

Support for conditional unemployment benefit in European countries: The role of income inequality

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Renzo Carriero and Marianna Filandri

University of Turin, Italy

Abstract

This article investigates attitudes towards the conditionality of benefits targeted to a specific needy group, the unemployed, and analyses their relationship with the structure of income inequality. The focus is on the deservingness of welfare recipients. The public seems to use five criteria to define deservingness and, consequently, the conditionality to which public support is subjected: need, attitude (i.e. gratefulness), control (over neediness), reciprocity (of giving and receiving) and identity, that is the similarity or proximity between the providers of public support (the taxpayers) and the people who should receive it. People's willingness to help depends on how close they consider benefit recipients to be to themselves (i.e. the extent to which they belong to the same in-group). The identity criterion is the main object of our investigation. We argue that the operation of this criterion at the micro-level can be affected by macro-level variables. Specifically, we focus on different measures of the structure of income inequality which are indicators of the social distance between welfare recipients and taxpayers. Based on data from three waves of the European Values Study (1990–2008) collected in 30 countries, the study offers a comparative and longitudinal analysis. The picture emerging from the within-country analysis – which removed much of the between-country heterogeneity – shows that when the social distance grows, it is more difficult for the majority of citizens (upper and middle classes) to identify with the unemployed.

Keywords

Conditionality, individual responsibility, inequality, social distance, unemployment benefits, welfare regimes

Introduction

Over the last two decades, changes in European welfare states have reduced access to universal protection schemes, increased means-testing and the conditionality of benefit provision, and placed

Corresponding author:

Marianna Filandri, Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Lungo Dora Siena 100, 10153 Turin, Italy. Email: marianna.filandri@unito.it

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greater emphasis on individual responsibility (Blekesaune, 2007; Brady and Lee, 2014; Jensen et al., 2017). Public opinion on these themes is of particular relevance, since mass preferences can influence welfare states' policy making (Brooks and Manza, 2006). Welfare cuts can be justified in many ways. One of the arguments is austerity, but another is legitimacy. The latter strategy includes framing welfare reform in terms of the (un)deservingness of welfare recipients, as this can be a powerful tool to garner public support for welfare state retrenchment (Slothuus, 2007). It is indeed much easier to justify cuts to welfare generosity if the beneficiaries are deemed undeserving of help. The question then is to define who is deserving and who is not. According to the literature (Van Oorschot, 2000), the public uses five criteria to define deservingness and, consequently, the conditionality to which public support is subject: the recipients' level of need, their attitude (i.e. gratefulness), the level of control over neediness (their responsibility for it), the reciprocity of giving and receiving and, finally, the criterion of identity, or in other words, the similarity or proximity between the providers of public support (the taxpayers) and the people who should receive it (Van Oorschot, 2000). People's willingness to help depends on how close they consider benefit recipients to be to themselves (i.e. the extent to which they belong to the same in-group).

We argue that the operation of these criteria at the micro-level can be affected by macro-level variables. Specifically, we focus on the structure of income inequality. The latter is an indicator of the social distance between welfare recipients and taxpayers and may be primarily linked to the identity criterion. Income inequality has often been considered in studies on attitudes towards the welfare state or welfare policies (see, for example, Dallinger, 2010; Dion and Birchfield, 2010; Finseraas, 2009; Jaeger, 2013; Schmidt-Catran, 2014). More generally, numerous comparative public opinion analyses linked popular attitudes to economic conditions and welfare institutions (Arts and Gelissen, 2001; Blekesaune, 2007; Dallinger, 2010; Jaeger, 2006a, 2009, 2013; Kenworthy and McCall, 2008; Nauman et al., 2016; Schmidt-Catran, 2014; Svallfors, 1997). We focus our attention on attitudes towards the conditionality of benefits targeting a specific needy group, the unemployed, and analyse their relationship with the distribution of income.

We add to previous literature in three ways. First, there are few comparative studies on attitudes towards conditionality of public support. Our study is both comparative and longitudinal, and also one of the few using three waves of the European Values Study (EVS), covering almost 20 years and 30 countries. Second, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that relates the structure of income inequality and attitudes towards conditionality, and, as we argue in the theoretical section, there are good reasons to investigate such a relationship. Third, the estimation method we applied to measure the effect of income inequality is more robust than standard comparative analyses because it makes it possible to remove much of the between-country heterogeneity.

The article is organized as follows. The following section sets out the theoretical background that informed our analysis and reviews some of the relevant empirical studies. The research hypotheses are stated at the end of this section. In the subsequent section, we describe the data and the analytic strategy applied to them. We then present the research findings and, last, discuss their implications in the concluding section.

