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The COVID-crisis as an opportunity for welfare recalibration? Panel-data evidence on the effect of the COVID-crisis on welfare preferences in Spain, Germany, and Sweden

Matthias Enggist [ID], Silja Häusermann [ID] and Michael Pinggera [ID]

Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

The reform capacity of welfare states to adapt to the needs of post-industrial labour markets has been a key question of the welfare literature for the last two decades. In a context of austerity, such adaptations (retrenchment or recalibration) are notoriously difficult because of extremely high levels of support for existing policies, particularly old age pensions. We investigate how the recent economic shock caused by the COVID-pandemic has changed social policy preferences in three West European countries (Germany, Sweden, Spain). Relying on original panel data observing the relative support for social policies before and during the crisis, we show that support for old age pensions has dropped substantially relative to other social policies. This drop can be observed in all three countries and among all ideological and age groups. The drop is strongest among current and soon-to-be pensioners who in turn increased support for benefits to the working-age population. At the expense of pensions, the economic shock has especially boosted support for active labour market policies and (in Germany) childcare services. This shift of support from pensions to social investment policies might have opened up a window of opportunity for recalibrating welfare reforms.

The COVID-crisis and the recalibration of the welfare state

The COVID-pandemic has constituted a major sanitary, societal, and economic shock. Beyond the health crisis itself, the measures taken by governments to slow down the spread of the virus have led to the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Only in Europe, more than five million jobs disappeared in spring 2020, with another 59

million jobs in EU countries being declared at risk (Chinn et al., 2020). Many people who previously experienced relatively stable economic conditions have been at risk of severe economic strain, but even more so has the COVID-crisis increased labour market inequalities. Moreover, school closures and home office requirements have highlighted widespread problems with reconciling work and family life (Petts et al., 2021).

These developments have not only challenged European welfare states, but they potentially amplified a long-standing tension in welfare politics: the tension between preserving established welfare benefits on the one hand and adapting social policy to new risk structures on the other hand (Hemerijck, 2013). Indeed, existing welfare states are still underdeveloped in safeguarding against 'new social risks' (Bonoli, 2005) such as atypical work, long-term unemployment or the inability to reconcile work and care obligations. Equally underdeveloped are policies usually subsumed under the term 'social investment', which focus on human capital formation and mobilisation (e.g., early childhood education and care policies, active labour market policies (ALMP), or education policies). Such social investment policies address the emergence of new social risks by shifting the focus away from the male breadwinner model – and thus from a welfare state designed around old social risks (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). Likewise, 'recalibration' thus denotes the difficult adaptation of the welfare state from a predominant focus on income replacement for traditional risk groups (e.g., pensioners) towards policies addressing new risks and needs among the working population.

In the light of the fiscal constraints that even exacerbate this tension, the question of the *reform capacity* of the welfare state has become one of the key questions of the welfare literature (Häusermann, 2010; Palier, 2010; Pierson, 2001; Rehm, 2016). Are consolidating and recalibrating reforms possible at all, and under which circumstances? In a time of 'permanent austerity' (Pierson, 2001), substantive welfare recalibration might require benefit consolidation or resource reallocation between programs (Häusermann, 2010). However, reallocation is extremely difficult, because – through institutional feedback mechanisms – existing benefit programs have created their own support coalitions – especially if programs benefit broad segments of the society (Jensen, 2012; Rehm, 2016). Old age pensions constitute the typical and most extreme case of such entrenched policies. Not only are the financial resources dedicated to pensions massive in comparison to other social policies, but the dominance of pensions in contemporary welfare states is also reflected in public opinion (Ebbinghaus & Naumann, 2018; Pierson, 2001). Hence, consolidating or recalibrating pension reforms tend to be highly contested and politically risky (Giger, 2012).

