

A farewell to welfare? Conceptualising welfare populism, welfare chauvinism and welfare Euroscepticism

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Abstract

This conceptual paper argues for the importance of studying three policy paradigms on welfare opposition: First, welfare populism, the opposition to welfare state policies and their administration that do not benefit the ‘common people’. Second, welfare chauvinism, the opposition to the inclusion of non-natives who live in a nation-state from welfare provisions. Third and finally, welfare Euroscepticism, the opposition to the harmonization of welfare policies at the European Union level. We argue that these paradigms have distinct causes and consequences that should be studied across countries in more detail, including a focus on their multidimensional nature and different political actors. And while these paradigms may not lead to a complete farewell to welfare, they most certainly have been shaping and will continue to shape welfare state recalibration. Precisely, we argue that due to welfare opposition, welfare states continue to be influenced by radical right and neoliberal logics instead of focusing on diminishing inequality. This paper concludes with avenues for future research.

Keywords: Welfare state, welfare policy opposition, welfare populism, welfare chauvinism, welfare Euroscepticism

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1. Introduction

Welfare support can be an opportunity to stimulate welfare renewal and reinforcement after three decades of cuts, privatization and neoliberalisation. In fact, reactivating welfare solidarity might be Europe's best chance to reconcile social cohesion and economic resilience in times of crisis and recovery (Hemerijck, 2012; Greve, 2023). The most recent global crises, such as COVID-19, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent cost of living crisis have highlighted these different degrees and flaws in current welfare state arrangements (or the non-existence thereof). Notably, in times of crisis welfare spending levels usually increase significantly as does the public support for these actions (Eick, 2023a). However, once the crises are over, these levels basically return to the normal level or even tend to decrease. Furthermore, even though governments spend significant amounts of their budget on welfare state policies, incomes decline, inequality and poverty increase, and working arrangements become more precarious (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). Considering these developments, one may ask: Are we moving towards a farewell for welfare?

In order to answer this question, this conceptual paper examines the principles behind opposition to welfare, which constitutes a significant part of the problem in current welfare states and needs more theorization and more refined empirical analyses. Importantly, if welfare states are to successfully transition to a more solidary and sustainable approach, there is an urgent need to understand and address existing and emerging patterns of *welfare policy opposition*, which we define as an umbrella term covering different forms of protest towards existing welfare policies provided by governments. We argue that three such policy paradigms stand out. The first one is welfare populism, which we define for this paper as the opposition to welfare state policies and their administration that do not benefit the 'common people'. The second one is welfare chauvinism, which we define as the opposition to the inclusion of non-natives who live in a nation-state from welfare provisions. The third one is welfare Euroscepticism, which we introduce in this paper as a new policy paradigm and define as the opposition to the harmonization of welfare policies at the European Union (EU) level.

Welfare policy opposition is a phenomenon that manifests itself across the public sphere and has gained increasing influence in politics over the past decades. For example, welfare populism, although an almost exclusive feature of populist radical right parties, has been increasingly used in light of the ever-expanding anti-elitist argument made by political actors

(Abts et al., 2021). Welfare chauvinism has become popular among mainstream political elites who have gradually copied the rhetoric once solely used by populist radical right movements with the aim of making electoral gains (e.g., Koning, 2017; Lefkofridi and Michel, 2017; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016). And while welfare Euroscepticism is not as salient as the other paradigms in party discourses yet, parties across the political spectrum have pronounced opposition to the social dimension of the EU at least to some degree already (see, for example, Vesan and Corti, 2019). This emphasizes even more how important it is to introduce this policy paradigm to the welfare opposition family, especially in times when the EU is making historically high investments into social policies. Generally, with Eurosceptic parties consolidating or even strengthening their place in domestic and European political arenas and sometimes influencing the rhetoric of mainstream parties, welfare policy opposition should not be underestimated.