Theoretical background: deservingness and income inequality

Social solidarity consists in sharing welfare responsibilities among the members of a particular community, based on a principle of redistribution: a share of some members' resources is placed at the disposal of public institutions in order to satisfy the social needs of other members (Dougan and Spaventa, 2005). In general, people support welfare state institutions that pool social risks and redistribute resources between groups because of a moral argument,¹ that is, because they think that society has an obligation to care for the most vulnerable (Mau, 2004). However, even invoking the more elevated human motives of generosity, this does not imply that solidarity has to be unconditional (Bowles and Gintis, 2000). Rather, solidarity is usually conditional on the fulfilment of a few *deservingness criteria* by people in need. According to Van Oorschot (2000), five criteria define the deservingness of receiving public assistance: (1) *control* (people's responsibility over their neediness): the less control, the more deserving; (2) *need*: the greater the level of need, the more deserving; (3) *identity* (proximity of recipients to the providers of solidarity): the more similar to 'us' the needy are, the more deserving; (4) *attitude* (recipients' attitude towards support or gratefulness): the more compliant, the more deserving and (5) *reciprocity* (the degree of reciprocation or having earned support): the more reciprocation, the more deserving.

As regards recipient categories, previous research (Frederiksen, 2015; Van Oorschot, 2000, 2006) has shown that the public considers the elderly, closely followed by the sick and disabled, to be most deserving, as they generally meet three criteria: control, identity and reciprocity (and often the other two as well). The elderly cannot control their aging, they are usually perceived 'like us' and they generally contributed with their past work to the welfare system. Conversely, the unemployed find it harder to earn deservingness. Despite the negative financial and health consequences of unemployment (Bambra and Eikemo, 2009, 2015), there are contrasting opinions about public financial support for the unemployed. When it comes to providing them with state financial help, unemployment is often considered as an individual fault. The reason behind this judgement is the idea that being unemployed (and persisting in that status) implies some voluntary component (control criterion). Therefore, the granting of unemployment benefits is subject to the unemployed individual's observable efforts to re-enter employment.

On the contrary, refusing a job that might end the individual's state of need is viewed as a violation of the *reciprocity norm* that imposes specific requirements on the beneficiaries of public assistance (Bowles and Gintis, 2000; Mau, 2004). Moreover, the unemployed, unlike the elderly, did not earn enough credit towards society with their past work.

Finally, the unemployed face stronger conditionality for the support they receive because they fail with regard to the *identity criterion*. As they are often the object of stigmatization (for the reasons just mentioned), they are likely to be excluded from the group. Thus, it becomes difficult for the public to identify with them, since the concept of identity is linked to belonging to a social group (Epstein, 1978). In this regard, previous research showed that being unemployed at present, expecting to become unemployed in the near future, or having family members or close friends with unemployment experience lowers the risk of blaming unemployment on the individuals themselves (Furåker and Blomsterberg, 2003). In other words, direct and indirect experience of unemployment make people more likely to identify with the unemployed, thus influencing their attitudes towards them positively. However, it should be stressed that it is not enough to have some contact with the unemployed. To meet the identity criterion, the unemployed have to be recognized as being similar to 'us', that is, they should be considered as members of our personal in-group area (De Swaan, 1988). The latter can be defined by kinship relations or by place of residence, or more generally, by 'certain identity-group, like "our family," "our town," "our church," "our people" (Van Oorschot, 2000).

To summarize, the literature shows that control, reciprocity and identity criteria have the greatest influence on people's opinions about the conditionality of unemployment benefits, as these criteria are especially salient when the public thinks of the unemployed. By contrast, need and attitude do not feature prominently in the public's view, at least when comparing the deservingness of the unemployed with other social categories (Larsen, 2008).

Our main argument in this article is that macrolevel variables can affect public support for conditional unemployment benefits because they alter the deservingness of the unemployed through the operation of the criteria discussed above. The focus of our investigation is the influence of the structure of income inequality on the operation of one of the deservingness criteria: identity. We consider that the in-group, in this case, is defined by the level of income, which is relevant for identifying different social strata. Indeed, income inequality can be thought of as a measure of the social distance among individuals and groups (Brown and Langer, 2016). Therefore, the higher the income gap, the higher the social distance between individuals and groups, and the lower the proximity of the majority with the unemployed who in turn are less likely to be considered 'like us'. This is the central assumption of our study and is consistent with the so-called 'empathy gulf' concept (Shapiro, 2002: 119), according to which extreme inequality creates such a distance between the rich and the poor that it becomes impossible or very difficult for the former to imagine that they themselves (or their children) could be in need in the future and thus prevents them from empathizing with the poor or other disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that directly analyse the relationship between the structure of income inequality and attitudes towards the conditionality of unemployment benefits. We are aware of only one study (Paskov, 2015) on income inequality and *generalized* social solidarity, that is, not specifically targeted to the unemployed, based on European Social Survey data, whose findings show that increasing income inequality is positively correlated with solidarity.

Notwithstanding the absence of specific studies, work on how changing income structures have an impact on welfare state attitudes features prominently in political economy and sociology. This strand of research focuses mainly on the relationship between income inequality and attitudes towards redistribution or, more generally, welfare attitudes (Corneo and Grüner, 2002; Dallinger, 2010; Dion and Birchfield, 2010; Finseraas, 2009; Jaeger, 2013; Lupu and Pontusson, 2011; Osberg et al., 2004; Schmidt-Catran, 2014; Shapiro, 2002). Although this literature generally assumes that self-interest is at the root of the relationship between income inequality and welfare attitudes, it does not rule out the possibility that other (altruistic) motives may underlie it. Specifically, a few authors (Lupu and Pontusson, 2011) hypothesize that changes in income distribution alter the way some citizens (e.g. the median voter, the middle class) perceive their social affinity with other citizens (the poor, the unemployed) and hence become more or less inclined to support welfare policies. Our study fits into this kind of interpretation of the changing income structure.

