

ESS22-025 - Misperceptions about the welfare state: Immigration and health behavior

Abstract

In modern societies, the welfare state is large and complex, and its functioning is therefore often difficult to grasp for citizens. But public support for the welfare state and public acceptance of its policies depend on citizens' perceptions and misperceptions of how it works. This project proposes to shed new light on these dynamics in Austria. One of the main innovations of the project is to focus on the malleability of perceptions of the welfare state by implementing a randomised information intervention. The novel combination of register and survey data allows us to study aspects of the malleability of perceptions of the Austrian welfare state that could not be studied before. Matching these survey data with the register data will provide a detailed picture of who knows and thinks what about the welfare state in Austria and whose perceptions can be influenced.

We treat a randomly selected subset of respondents with a "positive framing" of immigrants or persons with health risks (e.g. obese, smokers) to test whether such information succeeds in shaping respondents' perceptions and swaying support in favour of maintaining and expanding the welfare state. For example, we report the results of a scientific study showing that immigrants in Austria are, on average, net contributors to the welfare state, and measure which groups of respondents (by socio-economic, values, reasoning) are more likely to respond to the intervention. In another treatment group, we provide a "negative portrayal" to test whether such an information intervention succeeds in inducing misperceptions and influencing attitudes against the welfare state. For example, we cite a study that supports the "welfare magnet" hypothesis, showing that generous welfare benefits tend to attract low-skilled asylum seekers.

The experimental element of the survey allows us to test the responsiveness of voters to information interventions. Political parties often deliberately use one-sided information ("propaganda") in their campaigns to persuade (or "manipulate") voters to vote for their party. We are the first, to our knowledge, to implement both positive and negative information interventions, which are highly relevant for assessing whether one-sided information campaigns can strengthen or undermine support for the welfare state, and for investigating which groups in the electorate are most receptive to such information.

Scientific disciplines:

Public economy (25%) | Economic policy (25%) | Health policy (25%) | Migration policy (25%)

Keywords:

Welfare State; Immigration; Health Behavior

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Further links to the persons involved and to the project can be found under
<https://www.wwtf.at.jpeto2.brunner.at/funding/programmes/ess/ESS22-025/>