While these three paradigms have, to date, been studied independently from each other, our paper aims at reconciling different streams of the literature on welfare policy and attitudes to demonstrate that welfare policy opposition is a multifaceted phenomenon that is being increasingly advocated by political actors across the political spectrum, and that have multiple ramifications across the society. Still, the causes and consequences of these policy paradigms on the future of the welfare state and liberal democracy remain understudied. Notably, existing studies focus on specific and separate sets of public actors and how they shape welfare policy, such as the general public, the media, policy-makers, local politicians, political parties, courts, and the European Commission. This paper focuses on these policy paradigms and considers different actors involved in the policy process, in order to offer a comprehensive and timely analysis of new challenges European welfare states face, and how resilient they may or may not be to welfare policy opposition in the public sphere.

In particular, the paper aims to demystify the concept of welfare policy opposition by exploring different policy paradigms and their interrelations across different political actors, countries and governance levels. Three interconnected research questions will be addressed in more detail in this paper:

- 1. How and why do different public actors advocate welfare policy opposition?*
- 2. What role does welfare policy opposition play in shaping the transformation of welfare states across Europe?*

3. How can we explain the varying influence of welfare policy opposition across Europe?

After this introduction, section 2 defines the concept of welfare policy opposition before diving into the three different patterns welfare populism, welfare chauvinism and welfare Euroscepticism in section 3. The paper closes with some conclusions about the above-mentioned research questions and avenues for future research.

2. Defining welfare policy opposition

Comparative research on the welfare state and the opposition to implementing welfare policies is as old as the welfare state itself and can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century (Mares, 2009). When Western European societies started to implement their first welfare policies, there was a broad consensus across different political actors, including publics and elites and welfare states soon expanded to other regions in Europe and beyond the continent. And while the initial evolution of the welfare state increased solidarity, there have always been conflicts about particular questions that are still being debated today: Which welfare policies and welfare recipients should be prioritised? How much should the welfare state be expanded and to what extent should private arrangements stay in place? And which governance level should make these decisions and administer these policies?

The literature exploring welfare opposition has expanded at a dramatic pace over the past four decades, in line with the expansion of welfare policies themselves. Welfare states across Europe and beyond have been under the pressure to adapt to significant societal changes, including demographic changes, labour market transformations, globalisation, digitalisation, the rise of the radical right and the emergence of new social risks (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Additionally, over the last centuries, a range of crises have increased inequalities across and within countries, including the Great Recession of 2007-09, the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-16, COVID-19 in 2020-23, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the cost of living crisis since 2022, and the ongoing climate crisis. All of these changes and challenges have reassorted and further complicated the needs, demands, and strategies of the welfare state and made clear that there are certain trade-offs in the process of welfare state recalibration.

It is easy to imagine that different political actors would answer these questions differently and that not all would support all types of welfare policy. To start with, we understand welfare policy opposition as *an umbrella term covering different forms of protest towards existing or future welfare policies provided by the governments across different levels* (local, national, supranational). We argue that welfare policy opposition can be found across different stages of the policy process, and therefore covers strong discursive and attitudinal dimensions that ultimately aim at shaping electoral *and* policy outcomes. As such, welfare policy opposition can be considered as a political strategy used to promote fundamental social policy change across societies.

This concept does not necessarily imply support for the ‘implosion’ of the welfare state as we know it. For example, welfare policy opposition usually targets specific recipients or policies. Historically, the unemployed have been one of the main targeted groups, with policies and policy preferences on unemployment benefits becoming stricter (e.g., Houtman, 1997). As welfare states are subjected to more neoliberalisation, spending for the unemployed and public attitudes towards supporting the unemployed are decreasing even further (Eick, 2023a). Welfare policy opposition does not focus on the fundamental principles behind welfare redistribution (which is the focus of most welfare criticism studies, see e.g. Meuleman and Delespaul, 2020); instead, we argue that welfare policy opposition generally calls for drastic reforms or a block of new reforms that fit a specific policy agenda promoted by political actors. It also calls for change to serve specific interests over others, thereby having an impact on existing cleavages and solidarities within the society (Svallfors, 2012).

