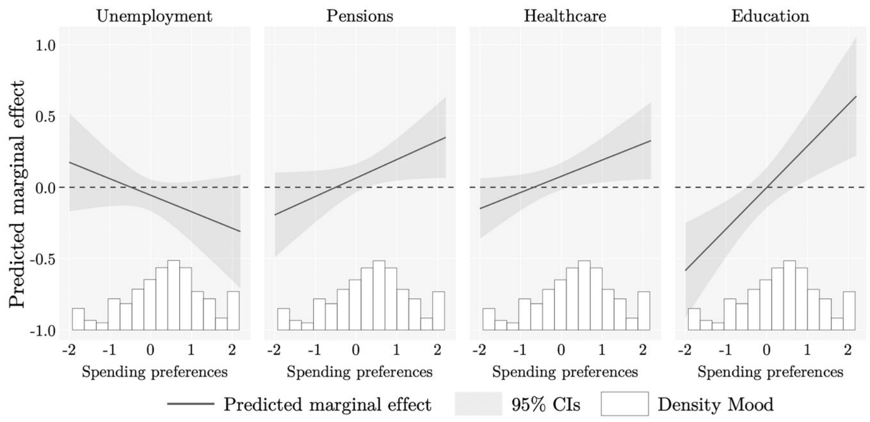

Figure 1. Marginal effect of issue salience on spending generosity in social programmes (t + 1).

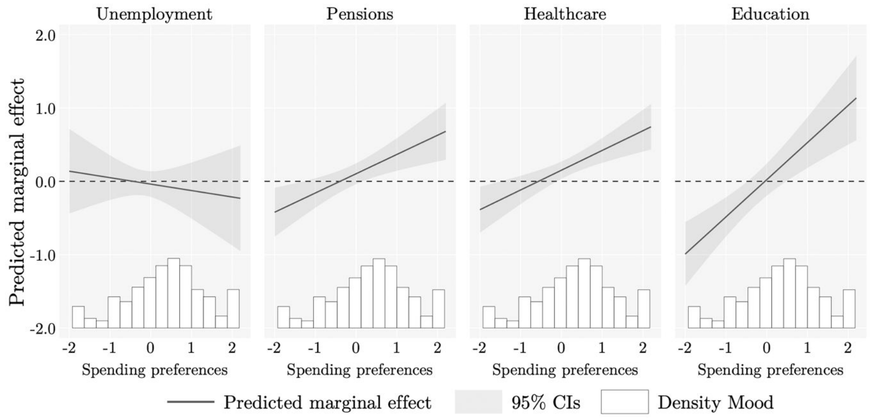

Figure 2. Marginal effect of issue salience on spending generosity in social programmes (t + 2).

these two tests to discuss substantive differences between the three big social policy programmes—pensions, healthcare, and education—and the small labour-market programme—unemployment compensation.

4.1 Pensions, healthcare, and education

I begin with the regression results for the large social policy programmes. Focusing on Table 4, I observe that the slope of the interaction term is positive across the three issue-policy areas. However, it is only significant at a $P < .05$ level in the case of healthcare and education. Coupled with positive (but non-significant) coefficients for the main effect, this slope follows the suggested hypothesis that the impact of issue salience on spending priorities increases as the public becomes more favourable towards government spending. Figure 1 gives us a visual inspection of the relationship, which aligns with Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 for both pensions and healthcare. When policy mood is low, salience of social

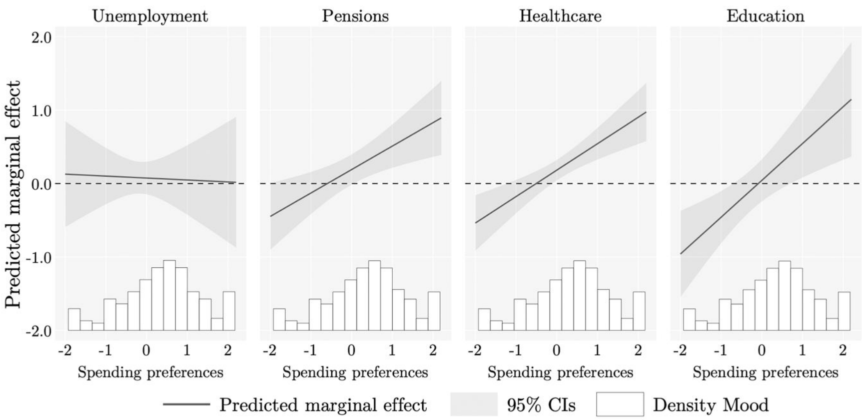

Figure 3. Marginal effect of issue salience on spending generosity in social programmes (t + 3).

