Policy Feedback, Political Behaviour, 
and Democratic Citizenship in European Welfare States

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Abstract
In democracies, citizens’ attitudes and behaviour should influence future public policies. But the reverse may be just as true: attitudes and behaviour are also results of previous policies. This idea of policy feedback can be traced through the history of political science. But it has been slow to reach the mainstream of empirical political behaviour research. In the last decade, however, feedback hypotheses have increasingly been tested in studies on political trust, participation, social policy attitudes, social capital, and civil society participation. Collectively they suggest that political behaviour and democratic citizenship not only function as exogenous democratic input but are (re)shaped by policies. Many studies concern the welfare and social policy domain. In Europe, this is because many countries experience difficulties in delivering on previous commitments to public services and income replacement systems. Similarly, labour market policies and incentive structures are changing. Thus, a broad ambition for the workshop is examining how the restructuring of European welfare states affect political behaviour and democratic citizenship. In doing this, we aim at general scientific progress along several lines. We invite studies conceiving of feedback effects (also) in an interactive and disaggregated manner, with different groups and individuals affected differently by the same policies, and with different individuals being exposed to different parts of the same “welfare regime.” Further, we want to identify generic mechanisms of feedback relevant for a whole range of specific dependent variables. This will have an integrating function and allow a parsimonious understanding of policy feedback. Methodologically, we need studies that take seriously the reciprocal causal relationship between policy and individual behaviour/attitudes.
Outline of the topic and relation to existing research

In democracies, citizens’ attitudes and behaviour influence future public policies. But in practice the reverse may just be as true: attitudes and behaviour are also results of previous policies. This “oldsaw in political science” (Soss and Schram 2007:112) can be traced through the history of the discipline to the likes of Schattschneider (1935), Easton (1965), Key (1966), and Pierson (1993), to mention a few. At the same time, this notion of policy feedback is only slowly reaching the mainstream of empirical political behaviour research. Indeed, textbooks have traditionally divided the field into three paradigms. There is the “sociological” tradition, focusing on group socialization and communication; there is the “psychological” tradition looking more to individual values and identifications; and there is the “economic” tradition concentrating on self-interest and rationality. In spite of obvious differences, they have in practice come to highlight processes largely exogenous to actual public policies. There are exceptions, to be sure. The field of “economic voting,” for example, examines how economic policy outputs/outcomes generate new democratic input, i.e. stronger or weaker incumbent support. This is valuable but concerns the immediate process of electoral accountability. More “game-changing” feedback on basic values, social and political trust, or patterns of participation have not been systematically examined.

Comparative policy research has been similarly slow to examine such policy feedback. Studies typically explain either policy output or outcomes while the relationship between them are left out (cf. Esping-Andersen’s 1990; Castles 1993). Policy effects, furthermore, are often analysed at the aggregate level. This is true for areas such as income inequality and poverty (Korpi and Palme 1998), female labour market participation (e.g., Kenworthy 2008), educational inequality (e.g., Freitag and Schlicht 2009), or associational membership (Curtis et al. 2001). All this has led scholars, like Mettler and Soss (2004: 1) in a programmatic article, to lament the fact that “aside from some notable exceptions, political science has had little to say about the consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship.”

We sympathize with this characterisation but quite such a harsh verdict may no longer be fair. In the last decade, different types of feedback hypotheses have been examined in empirical studies on political participation (e.g. Soss 1999; Mettler 2002; Campbell 2005; Soss and Schram 2007), political trust (Anderson and Singer 2005; Newton 2006; Kumlin 2007), social policy attitudes (e.g. Jæger 2006; Larsen 2007; Svallfors 2010), social capital (e.g. Kumlin and Rothstein 2005), civil society participation (Stadelmann-Steffen 2011), and social contacts (Anderson 2009). Collectively these studies suggest political behaviour and citizenship variables not only function as exogenous
democratic input but are also reshaped by public policies. More than this, many studies concern the welfare state conceived in the broadest sense. In Europe, of course, this is a natural focus as European welfare states face ‘permanent austerity’ (Pierson 2001); it is increasingly difficult to finance previous commitments to public services and income replacement systems. Similarly, labour market policies with associated incentive structures are significantly reshaped in many countries. This development is fuelled by the ongoing financial- and sovereign debt crises with associated austerity measures (Korpi and Palme 2003; Allen and Scruggs 2004). An ambition of the workshop is examining how this current restructuring of welfare and labour market policies in Europe may affect political behaviour and democratic citizenship.

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The increased attention to policy feedback is welcome but also creates new challenges. Below we explain analytical, theoretical, and methodological challenges. This helps clarify the imagined contributions of the workshop.

**Going beyond welfare regimes and understanding micro-macro relations**

The most common tool for conceptualizing policy feedback has been (some version) of Esping-Andersen’s (1990) “welfare regimes.” In practice, this has often meant studying main effects of country level variables to examine if, say, aggregated welfare state support or social volunteering varies in expected ways across social democratic, liberal, conservative, and—occasionally—post-socialist welfare states. We anticipate various types of “regime approaches” to be of continued relevance. However, we also strongly invite studies that “go beyond welfare regimes”. This entails several things.