How would we expect the economic shock induced by the COVID-pandemic to have affected the reform capacity of the welfare state? For one

thing, the crisis massively amplified risks among the working population. At the same time, fiscal leeway to expand social policies has been decreased, because of the recession and massive transfers to stabilise the economy. In this difficult situation, West European governments seem to have mostly refrained from taking difficult choices, especially when it comes to recalibration. Most prominently, the highly contentious 2020 pension reform of French President Emanuel Macron has been postponed for at least three years.

To better understand how the COVID-crisis has impacted the reform capacity of welfare states, we study how the crisis has affected public opinion. Has the crisis shock increased or decreased support for different social policies, and thus for a recalibration of the welfare state? Relying on *original panel data tracking social policy preferences in Spain, Germany and Sweden both before and during the COVID-crisis*, we show that the crisis had a substantial impact on the relative support for various social policies. During the height of the crisis, the dominance of old age pensions as the most strongly supported social policy eroded. The prioritisation of pensions decreased in all three countries, among all age groups and ideological blocs, while support for policies benefitting the unemployed, immigrants, or working parents increased. These shifts were biggest among current and prospective pensioners who seem to have become more willing to 'share' welfare benefits with working-age beneficiary groups. Given the substantive size of the observed shifts, our evidence seems to indicate that the COVID-crisis might have at least temporarily opened up a window of opportunity for welfare recalibration.

The predominant role of old age pensions in welfare politics

The financial resources dedicated to substituting income for the retired are massive: on average, OECD countries have spent nearly 16% of all their government expenditures on public pensions (*OECD, 2015*). In some countries such as Austria and Italy this share even amounts to about 25%. On average, more than a third of all social expenditures are dedicated to old age pensions, more than to any other social policy, including healthcare. Expenditures for the elderly are more than three times higher than expenditures for families, and six times higher than for the unemployed.

This importance is also reflected in public opinion: in Western European countries, between 50 and 70% of the population would like the government to spend even more on old age pensions; even 95% of respondents reject any spending reductions in this area (ISSP, 2018). Support for pensions is not only widespread, but also very salient: Busemeyer and Garritzmann (2017) as well as Häusermann et al. (2020) show that a predominant majority of voters would be unwilling to accept cutbacks of pensions to expand support for education or families.

There are many reasons why old age pensions occupy such a prominent position in the social policy preferences of West European publics: for one, the elderly are perceived as the group most deserving of welfare benefits (van Oorschot, 2006); moreover, pensioners constitute a big and politically active group which means that a broad segment of the society has a material interest in generous pensions; also, younger people count on benefitting themselves in the future. Consequently, old age pensions are supported not only by left-wing voters, but also by sizeable shares of right-wing voters (Jensen, 2012; Pierson, 2001). All these factors stabilise old age pensions, even to the detriment of recalibrating reforms.

How has the COVID-crisis experience affected social policy support?

Many studies have demonstrated that economic hardship greatly affects policy preferences, primarily by increasing the saliency of material self-interest. In particular, the risk of job loss (Rehm, 2016), as well as actual unemployment experiences have been shown to result in increased support for redistribution and social policy (Hacker et al., 2013), even and especially among right-wing voters (Margalit, 2013). Moreover, Margalit's (2013) findings corroborate the increased role of self-interest by showing that the economic downturn decreased support among those not directly affected. These findings suggest that economic crises generally suppress rather than fuel people's solidarity. There are also reasons to expect an indirect pathway: economic downturns usually restrict the fiscal leeway of the state by increasing the cost of and demand for social security and decreasing fiscal revenues. Häusermann et al. (2021) show that people who perceive this fiscal leeway to be small are less solidaristic with vulnerable groups such as the unemployed. Thus, previous research might suggest that the prospects for solidarity in the COVID-crisis appear rather gloomy.