problems is not significantly associated with an increase in spending priorities in the following year. However, when that policy mood is high, that is the case. Still, in the education model, the plot shows a symmetrical relationship. Governments appear to respond to people's concerns about the education system, mirroring the direction of spending preferences among the general public.

Admittedly, the visual inspection alone is not enough to provide a rigorous understanding of the size of our issue salience coefficient at these different points of the distribution. However, Table 5 offers reassurance that this interpretation is correct. For the pensions and healthcare models, issue salience has an effect that is not different from 0 on spending generosity when policy mood is low (10th percentile). However, when mood is high the predicted effect is significant. At the 90th percentile, the coefficients report a 0.27 (± 0.21 at a 95 per cent confidence interval) and 0.25 (± 0.20) point increase, respectively. In addition, the difference between the two coefficients, reported in the third column of Table 5, is also significant for both programmes. Both findings suggest that there is indeed a stronger effect of issue salience on spending priorities when the general public is favourable to government spending than when it is not.

Turning to education policy, Fig. 1 shows a symmetrical effect. In this case, we see governments responding to education issues when they become important among the public, yet they seem to follow the direction of spending mood. When citizens want less government spending, we see a reduction in spending priorities in the following year, with a size of –0.26 (± 0.19). When citizens want more government spending, we see an increase in spending priorities, with a size of 0.45 (± 0.32). Importantly, the comparison between the sizes of these two coefficients indicated by the third column shows that—while the coefficient at the 90th percentile is larger—it is not significantly larger than the coefficient at the 10th percentile. Thus, in the case of education policies, we cannot reject the null hypothesis of H2.

Table 4 also reports changes over two years and three years yield similarly consistent findings, and thus serve as a useful sensitivity check. The direction of the coefficients does not shift appreciably, and the visual inspection of Figs 2 and 3 and the calculations in Table 5 confirm the same pattern. The hypothesized direction remains the same. These

Table 5. Effect size at different levels of policy mood.

	Low mood (p10)	High mood (p90)	Difference abs(p90) – abs(p10)
Unemployment (t + 1)	0.05	−0.24	0.19
	(0.09)	(0.15)	(0.13)
Unemployment (t + 2)	0.04	−0.18	0.14
	(0.14)	(0.28)	(0.23)
Unemployment (t + 3)	0.10	0.03	−0.07
	(0.18)	(0.34)	(0.47)
Pensions (t + 1)	−0.05	0.27*	0.22*
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Pensions (t + 2)	−0.13	0.51***	0.39*
	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.16)
Pensions (t + 3)	−0.09	0.70***	0.61**
	(0.14)	(0.20)	(0.22)
Healthcare (t + 1)	−0.02	0.25*	0.23*
	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Healthcare (t + 2)	−0.08	0.57***	0.49***
	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Healthcare (t + 3)	−0.14	0.76***	0.62***
	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.15)
Education (t + 1)	−−0.26**	0.45**	0.20
	(0.09)	(0.16)	(0.17)
Education (t + 2)	−0.42**	0.81***	0.39
	(0.13)	(0.23)	(0.25)
Education (t + 3)	−0.39**	0.83**	0.43
	(0.17)	(0.31)	(0.34)

Difference corresponds to the difference between the absolute value of the predicted marginal effect of issue at percentile 10 and percentile 90 of mood.

*$P \leq .05$.

**$P \leq .01$.

***$P \leq .001$.

models report larger effects with a higher degree of statistical significance, even when accounting for greater variation observed in changes over longer periods. These stronger effects support previous studies that suggest that social policy change often takes time to be realized (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Starke 2006; Deken and Kittel 2007).