We connect income inequality and identity criterion, drawing on previous literature that sees income inequality as an indicator of social distance. We cannot test the mechanism empirically and therefore cannot rule out that inequality also influences the operation of the other deservingness criteria. We believe that the only other operating mechanism could be the need criterion, as growing inequality translates into an increase in *relative* poverty rates. However, the public considers the state of need much more in absolute rather than relative terms (Castell and Thompson, 2007; Hall et al., 2014). Therefore, the distance in living conditions among income groups should primarily capture the identity criterion. Of course, other macro-level variables associated with income inequality may capture different mechanisms or deservingness criteria. Our study is not intended to investigate the influence of all such macro-level variables. However, we have to take them into account as potential confounders of the relationship between the inequality structure and the operation of the identity criterion. We discuss them below.

First, the diversity of the population in terms of ethnic composition is a component of the social context's heterogeneity and, thus, may affect the identity criterion in particular. Ethnic composition makes it difficult for citizens to see their fellow citizens of a different ethnic, cultural or racial background as part of 'us' (Janmaat and Braun, 2009). As a consequence, citizens of the ethnic majority are less inclined to offer social assistance and to feel solidarity with citizens of the ethnic minorities (Rapp, 2017; Römer, 2017). However, diversity in ethnic composition often overlaps to some extent with differences in income. Thus, income inequality may actually conceal ethnic diversity which fosters opposition to redistribution towards the poor and the unemployed because most citizens hardly identify with them and consider the poor (or the unemployed) themselves responsible for being needy (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; but see Brady and Finnigan, 2014, for a critique and different findings).

Second, the general level of unemployment can affect the structure of income inequality and relax the strictness of the control criterion. The higher the unemployment rate at a certain time, the less control the unemployed can have over their state of need. For this hypothesis, previous research reached mixed conclusions. The findings by Blekesaune and Quadagno

(2003) and Fraile and Ferrer (2005), both based on International Social Survey Program data, are consistent with the idea that the working of the control criterion is moderated by the unemployment rate. The latter is positively associated with attitudes to state involvement in helping the unemployed, and negatively associated with support for cuts in spending on unemployment benefits. On the contrary, Van Oorschot and Meuleman (2014) showed that unemployed deservingness in Europe is not affected by the unemployment rate. Rather, they found that the policy and cultural contexts matter. An earlier study (Fridberg and Ploug, 2010), based on Eurobarometer data and just seven countries, also highlighted the weak or low significance of unemployment rates for public attitudes towards the unemployed.

Last, the social solidarity model prevailing in a given area can significantly determine the level of inequality and also affect the operation of deservingness criteria. An important characteristic of welfare institutions is precisely that of the conditionality of the help provided to citizens, framed by the welfare regimes' degree of generosity and degree of universalism or selectivity. According to Larsen (2008), generosity and universalism are two key dimensions of the welfare regimes' social solidarity models that have an impact on perceptions of identity. Generosity in particular influences the identity criterion because it leads to fewer differences between the bottom of society and the majority. As a consequence, the bottom can fulfil the identity criterion more easily. In general, over the last 20 years, welfare states have changed the levels and conditions for social assistance, putting increased emphasis on individual responsibility (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Hemerijck, 2013; Marx and Schumacher, 2016; Pierson, 2001; Van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007). There has thus been a shift of policy-making orientations towards the so-called 'activation paradigm' (Serrano and Magnusson, 2007) that sets different goals for labour market and social policies. The goal of activation policies becomes that of increasing labour market entry and participation in order to prevent social exclusion and welfare dependency. To do so, according to the proponents of such policies, options for labour market exit and unconditional benefit receipt by members of the working-age population should be removed as far as possible (Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl, 2008).

Welfare restructuring and rise of 'activation' has affected the relative importance of deservingness criteria applied to welfare recipients. In the case of the unemployed, shifting the focus from structural to individualized explanations of unemployment and the major impetus given to the activation strategy made the criteria of control and reciprocity far more important (Frederiksen, 2015).²

The theoretical framework underpinning our investigation is summarized by the following scheme (Figure 1). As can be seen, income inequality influences support for conditional unemployment benefit mainly through the operation of the identity criterion (although the need criterion cannot be completely ruled out). The other macro-level variables are connected to the operation of identity and other deservingness criteria, namely, control and reciprocity. These macro-level factors enter the model as they affect or are connected with income inequality.