However, there is also reason to question whether this crisis was like others. First, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic was exogenous. There is no obvious blame-attribution, as the extent to which industries were hit hard is only weakly associated with pre-crisis performance. Second, the COVID-crisis was – in contrast to the great recession 2008 – not only a demand- but also a supply-side shock. Hence, besides a decrease in demand, we have witnessed contractions in the supply of goods and services. The closure of schools and childcare or the precarious situation in healthcare institutions may have shifted welfare demands towards policies that are not usually in focus during economic crises. Hence, even people who are not at all at risk of losing their job have experienced the impact of the crisis first-hand.

Even more than an economic crisis, the COVID-pandemic was a sanitary crisis that posed a substantial threat especially to the elderly. While mortality and the likelihood of a severe course of the disease were relatively low among the young, younger generations bore a lot of responsibility for the transmission of the virus. Therefore, the elderly relied on the responsible behaviour of younger generations to slow down the spread of the virus. In contrast, the working age population was hit harder by the economic repercussions of the pandemic. The COVID-crisis could hence have affected intergenerational solidarity. The elderly could – out of reciprocity for the working-age population – have changed their welfare preferences to support those who suffered most from containment measures.

Lastly, the sheer size of the crisis means that nearly everyone has acquaintances whose economic livelihood had come under severe pressure. This might be relevant since Liu et al. (2022) show that grievances in people's social networks affect preferences and attitudes, as do contexts of heightened collective insecurity (Compton & Lipsmeyer, 2019). Hence, given the singularity of the COVID-context, we take an empirical approach to studying how attitudes have evolved.

Data and methods

To investigate how social policy preferences have changed, we exploit a panel design implemented in the context of the 'WELFAREPRIORITIES' project. To understand what citizens demand and expect from the welfare state, a first cross-national survey was fielded in autumn 2018 (Häusermann et al., 2020), which in this study serves as the first wave. The second wave stems from a survey fielded in June 2020, i.e., at a time when the strict lockdown restrictions were slowly being lifted, and the longer-term economic consequences of these restrictions started to become visible. We chose to field the second wave in Germany, Sweden, and Spain.[1]

We recontacted respondents who participated in the first wave. Of the around 4700 first wave respondents (Germany: 1722, Sweden: 1500, Spain: 1503), slightly less than half could be both recontacted and took part in the follow-up survey (Germany: 892, Sweden: 653, Spain: 643). Only respondents who have completed both survey waves remain part of the sample used in this paper. To alleviate potential problems of representativity stemming from panel attrition, we use inverse probability weights to counteract an underrepresentation of younger respondents and those with lower education in the recontacted sample.[2]

Our main quantity of interest is the relative support respondents indicate for different areas of welfare state policy, i.e., which types of benefits and services they prioritise. We measured these priorities with a point distribution question: respondents were asked to imagine that the government had the

means to *improve benefits* in some social policy fields but not in all of them and to allocate 100 points to six different social policy fields, including such that typically address old social risks (old age pensions, unemployment benefits) as well as such that are usually designed to address new social risks and are thus thought to recalibrate the welfare state (childcare, tertiary education, ALMP, and the social and labour market integration of immigrants).[3] Respondents expressed their priorities by giving more points to those fields in which they consider benefit improvements more important and less points to fields where they consider improvements less important. This question introduces a (budget) constraint in our measure of social policy support, which is key to validly measure solidarity, as it highlights opportunity costs.[4]

To analyse preference shifts, we compare how the answers to this point distribution question have changed from the first to the second wave. To disentangle which respondents are driving changes, we observe changes over time by country, ideology, and age groups. We regress priorities on ideology and age group and control for gender, education, and income.

Findings 1: less emphasis on old age pensions – especially among the elderly

Consistent with existing research, old age pensions emerged by far as the one policy field for which the public prioritises the expansion of benefits. Respondents in Germany, Spain, and Sweden on average allocated more than 30 of their available 100 points to expanding these benefits. The number of points allocated to childcare expansion – the policy field the public deemed second most important – amounted to less than 17 points. Figure 1 descriptively shows the average number of points allocated to the expansion of the six policy fields pooled across the three countries in 2018 (darker grey) and during the COVID-crisis in June 2020 (lighter grey). We observe a substantial decrease of importance attributed to expanding pensions of 5.5 points. Given the massive extent of old age pension prioritisation in 2018, this shift is extremely important, despite old age pensions remaining the overall most highly valued policy field. Pensions are the only policy field for which support has changed to such an extent. Most other policies have gained slightly in importance – most strongly ALMP.