Finally, all these findings remain robust even with the inclusion of variables measuring government orientations towards social program funding. Government partisanship coefficients show no significant influence on generosity levels, in line with recent meta-analyses indicating similar results in studies exploring the link between partisanship and spending on life-course welfare programs (Bandau and Ahrens 2020). This also aligns with broader welfare scholarship suggesting a diminished role of partisan differences in social policy generosity after the initial development of welfare states (Pierson 1996).

The sole exception regarding partisanship effects occurs in healthcare, where less focus on funding social programs correlates with increased spending generosity. This counterintuitive result might challenge the dominant view in the literature that left-wing parties are proponents of welfare expansion (Starke 2006; Häusermann et al., 2013). However, there is some evidence showing that confessional parties—typically more market-oriented—positively impact healthcare spending, especially when facing strong electoral competition with left parties (Montanari and Nelson 2013). These interesting results warrant further investigation into the dynamics of public opinion and healthcare politics.

What does this mean in substantive terms? These findings align well with my hypotheses H1 and H2, at least for pensions and healthcare. They suggest that governments are more proactive in responding to salient social issues when it involves expanding benefits in these two areas. In contrast, they display a more measured response when aligning with general public sentiment that would imply a reduction of benefits, likely due to the potential for electoral backlash from specific constituencies that stand to lose from such policy adjustments. This provides tentative evidence that governments also consider the preferences of pension recipients and the beneficiaries of healthcare programmes, even if they go against the general mood in public opinion for more or less government spending. As suggested by existing literature, cutting back is an unpopular policy—at least among its beneficiaries—which governments try to avoid to protect themselves from electoral misfortunes.

However, education remains relatively exposed to cuts, even though governments do respond to clear public demands, a pattern consistent with past research (Busemeyer et al., 2020). The symmetrical effects I observe in Table 5—where governments both expand and cut education spending depending on public mood—suggest they do not hesitate to reduce benefits, even when these programs are popular and serve large segments of the electorate.

Several explanations may account for these symmetrical effects. First, education offers less visible benefits, often realized over the long term for young children, so the effects of reforms on service provision may only become apparent well after implementation. Time inconsistency makes governments less responsive to public demands, since costs may only materialize after the election cycle (see Streeck and Thelen 2005; Jacobs 2016). This sector may have weaker interest groups compared to healthcare or pensions. The control variables measuring organizational influence indirectly support this: union and employer involvement is positively associated with future spending in pensions (at $t+3$) and healthcare (at $t+2$ and $t+3$) but not in education, where it appears to have no effect on spending priorities. Third, the composition of electoral groups can also have an impact. Typical beneficiaries of education policies, such as young adults and parents, tend to have lower voter turnout compared to older age groups, who are the main beneficiaries of pensions and healthcare (see Bhatti et al., 2012). This difference in electoral participation means that governments have stronger incentives to protect these latter two programmes compared to education.

4.2 Unemployment

Turning to unemployment, I find no relationship between public concerns about unemployment problems and spending priorities in unemployment compensation programmes in the following year. Similar conclusions are drawn from the models testing not only annual changes but also those spanning two and three years. I remind the reader that spending priorities are weighted by the number of unemployed people, meaning that cyclical effects in the unemployment rate do not affect the dependent variable. These findings are very much in line with the theoretical expectations set forth earlier.

Unemployment compensation schemes often serve smaller, less organized segments of the electorate. As a result, changes in the generosity of these programs are less likely to influence future election outcomes. Another possible explanation for these results is that they may reflect issues such as stigma, partisan conflict, or media framing. Still, with lower electoral incentives, governments are less likely to respond salient unemployment issues by expanding unemployment benefits.

This does not mean that salient unemployment problems may not prompt governments to act in periods of economic crises and high unemployment. Indeed, there is ample evidence that governments may introduce broader policy reforms to social programmes and labour-market regulations. Admittedly, such reforms depend on available fiscal space, the government in power, the influence of trade unions and employers' organizations, as well as policy legacies (Przeworski 1986; Ólafsson et al., 2019; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021). However, the key word here is 'broader' policy packages. From an electoral point of view, these packages may be more appealing solutions. The non-response we find pertains specifically to changes in unemployment compensation itself, which should not have much effect in the electoral fortunes of governments (Tables A.1 and A.2).