Research questions and hypotheses

In the light of the theoretical background outlined above, we are interested in the relationship between the structure of income inequality and attitudes towards conditional unemployment benefits from a comparative perspective. The structure of income inequality is captured by several interrelated indicators. We hypothesize that a distribution of income whereby the middle part of society becomes more distanced from the bottom part fosters stronger conditionality (H1), while an increase in the distance between the middle and the upper part results in less support for conditionality (H2). Moreover, an increase in income dispersion in the lower part relative to the upper part of the distribution should lead people to be more inclined to support conditional unemployment benefits (H3). The mechanism underlying these relationships is connected with the identity criterion of deservingness. In the event of a change in the structure of income inequality like that mentioned above, the middle classes become more similar to the upper rather than to the lower classes, so the social distance grows larger, making it more



Figure 1. Macro- and micro-level factors affecting support for conditional employment benefit.

difficult for the majority of people to feel a shared identity with the groups who are to be supported. Since they hardly identify with the unemployed, people are more likely to develop negative attitudes towards them and to agree on strict conditionality for providing financial assistance.

As discussed above, we took other variables into account that may affect income inequality but are associated with different deservingness criteria (namely, unemployment rate and stock of migrant population). These variables were included simply as a control to check that income inequality does not capture mechanisms other than identity. Among relevant macro-level control variables, we could not include welfare state measures because adequate data (e.g. expenditure for unemployment benefits) are not available for the range of countries and time points we cover. We then consider welfare regime only for a descriptive analysis based on a classification of countries' welfare state types (see below). We are interested in how welfare regimes, as representing different social solidarity models, shape citizens' attitudes towards conditionality. We would expect the public to be more supportive of conditionality in

welfare regimes that provide financial help to the unemployed with particularly stringent conditions.

Data, variables and method

Micro-level data

This study uses three waves (1990, 1999 and 2008) of the EVS. In order to leverage the macro-level longitudinal dimension of these data, we selected only countries present in at least two waves. In all, we have 30 countries and 81 country-waves (see Online Appendix for details).

The dependent variable is a question dealing with the unemployed and the conditionality of their entitlement to financial assistance. Respondents were asked to place their opinion on a 1–10 scale whose extremes are the following statements: 'People who are unemployed should have the right to refuse a job they do not want' (1) and 'People who are unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their unemployment benefits' (10).³ For simplicity, we treat this variable as numerical in the regressions, whereas for the descriptive analysis, we recoded it as a dummy (1 = support for conditionality, which collapses together scores 6-10).

Since our study focuses on macro-level factors, micro-level variables predicting respondents' opinion are used here only as controls for compositional effects across nations and waves. We selected basic socio-demographic characteristics such as age (six categories), gender, years of formal education, employment status (employed, retired, out of labour force, unemployed) and a dummy for married people.⁴ For a few robustness checks, we also selected individual's religious denomination, interpersonal trust and left–right political orientation.

Macro-level data

The main independent variables at macro-level are three measures of the structure of income inequality. Synthetic measures like the Gini index cannot adequately capture the distance between specific income groups. Thus, following Lupu and Pontusson (2011), we computed the ratio of the third quintile (Q3) to the first quintile (Q1) income share - representing the distance between the middle class and the lower class - the ratio of the fifth quintile (Q5) to the third quintile income share – representing the distance between the upper class and the middle class - and finally the ratio of these two ratios. Lupu and Pontusson use a very similar measure, based on percentiles, which they call skew ((P90/P50)/(P50/ P10)). Our third measure is conceptually very similar although based on quintile income shares (the only available data): it is the Q3/Q1 ratio divided by the Q5/Q3 ratio. We call it reverse skew because we reversed the numerator and denominator of the skew measure in order to make the expected sign of this variable's coefficient positive. When the reverse skew increases, it means that the distance between the middle and lower classes becomes larger relative to the distance between the upper and middle classes. In the rest of the article, we refer to this measure as *relative social distance* or reverse skew. The data to compute these measures summarizing income structure come from the World Income Inequality Database (WIID, version 3.4; United Nations University-World Institute Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), 2017). This variable's values, 1 year lagged with respect to survey year, were matched to each country-wave.⁵ Other variables we consider are the unemployment rate, the GDP (gross domestic product) per capita and the stock of migrant population. The first captures the availability of job opportunities in the labour market and at the same time is positively correlated with the level of income inequality. We retrieved data on unemployment from the International Labour Organization database. The second of these additional variables, GDP per capita, indicates a country's standard of living. It was included because citizens of richer nations can more easily afford to help the unemployed and hence to impose less conditionality. At the same time, changes in GDP may go hand in hand with changes in income inequality. Data on GDP (at purchasing power parity) were taken from the Penn World Table (version 8.0, see Feenstra et al., 2015). Finally, to account for the possibility that the structure of income inequality conceals ethnic diversity, we included in our analysis the stock of migrant population as a percentage of total population. Data on migrant population come from the United Nations database (United Nations, 2015).6

Analytic strategy

To introduce the empirical evidence, we first present a descriptive analysis of aggregate data on support for conditionality by country and wave (Table 1). We also grouped countries by welfare regime type in order to highlight possible variations in attitudes linked to institutional differences. We followed the conventional classification of welfare regimes revised by Arts and Gelissen (2002) and added a fifth category comprising all the former socialist countries.⁷

