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Differentiated distributive justice preferences?

Equality, equity and need in the welfare domains of health care, pensions and unemployment benefits

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Abstract

In an era of welfare state restructuring, the fundamental social question "who should get what and why" comes back to the fore (Mau & Veghte, 2007; van Oorschot, 2000, p. 34). In particular, the question remains which of the three principles of distributive justice should form the basis of the distribution of the burdens and benefits of our welfare system: equality, equity or need (Deutsch, 1975). Apart from the existence of an extensive body of normative theories, public opinion studies focus increasingly on preferences for these principles (Liebig & Sauer, 2016). However, this empirical research suffers from two interrelated shortcomings: it does not acknowledge that social justice preferences may be dependent of the particular distribution at stake and therefore it denies that people may simultaneously apply multiple justice principles in their distributive judgements. This paper offers a new perspective on distributive justice by responding to these drawbacks.

First, to consider context-dependency, we examine how preferences for equality, equity and need diverge across the welfare domains of health care, pensions and unemployment benefits (cf. Walzer, 1983). Based on differences in the predictability, prevalence and internal control of the three risks associated with these welfare domains, equality is expected to be dominant in health care, equity is anticipated to be supported most for pensions and the principles of need or equity are expected to be preferred for the distribution of unemployment benefits. Second, to consider how social justice principles are applied across these domains, we uncover unique subgroups of individuals who combine distributive justice preferences in similar ways. In line with a realm of research that shows that a large share of the population justifies an extensive role of the government (Roosma, Gelissen, & van Oorschot, 2013; Roosma, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2014), we expect, to begin with, to find an

egalitarian group that systematically prefers equality across domains. In addition, we anticipate to uncover two subgroups that prefer distinct principles for different domains. Specifically, we anticipate to find a group that combines a preference for equality in health care with preferences for equity in pensions and need or equity in unemployment benefits as well as group that balances preferences for equality in health care and pensions with support for equity or need in the distribution of unemployment benefits. Last, we consider the social basis of this group membership by considering the importance of social structural variables and ideology.

We use data from the Belgian National Elections Study of 2014 to provide a descriptive overview and to conduct a three-step latent class analysis (Vermunt, 2010). Results show that equality receives most support in each of the three domains. Nevertheless, the distributions of preferences for the three social justice principles are substantially different for each of the three welfare domains, which illustrates that distributive justice preferences are indeed context-dependent. The latent class analysis reveals that three classes can be distinguished: (1) an egalitarian class that values equality in each sphere; (2) a meritocratic class that supports equity in unemployment and pensions, but equality in health care, and (3) a residualist class that prefers need in unemployment and pensions, but likewise equality in health care. Although these classes are not fully in line with our expectations, it does show that there is indeed an important proportion of respondents that combines multiple principles across domains. The prediction of class membership shows that while ideology seems to play an important role, structural characteristics have limited explanatory power.

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