Welfare opposition can also be part of a broader ‘politics of opposition’ by non-governing political parties and their supporters, by calling for major reforms or alternatives to existing welfare policies that serve the party’s ideology or interests (Jensen and Seeberg, 2015). And governing parties that oppose welfare or certain welfare policies have actively been blocking necessary welfare expansions or new policies required to address the (new) challenges in our ever-so rapidly changing world. However, due to the complex self-interest, ideological and institutional mechanisms involved, it has also become increasingly difficult for parties to appease their electorate. For example, Gingrich and Häusermann (2015) show that the political support coalition for welfare states has been reconfigured over the past decades. This includes

the Left which has traditionally defended a more universal welfare state losing support among lower socioeconomic status groups to more mainstream or radical right parties that prefer a more selective welfare state (that excludes migrants, for example). On the contrary, some higher socioeconomic status groups that were previously in more secure employment positions are now more vulnerable in the labour market, particularly the service-based industry (or knowledge-based economy) that has grown over the past decades. Therefore, these groups may be inclined to increase their support for pro-welfare parties.

Figure 1 summarises our proposal for an analytical framework to study welfare policy opposition, including two key dimensions: the breadth and depth of welfare coverage. On the one side, the debates around welfare coverage are about who should be included in the welfare solidarity community (see, for example, deservingness literature). The opposition could argue that welfare should rather be restrictive and less unrestricted/universal. On the other side, the debates are about how much coverage should be provided (see, for example, social expenditure literature). Hence, the opposition could argue that welfare generosity should be more limited and less broad/generous. To formulate it as a question: *Who* deserves welfare support and *how much* welfare support do they deserve? Of course, welfare policy opposition can also mean broad but restrictive coverage or limited but unrestricted coverage. And to make it more complex, we can expect variations across policies, countries, administration levels, beneficiary groups, and time. For this reason, more research is needed to better understand where the three policy paradigms we cover in this paper could be allocated in this framework or if this is possible at all.

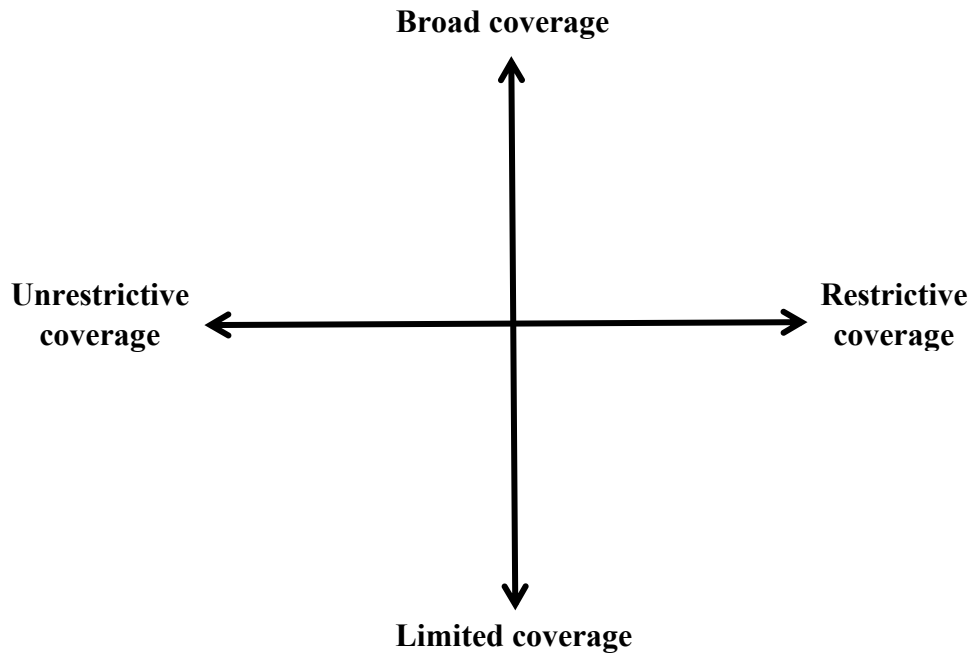


Figure 1. Analytical framework for welfare policy opposition.