To investigate the relationship between the structure of income inequality and support for conditionality, we performed a multilevel analysis. Our data, in fact, present a multilevel structure where respondents are nested in country-waves and the latter in countries. Although this is not the only structure that can be assumed (cross-classified models would theoretically apply as well⁸) it is the one that preserves much of the complexity of the data while facilitating estimation, given the low number of waves. Thus,

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Average Scandinavian countries 76 65 66 SD Scandinavian countries 7.1 8.1 4.7 Former socialist regime 50 54 Bulgaria 34 55 68 Croatia 61 60 Czech Republic 70 64 73 Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60	Sweden	75	78	68
SD Scandinavian countries 7.1 8.1 4.7 Former socialist regime 50 54 Bulgaria 34 55 68 Croatia 61 60 Czech Republic 70 64 73 Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60	Average Scandinavian countries	76	65	66
Former socialist regime 50 54 Bulgaria 34 55 68 Croatia 61 60 Czech Republic 70 64 73 Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60	SD Scandinavian countries	7.1	8.1	4.7
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Bulgaria 34 55 68 Croatia 61 60 Czech Republic 70 64 73 Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60	Belarus		50	54
Croatia 61 60 Czech Republic 70 64 73 Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60	Bulgaria	34	55	68
Czech Republic 70 64 73 Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60 Russian Fed 44 46	Croatia		61	60
Estonia 32 37 56 Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60 Bussian Fed 44 46	Czech Republic	70	64	73
Hungary 53 69 75 Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60 Bussian Fed 44 46	Estonia	32	37	56
Latvia 25 49 50 Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60 Bussian Fed 44 46	Hungary	53	69	75
Lithuania 48 53 59 Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60 Bussian Fed 44 46	Latvia	25	49	50
Poland 62 71 63 Romania 51 56 60 Bussian Fed 44 46	Lithuania	48	53	59
Romania 51 56 60 Russian Fed 44 46	Poland	62	71	63
Russian Fed 44 46	Romania	51	56	60
	Russian Fed.		44	46

Table I. Average support for (% agreeing with)conditional unemployment benefits in Europe, bycountry, type of welfare regime and EVS wave.

Table I. (continued)

Type of welfare regime and	EVS wave		
country	1990	1999	2008
Slovak Republic	55	65	75
Slovenia	85	78	78
Ukraine		42	44
Average former socialist countries	52	57	62
SD former socialist countries	17.3	11.5	10.7
Minimum	25	37	44
Mean	62	61	64
Maximum	85	81	80
SD	15.5	11.1	9.4

Source: Our calculations from the EVS, longitudinal database. EVS, European Values Study; SD, standard deviation.

we followed the modelling approach suggested by Fairbrother and Schmidt-Catran (see Fairbrother, 2014; Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother, 2015). A crucial feature of this approach is the treatment of macro-level variables that are entered in the regressions in two forms: as between and within components. The between component is the country-specific average of a macro-level variable over different waves. The within component is the variable's deviation from the country-specific average in each wave. The two components are, by construction, uncorrelated. An interesting feature of entering macro-variables in this way is that the within component, as in a panel data fixed-effects model, captures the effect of a macro-level variable netting out the between-country time-invariant heterogeneity (e.g. differences in history, institutions and longterm cultural aspects). Therefore, the estimation of societal contextual effects is much more robust than in standard cross-sectional analyses. In the regression models, we also included dummies for survey waves in order to control for any generic time trend that is common across countries.

Results

Descriptive analysis

(Continued)

Looking at Table 1, several points can be made. First, on average, a majority of the public in Europe supports conditionality for unemployment benefits, thus confirming ideas about popular deservingness perceptions and the strength of the control and reciprocity criteria. Second, there has been a convergence across nations towards conditionality. In 1990, the range of average support was 25–85 percent (mean=62%), whereas in 2008, the range shrank to 44–80 percent (average=64%). In 2008, only two countries (Russia and Ukraine) have a majority of citizens supporting the right to refuse an unwanted job. Third, institutional arrangements, and welfare regimes in particular, show considerable variation across countries in each group, and thus do not seem to have a clear and meaningful influence.

At the beginning of the observation period, the lowest values of support for conditionality were found among former socialist countries (just in the aftermath of the collapse of communist regimes) as well as in liberal countries (the United Kingdom and Ireland), while Scandinavian countries displayed the highest values, with corporatist and Mediterranean countries slightly below. Thus, it could not be said that public opinion reflected the institutional welfare arrangements prevalent in their nations. The degree of welfare state generosity (highest among Scandinavian and lowest among former socialist countries) seems to positively correlate with public support for conditionality. However, this is exactly the opposite of what Larsen (2008) predicted. By 2008, most former socialist countries moved towards majoritarian levels of support for conditionality, yet they remain the group with the lowest values on average. The same positive trend can be found in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Conversely, the trend has been negative in Scandinavian countries, where conditional unemployment benefits receive less support than in the past, although they still represent the preferred option for most citizens. Finally, in corporatist and Mediterranean countries, changes across time have been less predictable. In 2008, these countries show a high level of support for conditionality on average, but there is substantial variation within these groups (see, for example, France vs Germany and Greece vs Italy). Therefore, the trend towards more conditionality, displayed by many countries except for Scandinavia, could be understood in the light of the activation turn, evident in many European nations as well as at the European Union level. As pointed out above, this change in policy making might have altered the relative importance of control and reciprocity criteria among the public. Overall, descriptive results show that findings by regime type vary very little, particularly in the last period, whereas the outcomes by country within each welfare regime differ considerably.

