Are universal welfare schemes more popular than selective ones? A critical review of empirical research.

Tijs Laenen and Dimitri Gugushvili (KU Leuven, Belgium)

Abstract. Throughout the years, it has become conventional wisdom in welfare state literature that universal policies, which are accessible to all residents or citizens facing a particular social risk, enjoy much higher levels of popular support (and are thus politically less vulnerable) than selective policies that are targeted at poor people only. This article revisits this conventional wisdom by critically reviewing the existing empirical literature on public support for differently organized welfare benefits and services. Our results indicate that, at first sight, there seems to be overwhelming empirical evidence supporting the universality thesis. A large number of public opinion studies, conducted in different countries and different years, consistently reveal the same pattern: universally targeted programs, such as most old-age pensions and healthcare systems, are more popular than selective programs, such as means-tested social assistance and housing allowances.

However, our review shows that the evidence is less solid as it seems. Most of the empirical studies suggesting that universalism is more popular than selectivism have conflated the institutional design of a policy with its target group: the welfare programs they compare do not only differ in terms of design, but also in the groups they target. This is important because there is mounting evidence showing that support for welfare programs also depends on the perceived deservingness of their target groups. As a result, we still do not know whether pensions and healthcare arrangements for example are popular because of their universal design, because they are targeted at groups that are perceived as deserving, or because of a combination of both factors. Therefore, we advance a novel theoretical model that stresses the importance of combining institutional design with target group deservingness to explain public support for social welfare schemes. In short, our 'design-deservingness model' predicts that public support is highest for universal schemes that target groups perceived as highly deserving (e.g. universal pensions), lowest for selective schemes geared towards less deserving groups (e.g. means-tested unemployment benefits), and in-between for universal schemes with less deserving targets (e.g. universal unemployment benefits) and selective schemes with highly deserving targets (e.g. means-tested pensions). To be able to test the theoretical model empirically, we propose a number of promising methodological approaches that can be adopted in future research.

Keywords: literature review; public opinion; policy design; deservingness