We also want to briefly mention what we see as particular outcomes of welfare policy opposition. One outcome example are welfare retrenchment and austerity measures, in the form of welfare cuts, to reduce growing levels of public debt (Pierson, 1994; Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000; Streeck and Schäfer, 2013). Austerity is generally crisis-induced, as a response to an economic shock for instance, and has a short-term dimension. Such measures were particularly popular by governments as a response to the Great Recession. Austerity responses varied significantly between countries, based on the depth of the recession and governmental ideology (Armingeon et al., 2016). Another example of outcomes are conditions under which welfare policies further increase inequalities in society as they are not granted to or taken up sufficiently by individuals who would benefit the most from them. Particularly more market-oriented or human-capital oriented social policies (often referred to as social investment policies) such as education, childcare or active labour market integration policies, have been found to suffer from so-called ‘Matthew effect’ (Cantillon 2011; Van Lancker 2013). Such policies tend to benefit higher socioeconomic groups relatively more than lower socioeconomic groups, hereby creating welfare states geared at the middle class.

Such outcomes, where redistribution is least present when and where it is most needed, have been coined in the literature as the ‘Robin Hood paradox’ of the welfare state (Lindert, 2004). This paradox can also be applied to developing countries, where there would be even more necessity for (generous) welfare policies than in more advanced democracies and welfare policy opposition can lead to even more severe outcomes.

3. Defining paradigms of welfare policy opposition

Welfare policy opposition is far from being a new phenomenon and can take a wide range of forms in the public sphere. Much in line with the general politics of opposition, public actors developed and adopted different strategies to push for their own policy preferences and political agenda. In this paper, we focus on three policy paradigms that we argue have emerged and grown in influence over the past four decades in academic and public discourses: welfare populism, welfare chauvinism and welfare Euroscepticism. We call them paradigms because they constitute “a theoretical tool to specify and understand the guiding principles, or ideas, for creating public policy, why the various actors involved are involved, and why they pursue the strategies they do” (Hogan and Howlett, 2015, p.3).

We argue that these three paradigms have at least four features in common: (1) general sentiments of opposition to welfare (policies), (2) create further polarization in society, (3) mainstreaming of the radical right and (4) increase inequality. We also argue that the three paradigms have core distinct causes and consequences that are summarized in Table 1. First, *welfare populism*, the opposition to welfare state policies and their administration that do not benefit the ‘common people’. We argue that the main line of argument underlying welfare populism is anti-elitism, which is also related to a lack of political trust. Second, *welfare chauvinism*, the opposition to the inclusion of non-natives who live in a nation-state from welfare provisions. We argue that the main line of argument underlying welfare chauvinism is deservingness, with migrants, refugees and ethnic minorities seen as one of the least deserving groups in society due to underlying xenophobic attitudes. Third and finally, *welfare Euroscepticism*, the opposition to the harmonization of welfare policies at the European Union level. We argue that the main line of argument underlying welfare Euroscepticism is the desire

for national sovereignty and/or anti-globalisation sentiments, which are both related to the core principles behind opposition to the process of European integration.

Table 1. Three policy paradigms of welfare opposition.

	Definition	Main line or argumentation
Welfare populism	Opposition to welfare policies and their administration that do not benefit the ‘common people’	Anti-elitism, lack of political trust
Welfare chauvinism	Opposition to the inclusion of non-natives who live in a nation state from welfare policies	Deservingness, xenophobia
Welfare Euroscepticism	Opposition to the harmonization of welfare policies at the European Union level	Sovereignty, Anti-globalisation

To be clear, these definitions and main lines of arguments are highly influenced by perceptions. For example, terms like ‘common people’, natives and the European Union are highly charged and influenced by ideology and context. The same applies to the underlying rationales we mention here. In the next subsections we define these three policy paradigms further, discuss their possible causes and consequences and we dive further into the related terms.