Furthermore, the substantial decline of importance attributed to old age pensions is consistent across all countries (see figure A11 in the appendix): the change amounts to a drop of about 15–20% in Germany, Spain, and Sweden. This uniform picture is striking given the differences in crisis affectedness and welfare regimes across countries. Slight differences exist concerning the relative shifts and rank orderings: while old age pensions are still considered the most important policy by far in Sweden, in Germany and
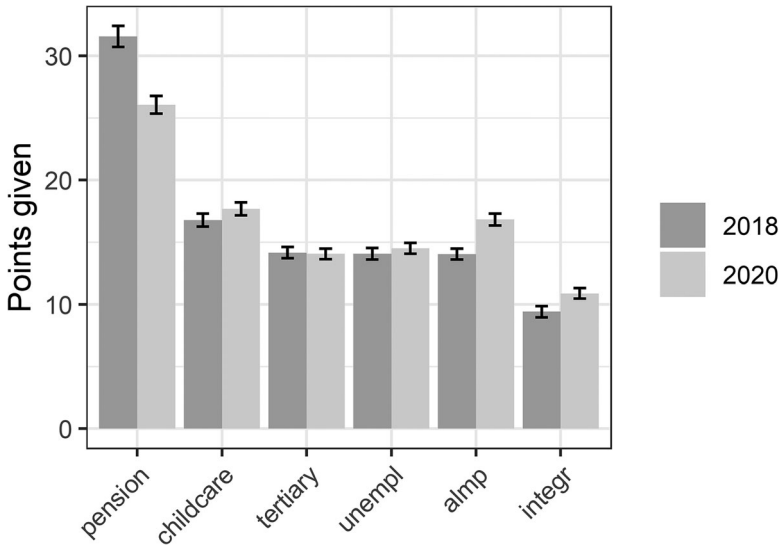
Figure 1. Importance of expansion in different social policies before and during COVID-crisis, all countries.

Notes: pension = old age pension benefits, childcare = childcare services, tertiary = tertiary education, unempl = unemployment benefits, almp = active labour market policies, integr = integration of immigrants.

especially in Spain pensions have nearly forfeited their dominant role. The distance to the policy field considered second in importance has shrunk from 13 to 3 points (Spain) and to 5 points (Germany) respectively.

Is this shift away from pensions a sign of increased self-interestedness of the young or of increased solidarity by the elderly? Figure 2 shows changes by age groups. We differentiate between pensioners[5], middle-aged respondents aged 50 or older, who will become beneficiaries of old age pensions
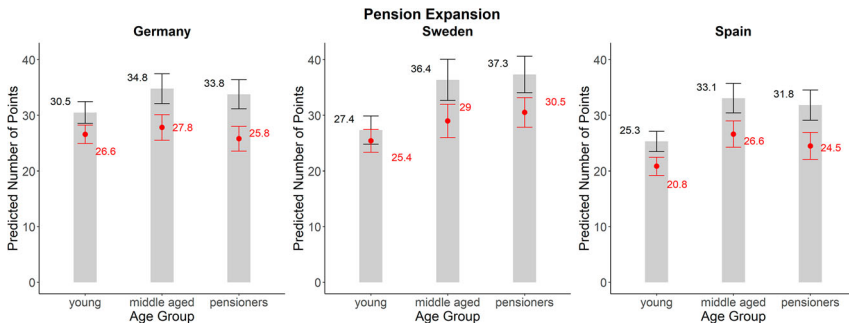
Figure 2. Importance of pension expansion by country and age group.