The control variables here suggest that neither the influence of interest organizations nor government partisanship appears to affect the spending generosity of these programmes. While the former makes sense from a theoretical point of view, the latter is more surprising. Governments should enjoy a greater leeway in adjusting the generosity of unemployment compensation programmes in accordance with their programmatic agendas. This is also suggested by the literature, which shows that partisan influence over these policies is greater than in large programmes (Jensen 2011; Bandau and Ahrens 2020). Nonetheless, the findings do not support these expectations, as evidenced by inconsistent coefficients for government orientations concerning welfare programme funding and economic intervention. To be sure, this constitutes preliminary evidence requiring further investigation. The current models treat programmatic orientations of governments merely as control variables, given that they do not form a core aspect of the initial expectations. Future research exploring how these government orientations and public preferences collectively impact spending opens a promising avenue for the welfare state literature.

Nevertheless, these findings lend support to H3, regarding the impact of government responsiveness to issue salience in the three big social programmes—pensions, healthcare, and education—but not on unemployment compensation. Furthermore, H1 and H2 also appear to be corroborated for pensions and healthcare, where we also find supportive evidence that the influence of interest groups in policymaking increases spending priorities in the medium run. This indicates a more cautious approach by governments towards reducing the generosity of social programmes, even when public mood is lower. Such cutbacks can still carry electoral risks, especially if they displease the beneficiaries of these policies. In the case of education programmes, we find an effect of issue salience on spending priorities, but this effect is symmetrical—it matches the general public's spending preferences for government spending. Consequently, we cannot reject the null hypothesis for H2 for this programme.

5. Conclusion

This article asks whether social issues affect the generosity of social policy programmes. It argues that governments adjust the spending priorities when citizens view a particular social problem as particularly important. However, because of their electoral motivations, they do that under two conditions. First, they are more likely to expand benefits in response to salient issues when citizens favour more government spending, as this aligns the interests of the general public with those of organized beneficiaries. However, when public mood for spending is lower, governments face conflicting signals and tend to refrain from cutting benefits to avoid electoral backlash. Second, governments are more responsive in programmes that benefit large and politically organized constituencies, such as pensions, healthcare, and education. In contrast, they are less likely respond to unemployment concerns by changing the generosity of unemployment compensation programmes. This happens because these policies cater to smaller, less organized constituencies, which means they have less electoral incentives to respond to these issues.

The findings largely support these theoretical expectations. There is no evidence of responsiveness in unemployment programmes. This is likely because unemployment compensation affects smaller, less organized segments of the electorate, which reduces both the political payoff and the pressure for governments to respond to shifts in public concern or public opinion. Additional factors such as the stigma attached to unemployment benefits, partisan conflict, and how the media frames these issues may further weaken the electoral incentives for governments to adjust these programmes. Future research can build on this framework to examine more closely why governments remain unresponsive to unemployment concerns.

In contrast, pensions, healthcare, and education consistently show responsiveness to salient issues across all models. For pensions and healthcare, when the public wants more spending, governments respond; when the public wants less, governments avoid cuts due to potential backlash from organized beneficiaries. This pattern aligns closely with the theoretical expectations of the article.

In education, governments respond symmetrically to public mood, expanding or cutting benefits depending on public preferences for more or less spending, respectively. This symmetric effect was unexpected. Possible explanations include less visible long-term benefits, weaker interest groups, and lower electoral participation among education beneficiaries. Future research should further investigate the dynamics of education spending and why it appears to be less protected from cuts.

These findings have important implications for the welfare state literature, which has traditionally focused on government partisanship, party competition, existing welfare institutions, policy legacies, and organized interests (Esping-Andersen 1990; Pierson 1996; Beramendi et al., 2015; Manow et al., 2018). The role of dynamic public opinion has received much less attention. This article shows that issue salience can play a key role in shaping government decisions on social policy, depending on the policy area and the direction of public mood.

The article also has several limitations, which point to avenues for future research. First, the analysis does not cover family and children policy, which has become an important function of advanced welfare states (Bonoli 2013). The main reason for this omission is data availability: existing surveys and studies on political party agendas do not systematically cover family policy (see Krause et al., 2019; European Commission 2020). Future studies could address this gap by gathering new public opinion data on this policy area.