Notably, these three paradigms are not mutually exclusive, although they have different roots and implications for the welfare state. One of the core objectives of this conceptual paper is to bring together different strings of welfare policy studies that have, to date, been studied separately from each other. While we focus on the three above-mentioned paradigms, it is worth noting that other relating concepts co-exist and have been picked by scholars. For instance, according to the so-called anti-welfare liberal argument, some welfare policies might undermine the competitiveness of the economy by increasing labour costs (Meuleman and Delespaul, 2020).

In the next sections, we will provide our definitions for these paradigms and discuss potential causes and consequences that these paradigms have.

3.1. Welfare populism

Welfare populism has been used and conceptualized in many ways in the existing literature (see e.g., de Koster et al., 2013; Greve, 2019; Abts et al., 2021). Within the framework of this paper, we define welfare populism as *a form of welfare policy opposition according to which welfare provisions and their administration do not benefit the ‘common people’*. This definition largely draws on Cas Mudde’s (2004, p. 543) seminal work on populism, which he defines as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. In the context of social policy, welfare populism blames traditional political elites and bureaucrats for creating inefficient welfare states that are not taking care of those in need: access to welfare provisions is hindered by lengthy and complex administrative processes that make it harder for recipients to access benefits and services provided by the state. Additionally, the welfare state might focus on policies that do not provide sufficient safety nets for those living in poverty. Welfare populism’s main line of argument is, therefore, a strong anti-elitist stance in line with the ‘pure people versus corrupt elites’ dichotomy used by most populist radical right parties and their electorate.

We argue that welfare populism is the oldest of the three paradigms presented here. As part of the economic depression in the 1970s, critiques of the welfare state started to get more attention and alleged that the growing collectivization and mass public administration will lead to a loss of individual freedom (see Röpke, 1960). However, the paradigm only evolved in the early 1980s and as inequalities increased, in light with the progressive rise of populist radical right movements across Europe (Swank and Betz, 2003). Unsurprisingly, these critiques appeared first in the countries with the most generous welfare states at the time, particularly in Denmark and Norway. A more recent study conducted by Abts et al. (2021) shows that in Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands, populist radical right parties directly accuse elites of using welfare policies for their own gains and fail to use the community’s resources for the people. In their study of the Dutch electorate, de Koster et al. (2013) identified that the welfare populist views of voters play an important role in their voting behaviour.

A particular consequence of welfare populism is nostalgia or the desire to return to an often imagined past, where the ‘common people’ were not discriminated against. We know that this sentiment is inherently connected to the populist radical right, as Betz and Johnson (2004) describe: “radical right-wing populist ideology is a backward-looking reactionary ideology, reflecting a deep sense of nostalgia for the good old days.” (p. 324). Steenvoorden and Harteveld (2018) find that Europeans that support the radical right and are nostalgic are also less supportive of government income redistribution and migration. This seems intuitive, considering these groups usually also trust the government less. And while welfare populism has been an almost exclusive feature of populist radical right parties, it has been increasingly used in light of the ever-expanding anti-elitist argument made by political actors (Ketola and Nordensvard, 2018). This lack of trust in current governments can also become a problem when policymakers try to introduce more inclusive policies. For example, the (further) digitalization of welfare states may lead to higher take-up rates, particularly among lower socioeconomic status groups. However, this would also require trust in the government administering all this personal data.