Notes: Grey bars: Predicted number of points attributed in 2018; Red dots: Predicted number of points attributed during COVID-crisis. 95% CI. Based on the regressions in Table A1 in the appendix.

in the foreseeable future and would therefore be affected nearly as strongly from pension reforms as current pensioners, and the young.[6] The grey bar indicates the predicted number of points allocated to pensions in 2018, while the red point estimate shows the predicted number of points in the second wave.[7] Importance of old age pensions has decreased in all age groups across all countries. However, the size of this decline differs clearly between age groups and is particularly pronounced among current and prospective pensioners. While in 2018 the importance attached to pensions was strongly characterised by an age divide, with older voters prioritising pensions significantly more than younger voters (in line with self-interest expectations), the COVID-crisis seems to have dampened or even eliminated that divide. This is most obvious in Germany, where pensioners have become the group emphasising pension expansion the least. Hence, it seems that the recent crisis has increased the willingness of the elderly to support younger generations.

Turning from age to ideology as a predictor of importance, Figure 3 shows that in 2018 in all countries people self-identifying as right-wing allocated more points to pensions than left-wing voters. This is not as surprising as it might seem at first glance, since we measure importance relative to other social policy fields. Old age pensions (life cycle risk, not particularly redistributive) would be expected to find relatively more support than other welfare policies among the right (Busemeyer et al., 2022).

Interestingly, the shift we observe regarding pensions is not uniform across the ideological spectrum. While in Germany mostly left-wing voters seem to have become more sensitive to other vulnerable groups, in Spain and Sweden increased relative support for other groups stems rather from right-wing voters.[8] In the latter two countries, the left-right divide over how much pensions are valued has thus nearly disappeared.

One could object that since our first panel wave was fielded in 2018, the changes we observe might be caused by other developments than the
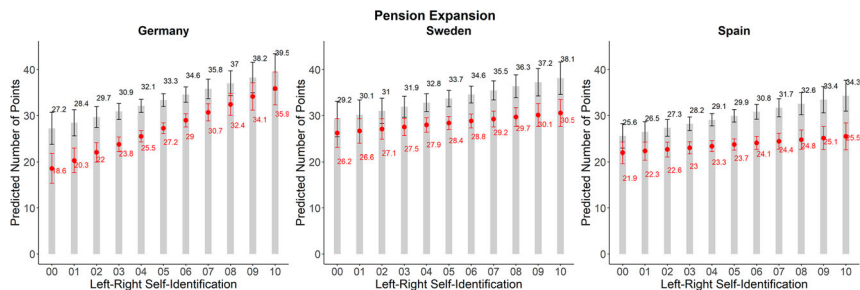
Figure 3. Importance of pension expansion by country and ideology.

Notes: Grey bars: Predicted number of points attributed in 2018; Red dots: Predicted number of points attributed during COVID-crisis; 95% CI. Based on the regressions in Table A2 in the appendix.

Change in importance of pension expansion conditional on perceptions about pandemic
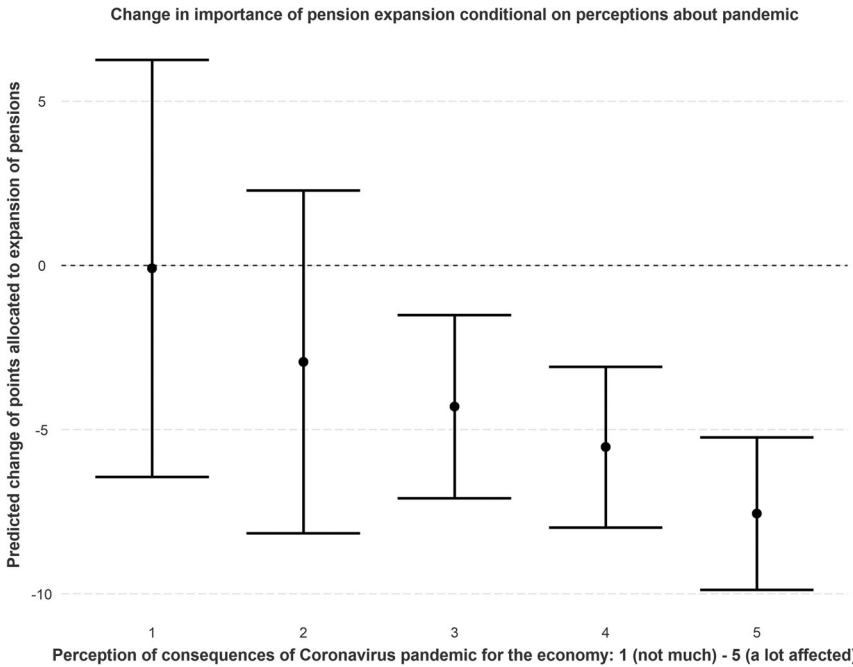
Figure 4. Change of points allocated to pension expansion by a respondent's perception of how much the COVID-crisis will affect the economy in the future.