Second, the article focuses solely on public opinion without considering the role of political institutions in welfare state development (Esping-Andersen 1990; Pierson 1994; Manow et al., 2018). While the analyses use fixed effects to account for structural factors, I do not examine how institutions may mediate the relationship between voters, governments, and social policy. This remains a promising area for future work. Some recent studies examine the role of institutions in overall social spending (e.g. Abou-Chadi and Immergut 2020), but less is known about how institutions interact with public opinion on specific social programmes.

Third, the analysis does not systematically consider how government agendas and the influence of trade unions and employers' associations shape social policymaking. Although these actors are included as control variables, their effects may interact with public opinion and context-specific factors. For example, research shows that these groups influence education reforms mainly when the issue is less salient (Busemeyer et al., 2020). Other studies find that strong left parties and robust trade unions are linked to higher welfare spending (Boreham et al., 1996; Engler and Voigt 2023). Future work should explore how these actors interact and how partisanship shapes social policy (Bulfone and Tassinari 2021).

Fourth, the study does not establish a causal relationship between public opinion and government responsiveness in social policy generosity. The analysis prioritizes external validity to identify broad welfare state trends across countries. This approach is meant to complement existing case studies on family policy (Fleckenstein 2011), two-country comparisons of unemployment (Davidsson and Marx 2013), and cross-country analyses of education (Busemeyer et al., 2020). However, this approach involves trade-offs with internal validity. For this reason, studies with a narrower focus continue to be very valuable to continuing furthering this research agenda.

Still, this study raises new and important questions for the literature on welfare state politics. My findings suggest that governments do remain, to some degree, attuned to shifting political and socio-economic conditions, but only when issues become important. However, not all groups in society have the capacity to bring their problems to the forefront of the policy agenda.

This has implications for the normative debate on representative democracy (Przeworski et al., 1999; Achen and Bartels 2016) about the extent to which policies deliver benefits only to societal groups whose voices matter. Evidence suggests that elected officials tend to forgo citizens whose mobilization and voice is weaker, raising important normative questions about the *left-behind* in society and the extent to which being excluded from welfare benefits for lack of electoral weight has implications for the cohesion of society. Ultimately, ensuring that the social needs of groups with lower political capacity are not systematically overlooked remains a crucial challenge for social policymaking as new social risks become more prevalent in post-industrial societies (Hemerijck 2013).

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Appendix 1. Correlation between general policy mood and policy-specific mood

The measure of general policy mood is derived from Caughey et al.'s (2019b) supplementary material on relative economic conservatism. The original variable was inverted to ensure that higher values represent more favourable views towards government spending. This makes interpretation more intuitive.

Policy-specific mood is constructed using responses to the following question from the International Social Survey Programme (GESIS 2024):

> Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please show whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say 'much more' it might require a tax increase to pay for it.

Respondents rated their preferences for spending in the following areas

> *Healthcare …*
> *Education …*
> *Old Age Pensions …*
> *Unemployment benefits …*

Answers are recorded on a 5-point scale, where 1 corresponds to 'spend much less' and 5 corresponds to 'spend much more'. These variables were also inverted to ensure higher values reflect preferences for reduced government spending, to align it with the interpretation with the general mood variable.

To test the correlation between general policy attitudes and policy-specific attitudes, I only used data from the countries included in the analysis and comparable time periods. The resulting dataset includes nine countries (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) for the years 1996, 2006, and 2016. Both Caughey et al.'s (2019b) supplementary material and the ISSP dataset (GESIS 2024) separate

Table A.1. Correlation between general and policy-specific mood.

	Unemployment	Pensions	Healthcare	Education
Unemployment	1			
Pensions	0.46	1		
Healthcare	0.44	0.88	1	
Education	0.45	0.61	0.55	1
General mood	0.26	0.45	0.21	0.33

Number of observations for each correlation: 23.

Table A.2. Correlation between general and policy-specific mood: changes over time within each country (1996–2006 and 2006–2016).

	Unemployment	Pensions	Healthcare	Education
Unemployment	1			
Pensions	0.35	1		
Healthcare	0.62	0.82	1	
Education	0.43	0.48	0.56	1
General mood	0.07	0.26	0.38	0.11

Number of observations for each correlation: 13.

measurements for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Thus, I treated them as separate observations for this test. For Germany, I aggregated the values for West and East Germany together using a weighted average based on population data retrieved from Eurostat (2023).

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