A first indication of the relationship between the structure of income inequality and support for conditionality comes from simple scatterplots of aggregate data. The upper part of Figure 2(a)-(c) shows the associations between the measures of income inequality and aggregate support, averaging values across EVS waves (each data point representing a country). The relationships are in the expected directions, but they appear weak and influenced by a few outliers. Specifically, we see that in countries where the income distance between the middle and lower class (Q3/Q1 ratio) is higher, support for conditionality tends to increase, albeit very modestly (Figure 2(a)). In countries where the income distance between the upper and middle class (Q5/Q3 ratio) is larger, support for conditionality tends to decrease (Figure 2(b)). When the relative social distance between income groups (reverse skew) is higher, the public tends to be more in favour of conditionality (although here there is an evident outlier country, that is, Norway). The lower part of Figure 2(d)–(f) shows the associations between variations in income inequality and withincountry deviations of aggregate support from the country averages (each data point representing a country-wave). Figure 2(d) displays a strong and positive (i.e. expected) association: when the income distance between the middle and lower classes becomes higher within nations, support for conditionality tends to increase. Figure 2(e) displays a less tight and positive (i.e. unexpected) association: when the distance between the upper and middle classes increases, support for conditionality tends to rise. Finally, Figure 2(f) shows a weak and positive (i.e. expected) association between our relative social distance measure and support for conditionality. All these bivariate associations will be checked with multivariate models that control for macro-level confounding variables and compositional effects at micro-level.



Figure 2. Bivariate associations between measures of the structure of income inequality and aggregate support for conditional unemployment benefits: (a) Q3/Q1 income ratio, (b) Q5/Q3 income ratio, (c) relative social distance, (d) Q3/Q1 income ratio (variation), (e) Q5/Q3 income ratio (variation) and (f) relative social distance (variation).

Multivariate analysis

The first two models (Table 2, models 1 and 2) show the effects of the income share quintile ratios (Q3/Q1, Q5/Q3). Each macro-level variable is included in the two forms (between and within components). Model 1 includes only micro-level controls, while model 2 also adds macro-level controls (unemployment rate, GDP per capita and stock of migrant population). The positive and significant coefficient of Q3/Q1 (W) means that an increase (within nations) in the distance between the middle and the lower class is associated with an increase in support for conditional unemployment benefits, holding constant all microand macro-level variables. This result is consistent with our social distance hypothesis (H1). The coefficient of the Q5/Q3 ratio (W), on the contrary, is null (in model 1) or negative (in model 2) but clearly not significant, meaning that an increase in the distance between the upper and the middle class does not lead to significant changes in the average support for conditionality. It should also be noted that the between components of the income share quintile ratios are not significant (except for Q5/Q3 in model 1). In any case, their effects would likely be spurious as they capture many other differences between countries, whereas the within components are robust to timeinvariant heterogeneity, although they are still vulnerable to correlated variables that change over time. To address this concern, we considered additional

	Model		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	В	SE	В	SE	В	SE	В	SE
Constant	8.891	I.049***	7.376	0.915***	3.750	I.343**	6.179	I.142***
Q3/Q1 ratio (W)	0.773	0.297**	0.803	0.304**				
Q3/Q1 ratio (B)	0.851	0.551	-0.241	0.504				
Q5/Q3 ratio (W)	0.042	0.394	-0.417	0.420				
Q5/Q3 ratio (B)	-2.027	0.646**	-0.498	0.605				
Reverse skew (W)					1.721	0.736*	1.949	0.701**
Reverse skew (B)					2.411	1.380	-0.441	1.172
Unemployment rate (W)			-0.018	0.022			-0.018	0.022
Unemployment rate (B)			-0.023	0.036			-0.035	0.037
GDP per capita (W)			0.007	0.026			0.004	0.025
GDP per capita (B)			0.042	0.010***			0.046	0.011***
Stock of migrant population (W)			-0.066	0.030*			-0.084	0.026**
Stock of migrant population (B)			-0.047	0.016**			-0.054	0.017**
Wave (ref: 1990)								
Wave 2008	0.214	0.154	0.410	0.289	0.418	0.142**	0.571	0.224*
Wave 1999	0.073	0.158	0.256	0.189	0.295	0.146*	0.390	0.144**
Age cat. (ref: 15–24)								
Age cat. 25–34	-0.097	0.033**	-0.097	0.033**	-0.097	0.033**	-0.097	0.033**
Age cat. 35–44	0.001	0.034	0.000	0.034	0.001	0.034	0.001	0.034
Age cat. 45–54	0.083	0.035*	0.082	0.035*	0.083	0.035*	0.082	0.035*
Age cat. 55–64	0.392	0.038***	0.392	0.038***	0.392	0.038***	0.392	0.038***
Age cat. 65+	0.688	0.044***	0.687	0.044***	0.688	0.044***	0.687	0.044***
								(Continued)

Table 2. Multilevel regression analysis of support for conditional unemployment benefits.