Notes: Predicted values from an OLS regression. DV: change in the number of points between survey waves. Controlled for country, age, sex, education, income, and left-right self-identification (at means). Based on the regression in Table A3 in the appendix.

pandemic. Figure 4, though, reinforces our interpretation that attitudinal shifts should be attributed to the recent economic shock: it shows change in the number of points attributed to pension expansion conditional on how much respondents expect the COVID-pandemic to affect their country's economy in the future. We observe that this shift is strongest among respondents who are highly concerned about the economic ramifications.[9]

Findings 2: more emphasis on benefits for the working population

The decline in importance attributed to old age pensions begs the obvious question of which social policies and recipient groups have increased in importance in voters' perceptions. One might expect that the increased risk of unemployment caused by the crisis should increase the support for *unemployment benefits and/or ALMP*, both for reasons of self-interest and deservingness perceptions, since in this crisis unemployment risk seems truly exogenous. In a very different vein, home-office experiences and lacking

opportunities of intergenerational childcare might have raised awareness for the importance of public childcare. We see less theoretical foundation to expect increased support for immigrants and higher education.

While the decline in pension importance is clear and consistent, no uniform pattern emerges regarding the increase in importance of alternative policy fields. We proceed by showing the most important changes by age or ideology, depending on the policy field.

The COVID-crisis had the biggest positive effect on support for ALMP. Figure 5 depicts change in the number of points allocated to ALMP by ideology and country. While relatively unpoliticised in 2018, a slight partisan divide has opened in Sweden and Spain: especially right-wing voters consider activation measures important when addressing the economic crisis. Additionally, in both countries, the surge in support for ALMP was mostly driven by the working-age population, i.e., the group which might benefit from these measures the most (see appendix figure A12).

Interestingly, while support for ALMP has increased on average, less change can be detected regarding passive unemployment benefits, for which support is only boosted slightly in Sweden. Also, there is no notable shift in support by age or ideology (see appendix figure A1). However, we detect a politicisation of unemployment benefits in Germany (Figure 6). The crisis has increased the importance left-wing voters attribute to unemployment benefits but has had the reverse effect among right-wing voters. Overall, the comparatively lower increase for labour market measures in Germany may be explained by a less drastic increase in unemployment rates. Between January 2020 and June 2020, Germany experienced an increase in unemployment levels of 0.5 percentage points. In contrast, both Sweden and Spain experienced a roughly 2 percentage points increase.

