

ABSTRACT YOUNG RESEARCHERS DAY ESPANET NEDERLAND-VLAANDEREN, LEUVEN

**A modest table for all, but a high table for the deserving? The interplay between popular deservingness opinions and welfare state policies**

This book argues that Boulding's (1958) claim that 'society lays a modest table at which all can sup and a high table at which the deserving can feast' remains an apt characterization of both public opinion and public policy on social welfare. Opinion-wise, we know from previous attitudinal research that, compared with the old, sick and disabled, the able-bodied and working-aged unemployed are seen as relatively less deserving, but not undeserving, of social welfare. Policy-wise, it appears that welfare states have, throughout history, often offered less generous and more conditional social protection to the same groups that are deemed least deserving by the general public. This book's core proposition is that this close correspondence between public opinion and public policy is no coincidence, but can instead be read as the product of a reciprocal relationship between popular deservingness opinions and social welfare policies. On the one hand, popular deservingness beliefs affect public support for social welfare, which, in turn, through various mechanisms of policy responsiveness, shapes how welfare policies are designed and implemented. On the other hand, welfare policies also have the potential of shaping popular notions of deservingness through various mechanisms of policy feedback. Using data from quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups, the book's main conclusion is twofold. The first is that deservingness opinions have a strong and consistent influence on support for social welfare and are therefore a crucial factor to include in future welfare attitudes research. The second key conclusion is that deservingness beliefs are, through a variety of mechanisms, related to social welfare policies. However, despite its explicit focus on deservingness, this book denies nor ignores alternative explanatory frameworks. Instead, it fully acknowledges that deservingness is but one, albeit a very fruitful, analytical lens through which to explore the complex world of social welfare.