	Model		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	ш	SE	а	SE	а	SE	а	SE
Gender (ref: female) Male	0.023	0.017	0.023	0.017	0.023	0.017	0.023	0.017
Marital status (ref: not married) Married	0.138	0.019***	0.138	0.019***	0.138	0.019***	0.138	0.019***
Education (ref: lower secondary or Uncompleted secondary	less) -0.247	0.028***	-0.248	0.028***	-0.247	0.028***	-0.247	0.028***
Completed secondary	-0.354	0.029***	-0.353	0.029***	-0.353	0.029***	-0.352	0.029***
Tertiary	-0.522	0.029***	-0.522	0.029***	-0.522	0.029***	-0.521	0.029***
Employment status (ref: employed)								
Retired	-0.021	0.033	-0.021	0.033	-0.021	0.033	-0.021	0.033
Out of labour force	-0.174	0.026***	-0.174	0.026***	-0.174	0.026***	-0.174	0.026***
Unemployed	-1.132	0.037***	-1.131	0.037***	-1.132	0.037***	-1.131	0.037***
Random-effects (variances)	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
Level 3: country								
var(constant) Level 7. country-wave	0.283	0.093	0.145	0.056	0.364	0.116	0.168	0.062
var(constant) Level 1: individual	0.189	0.038	0.168	0.034	0.212	0.043	0.168	0.035
var(constant)	7.377	0.032	7.377	0.032	7.377	0.032	7.377	0.032
ICC country-wave	0.060		0.041		0.072		0.044	
ICC country	0.036		0.019		0.046		0.022	
(W) = within component; (B) = between Q3/Q1 over Q5/Q3. The dependent val unemployed should have to take any ava	component; riable ranges ailable job oı	GDP=gross (from 1 ('Peol r lose their und	domestic produ ple who are un employment be	uct. All models bas employed should h :nefits').	ed on 105,753 indi ave the right to re	vidual observations. fuse a job they do n	Reverse skew is the ot want') to 10 ('Pe	e ratio between ople who are

Table 2. (continued)

12

variables, beyond the ones already included among controls (see robustness checks below).

In models 3 and 4, we estimated the effect of how the two ratios are related to each other (reverse skew), that is, our relative social distance measure. To interpret the results, it should be borne in mind that an increase in the reverse skew means an increase in income dispersion in the lower part relative to the upper part of the distribution or, in other words, that the middle class becomes more similar to the upper than to the lower class. Consistently with our hypothesis (H3), when the reverse skew increases, a majority of citizens finds it more difficult to identify with the unemployed and requires more conditionality to provide them with financial help.

The size of the estimated effects is not large, although not irrelevant. A one standard deviation increase in the Q3/Q1 ratio brings about a positive variation of 0.3 points in the dependent variable (whose range is 1–10). Such variation accounts for one third of the standard deviation of the dependent variable across country-waves and one tenth of the standard deviation across individuals. The same calculations applied to the relative social distance measure reveal that a one standard deviation increase in this independent variable yields an increase of 0.2 points in the dependent variable or one fourth of the standard deviation across country-waves and 0.08 standard deviations across individuals.

To assess the robustness of our findings, we performed a few checks (all available in the Online Appendix). First, we excluded each country at a time in a rotating fashion and re-estimated models 2 and 4 in order to assess the presence of particularly influential outlier countries. Second, we added other micro-level variables that might affect support for conditional unemployment benefits. Namely, we included belonging to a religious denomination (alternatively, church attendance), interpersonal trust and political orientation. Third, we added further macro-level variables whose variations across time might be associated with changes in the structure of income. We considered public debt, trade openness, industrialization and economic globalization (see Online Appendix for their definitions). Each of these variables was added, one at a time, to models 2 and 4. None of these robustness checks significantly affected our main results.9

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we argued that the operation of the deservingness criteria whereby the public forms their opinion of welfare recipients is affected by macro-level conditions. We focused on the structure of income inequality, as an indicator of social distance between welfare recipients and taxpayers, which is supposed to affect attitudes towards conditionality mainly through the operation of the identity criterion. However, the direct effect of income inequality cannot be uncovered without taking into account the influence of other macro-level conditions that are simultaneously connected with income inequality and with the other deservingness criteria, namely, control and reciprocity. This is one of the few studies to address this topic with a comparative longitudinal approach, that is, relying on withinrather than between-country changes. The withincountry analysis - which removes much of the between-country heterogeneity – suggests that when the social distance grows, it is more difficult for the majority of citizens (upper and middle classes) to identify with the unemployed. This in turn leads to more negative attitudes and to imposing stricter conditionality on helping them.