Support for childcare services has on average increased slightly in Germany and Spain. Interestingly, Figure 7 shows that the most marked
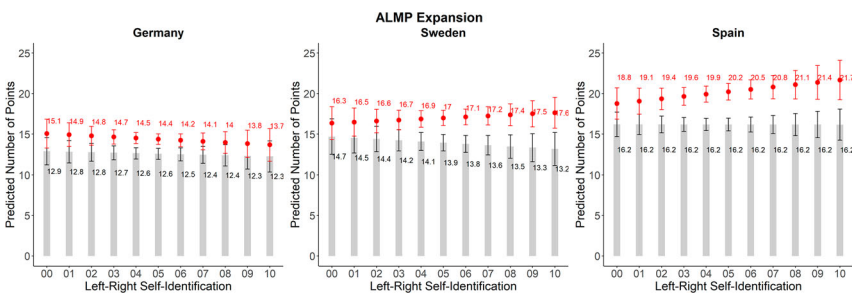
Figure 5. Importance of expansion of ALMP by country and ideology.

Notes: Grey bars: Predicted number of points attributed in 2018; Red dots: Predicted number of points attributed during COVID-crisis; 95% CI. Based on the regressions in Table A5 in the appendix.
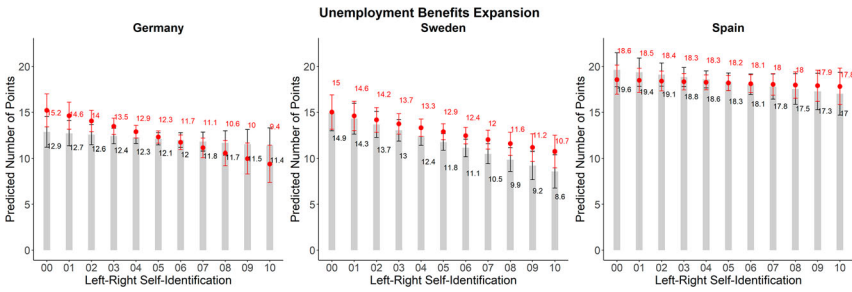
Figure 6. Importance of expansion of unemployment benefits by country and ideology.
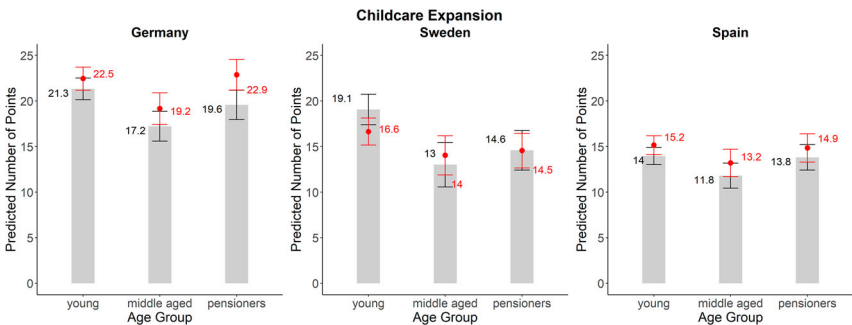
Notes: Grey bars: Predicted number of points attributed in 2018; Red dots: Predicted number of points attributed during COVID-crisis; 95% CI. Based on the regressions in Table A6 in the appendix.

increase stems from pensioners in Germany (while differences regarding ideology are neglectable, see appendix figure A2). This again appears as increased support of pensioners for the working population – and by implication for recalibration (and against narrow self-interest). As for labour market measures, this finding again reflects countries' COVID regulations: the decrease in support for childcare in Sweden (while support increased in Germany and Spain) can possibly be explained by the fact that childcare facilities were not mandated to close in the first half of 2020 (contrary to Spain and certain regions in Germany).

As expected, we do not find relevant shifts (neither on average nor by country, age, or ideology) regarding tertiary education. For services for the social and labour market integration of immigrants we observe a uniform increase in support across the ideological spectrum (see Figure A3).

Figure 7. Importance of expansion of good-quality childcare services by country and age groups.

Notes: Grey bars: Predicted number of points attributed in 2018; Red dots: Predicted number of points attributed during COVID-crisis; 95% CI. Based on the regressions in Table A7 in the appendix.