One case on point concerns the assumption of a uniform policy impact. Policies are typically targeted at particular population groups or affect individuals differently (Schmid 1984; Scheepers and Te Grotenhuis 2005; Stadelmann-Steffen 2011). To evaluate the societal impact of public policies it is therefore crucial to know how specific groups of individuals react to particular policy contexts (Elster 1998; Jones and Cullis 2003), i.e. to understand the individual-level processes generating aggregate outcomes (Hedström and Swedberg 1996: 131). While the empirical implementation of complex micro-macro relationships (e.g. cross-level interactions) can easily be realized in present software programs, their theoretical founding is often lacking or is presented on a rather ad-hoc and ex-post basis.
Moreover, we also invite efforts that disaggregate the unit of analysis and conceptualize feedback in terms of differences across policies and individuals within countries. Citizens within one welfare regime experience very different parts of the same welfare state (or no part at all). Here, some studies conceptualize policy design in terms of the power relation between citizen and public employees. Power relations are in turn affected by a multitude of institutional and policy features. This has turned out to be promising approach in explaining political participation (Soss 1999), general left-right orientations, and political trust (Kumlin 2004). Of course, as discussed by Goodsell (1981) and Campbell (2006) there are numerous other ways in which differences between policies, and individuals experiences thereof, can be conceptualized and put to empirical use. We welcome such attempts.

**Discovering and systematizing causal mechanisms**

The surging interest in policy feedback largely coincides with survey-based political behaviour research assuming a more central role in comparative politics. Theoretically, this trend is inspired by “the new institutionalism” (Hall and Taylor 1996) that gained ground in many corners of political science in the 1990s. The interest in institutions has created a natural focus on cross-country contextual variation. It is further fuelled by phenomenal improvements in comparative cross-country survey data, and in user-friendliness of multi-level modelling. Still, real cumulative progress is slow. Studies on specific “institutional” and “contextual” variables are now piling up but only a few stable generalisations have emerged. More than this, in recent overviews it has been argued that we in fact lack an integrated framework for understanding the many published empirical results (Anderson 2008). In Anderson and Singer’s formulation (2008: 588), “several critical caveats require attention before they become full-fledged pitfalls. First and foremost, although so far it has clearly proven fruitful to develop multilevel models that draw on various concerns in comparative politics scholarship—such as the effects of […] macro-political performance on legitimacy—it is by no means clear that there are prospects for developing a unifying theory […] That is, we are clearly starting to recognize that people’s actions and attitudes are shaped by their (cross-nationally variable) context in important and systematic ways but do not as yet have a common framework to investigate the connections among individuals, democratic political contexts, and behaviour.”

Feedback studies tend to deal with one dependent variable at the time, often in isolation from each other. At the same time, proposed causal mechanisms often resemble each other. For example, policies are assumed to endow groups and individuals with (unequal) resources and interests, which in turn affect attitudes and behaviour (Campbell 2006). Similarly, some policies may be better at enhancing perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness (deservingness), which may build
normative policy support and avoid stigmatizing and demobilizing effects on target populations (van Oorschot 2006; Schneider and Ingram 1997). A final example concerns adaptation to norms and expectations that public policies help to institutionalize. This mechanism has turned out to be relevant for understanding welfare attitudes (Svallfors 2010), but also for patterns of social volunteering (Stadelmann-Steffen 2011). In sum, then, a contribution of the workshop is to identify and systematizing generic mechanisms of policy feedback on specific dependent variables. This, we hope, will have an integrating effect and allow a more parsimonious understanding of policy feedback.

**Grappling with measurement and reciprocal causality**

Theoretical and conceptual advances in the research on policy feedback are intimately linked to methodological issues. One has to do with the measurement of public policy. How can we operationalise the public policy context in a way that corresponds – on the one hand – to the hypotheses, i.e. that the indicators measure a construct which is relevant, visible or noticeable for individuals and thus for their attitudes and behaviour, and that is – on the other hand – useful given data constraints? While expenditure data are often criticised for assuming that “all spending counts equally” (Esping-Andersen 1990), they are still most often used in comparative analyses. More “qualitative” indicators, in contrast, that could probably better measure how a particular policy affects individuals, are typically not available or not comparable across a large country sample. Progress in the research of policy feedback therefore also considerably relies on efforts on the issue of measurement.

Second, how can we ensure that we indeed model policy effects, i.e. that we get cause (public policies) and effects (individual citizenship) right? Generally, causal inference problems in empirical social science research are increasingly discussed (Rubin 1974; Falleti and Lynch 2009). As for policy feedback these questions are of primordial importance since policy is both consequence and cause of individual attitudes/behaviour. Thus, we invite studies that carefully try to tease out cause and effect.

And finally: How can we handle difficulties related to the limited data we typically face when combining policy context with individual level data? Recent years have seen an explosion of multilevel studies in comparative research. But given a typical country sample of 15 to 25 contextual units, for instance, standard regression approaches quite rapidly reach their limits if a series of contextual effects is modelled. This may be one reason why Bayesian approaches have recently gained in popularity.
Participants and types of papers

Relevant findings are scattered over research communities analyzing specific dependent variables, i.e. welfare state support, political participation, civic engagement and volunteering, social and political trust etc. The use of umbrella terms like “political behaviour” and “democratic citizenship” in our workshop title reflects a wish to simultaneously discuss several groups of dependent variables, including attitudes, values and behaviour, all of which may be subject to feedback processes. Here, we envisage a balanced group of participants working in, and on, welfare regimes all over Europe.

In terms of “paper types,” the bulk of contributions will be empirical. Here, one group of papers may offer multi-country, large-N analyses of comparative survey data. Another one will provide case studies, some based on primary as well as secondary survey data (perhaps drawing on "natural experiments"), whereas some may utilize qualitative interviews or participant observation.

Finally, we are interested in theoretically and conceptually integrative work. What have we learned so far and how can this knowledge be systematized? What are the unifying mechanisms at work in policy feedback processes affecting seemingly disperse types of attitudes and behaviour? Which types of public policies tend to have what broad types of consequences on citizenship and political behaviour variables? The available overviews of this kind have been done within the field of American politics (Mettler and Soss 2004, Campbell 2006) and there is a need for similar theoretical work on policy feedback in European welfare states.
Literature