At a descriptive level, we looked at how welfare regimes, as representing different social solidarity models, are related to citizens' attitudes towards conditionality. In this case, we were able to assess only between-country differences. The data show a weak association between welfare regimes and attitudes towards support for conditionality, but this association vanishes in the latest period. There is indeed substantial variation *within* the groups of countries defined by welfare state types and it is hard to infer that public opinion reflects the institutional welfare arrangements prevalent in those nations. However, as a limit that should be acknowledged, welfare state measurement based on dummy variables (due to lack of information for all time periods considered for variables such as, for example, expenditure for unemployment benefits) is not ideal for this analysis. Therefore, the relationship between welfare institutions and support for conditionality should be further investigated.

Another limit of the current study concerns the fact that we inferred a connection between the structure of income inequality and the operation of the identity criterion at micro-level, but did not directly observe it. In other words, we assumed that a change in the income structure makes the majority of citizens feel more distant from the unemployed, without being able to test it. Future research should provide a more direct test of the links we hypothesized between income inequality (or other macro-level conditions) and deservingness criteria.

Moreover, the data we used make it possible to capture only the distance between the top, the middle and the bottom of the income distribution. This is in accordance with the concept of 'empathy gulf' (Shapiro, 2002), as we showed that the higher the social distance (in terms of income) between individuals and groups, the lower the proximity of the majority to the unemployed who in turn are subjected to more conditionality. However, extreme inequality (e.g. the distance between the top 1 percent and the lowest quintile) is not perfectly captured by the available measures and further studies are needed to investigate its effect.

Our results are of particular relevance in the current socio-economic situation. The popularity of the opinion which holds that people who are unemployed should have to take any available job or lose their benefits has generally increased in Europe. In the light of our analysis, this can be understood as a direct consequence of rising income inequality in many European countries (Piketty, 2013; Stockhammer, 2013), as well as a feedback effect of the activation turn in policy making (Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl, 2008; Serrano and Magnusson, 2007). The rise of income inequality can be related to different causes, among which a prominent place is occupied by the strength of effective redistributive social policies (Doerrenberg and Peichl, 2014; Kenworthy and Pontusson, 2005; Page and Simmons, 2000). Our findings suggest that when the measures for contrasting inequality are reduced, the ensuing increased differences between citizens result in distrust towards the beneficiaries of public help. Therefore, a consequence of welfare state restructuring concerns not only the legitimacy of the welfare state itself - as pointed out by institutionalist theorists (Pierson, 1993; Rothstein, 1998) - but also the social representation of welfare recipients and the attitudes towards the conditionality of public benefits.

Our findings also point to another consideration regarding the effect of macro-economic conditions. Previous research results, according to which worsening economic conditions lead citizens to ask for more government support (Blekesaune, 2007), should be reconsidered. If worse economic conditions entail an increase in income inequality, as is often the case, then citizens' attitudes towards the beneficiaries of welfare policies will tend to become more negative and they will then demand more conditionality. This is quite paradoxical because, at the same time, in such conditions, people require more government support. A possible explanation for the paradox could be the very nature of self-interested requests for government support: people are more likely to ask help for themselves or for their in-group, but disapprove of unconditional support for the outgroup members (Alesina et al., 2001; Römer, 2017; Schmidt-Catran, 2014). In this regard, it would be interesting to test the effects of the 2008 recession that brought about both an increase in inequality and a deterioration in income levels in many countries. Unfortunately, the last wave of EVS data was collected just at the beginning of the recession. The next wave of data collection (2017) will hopefully make it possible to shed light on the effects of the recession.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

- 1. There is also a literature that views support for welfare as based on rational-choice arguments (see, for example, Jaeger, 2006b; Rehm, 2009). Even in this case, solidarity does not necessarily have to be unconditional.
- The influence of policy reforms on public opinion does not of course rule out the other possibility, namely, that public opinion influences policy reform according to the so-called *policy feedback* effect (Mettler and Soss, 2004; Pierson, 1993; Van Oorschot and Meuleman, 2014).
- 3. In the original data, this variable is reverse coded.

- 4. We avoided using information on occupation because it was not consistently collected across waves.
- 5. As World Income Inequality Database (WIID) provides more than one estimate for each income inequality measure, we computed an average for each yearly observation. We excluded values based on earnings and selected those referring to consumption or income. Moreover, we computed averages only on high and average quality data, except for five cases for which only low-quality data were available (BG, CZ, ES, SE in wave 1; CZ in wave 2).
- For the correlation matrix between macro-level data, see the Online Appendix.
- This classification has already been applied empirically in the field of deservingness perceptions by Van Oorschot (2006).
- 8. It was also possible to consider individuals nested simultaneously in both countries and year. In this way, the lower level units would not belong to one and only one higher level unit. Rather, lower level units would belong to a combination of higher-level units formed by crossing country and wave, and, thus, do not allow a strict hierarchy.
- 9. The coefficients of the main macro-level variables of interest do not change significantly across all the robustness checks performed. Specifically, the Q3/Q1 coefficient varies between 0.69 and 0.97 (it is 0.80 in the main model), the Q5/Q3 ratio is always not significant as in the main model, the reverse skew coefficient varies between 1.76 and 2.42 (1.95 in the main model).

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