Discussion: policy implications

This paper provides evidence on how the COVID-crisis has affected peoples' social policy preferences and thereby the potential reform capacity of the welfare state. We find that the crisis has led to shifts in the importance attributed to different policies, to new conflicts and polarisation in some cases and convergence in others. Our findings of quite sizeable *specific* shifts complement emerging research on relative stability regarding *overall* attitudes towards social spending (Reeskens et al., 2021).

In Germany, we observe that the elderly left and centre-left voters became more solidaristic with the vulnerable working population. In contrast, in Sweden and Spain, declines in the importance of pensions led to convergence along ideological lines. While pre-COVID right-wing voters put relatively more emphasis on generous benefits for the old, the observed shifts erased partisan conflict about pensions. In both countries, right-wing voters have in turn increased support towards ALMP.

Besides these country-differences (that our study is not designed to causally explain), we observe one striking similarity across all countries and across all age and ideological groups: the importance voters attribute to pensions has declined. This shift might entail far-reaching policy implications. In 'normal times', expansion of social investment and new social risk policies tend to be hindered not least by the massive amounts of resources and public support old age pensions bind. However, the COVID-crisis has at least temporarily reduced the relative priority people attach to pensions, thereby potentially providing an opportunity for policymakers to advance reform proposals. In terms of potential reform capacity, decisions of policymakers such as French president Emanuel Macron to postpone the hotly contested pension reform appear in a different light given our findings.

However, we do not claim that ongoing gridlocked processes merely aiming to retrench pensions would pass smoothly. First, it is important to note that our findings do not necessarily suggest that *retrenching* pensions has become popular. Rather we demonstrate that the expansion of new social risk policies has become more likely even if these expansions include opportunity costs in the area of pensions. Second, opinions on reform proposals developed *before* the crisis might be entrenched and pensions remain very strongly supported. Rather we suggest that our findings indicate that the COVID-crisis has provided or still provides opportunities for policymakers to develop new 'frames' and measures such as proposing 'Corona-solidarity reforms'. Reforms aiming at assisting vulnerable groups particularly affected by the pandemic and the concomitant economic shock might have a greater chance to attract support even among groups which will not benefit themselves. The prospects of such recalibrating reforms, of course, not only

depend on framing, but also on the temporal sustainability of the crisis effects we found. If the COVID-crisis and its related economic measures had remained a short-term 'shock', one should be sceptical about the durability of the observed preference shifts (as for example Margalit (2013) has shown attitudinal shifts in response to economic shocks to be short-lived). However, at least as long as recurring waves continue to trouble the economic outlook of sectors such as the travel, event, or catering industries and the dependence of elderly generations on the behaviour of younger generations to slow down the spread of the virus, we believe the attitudinal consequences to persist. Whether these preference shifts result in a more durable preference realignment remains to be studied in further research.

Notes

1. These countries constitute a selection of cases as diverse as possible, since they vary regarding crisis affectedness, governmental reactions to the pandemic, as well as welfare state regime.
2. See Table A12 in the appendix for an overview.
3. Table A11 in the appendix shows the exact question wording.
4. We have extensively tested the consistency and validity of this measure in Häusermann et al. (2020).
5. To account for different retirement ages across countries, we base classification on self-reported pensioner status.
6. Findings are robust to an age threshold of 40 instead of 50 (see Figures A3-6 in the appendix).
7. Predicted values for a woman with secondary education, average income, and average left-right self-identification.
8. We generally find that, especially in Sweden and Spain, right-wing more than left-wing voters have more strongly shifted their welfare preferences in consequence of the Covid-crisis. This result mirrors the finding by Jensen and Naumann (2016) that primarily right-leaning voters adjusted public healthcare support after a flu-epidemic, potentially because their welfare support is more fragile.
9. Figure A7 in the appendix shows that shifts regarding ALMP are also strongest among respondents who are highly concerned about the economic ramifications of COVID-19.

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ORCID

Matthias Enggist http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5380-2651
Silja Häusermann http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2410-8959
Michael Pinggera http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2621-8599

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