3.2. Welfare chauvinism

Welfare chauvinism is the most salient of the three policy paradigms covered here and has been defined in different ways in the literature (see, e.g., Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). Within the framework of this paper, we define welfare chauvinism as *opposition to the inclusion of non-natives who live in a nation state from welfare provisions*. Non-natives are perceived as such by political actors and could have the status as non-citizens, individuals with migration backgrounds, ethnic minorities or refugees. Welfare chauvinism offers a clear division between two groups: the ‘deserving’ natives on the one hand, and the ‘undeserving’ migrants on the other (Mewes and Mau, 2012; van der Waal et al., 2013). In other words, welfare chauvinism is often framed around the issue of *deservingness*. Van Oorschot (2006) shows that migrants are seen as the least deserving welfare recipients in Europe. This is because welfare chauvinism is always about belonging to a national community but it can often also be about contributing to the national community (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). Eick and Larsen (2022) demonstrate that welfare chauvinism varies significantly across different social policies, and unsurprisingly the public prefers more market-oriented social policies (in-kind services or social investment policies) for migrants. Leruth et al. (2023)

propose a categorisation different forms (or frames) of welfare chauvinism along four dimensions: time, space, function, and culture.

We argue that welfare chauvinism emerged as a policy paradigm after welfare populism but before welfare Euroscepticism. Migration levels started to increase significantly in the 1980s in Europe. Once again, welfare chauvinist critiques appeared first in the countries with the most generous welfare states at the time – Denmark and Norway. Andersen and Bjørklund (1990) were the first to coin the term, in the context of the growing radical right in these two countries. Their research shows that voters support welfare provisions only for natives but not for migrants. Over the following decades, welfare chauvinism or ‘welfare for our kind’ became a winning formula in Europe (Eger and Valdez 2015) and beyond. Welfare chauvinism has become popular among mainstream political elites who have gradually copied the rhetoric once solely used by populist radical right movements with the aim of making electoral gains (e.g., Koning, 2017; Lefkofridi and Michel, 2017; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016).

The welfare chauvinist rhetoric has sparked a wealth of academic debates on whether higher migration levels are leading to more overall welfare opposition (also referred to as the ‘progressive dilemma’ or the ‘ethnic heterogeneity hypothesis’). While some scholars find a relationship between higher levels of migration and lower levels of welfare support (e.g., Eger, 2010 for Sweden; Eick and Busemeyer, 2023 for Germany) the causalities underlying these relationships are still unclear. Furthermore, most of the evidence also shows that migration does not exhaust welfare state resources or harm the economy (Eger, 2022). Still, the conflicts between natives and newcomers are fueled the sentiment that the ‘common people’ are being left behind, in this case because the newcomers were being favoured (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997). The COVID-19 crisis has also demonstrated migrant workers’ key role in the functioning of European labour markets and services, but this also did not stop the scapegoating of migrants. And thus a main consequence from welfare chauvinism remains the exclusion of migrants from essential welfare policies and stigmatisation of this group as ‘scroungers’ or ‘lazy’ (Bell et al., 2023).

3.3. Welfare Euroscepticism

Welfare Euroscepticism has not been introduced as a policy paradigm thus far and this paper aims to conceptualize it for the first time. In line with the scholarly literature on Euroscepticism as a persistent phenomenon (see e.g. Taggart, 1998; Usherwood and Startin, 2013; Leruth et al., 2017), we define welfare Euroscepticism as *the opposition to the harmonization of welfare policies at the European Union level*. Many studies of (party-based) Euroscepticism use a simple conceptualization offered by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2000), who distinguish opposition to specific policies or aspects of the process of European integration ('soft Euroscepticism') from outright rejection of the entire project of European integration to the point of advocating an exit from the EU ('hard Euroscepticism'). We argue that welfare Euroscepticism therefore constitutes a form of 'soft' Euroscepticism, although it can be also advocated by actors favoring a full withdrawal of their country from the EU. Welfare Euroscepticism can affect well-established policies or common policy objectives established by European institutions, or oppose ideas or proposals that are put on the table, especially since the social policy competence of the EU (the so-called 'Social Europe') is still evolving and defining itself.

We argue that welfare Euroscepticism is the newest of the three policy paradigms we discuss and that it is timely to start theorising and studying welfare Euroscepticism as a genuine policy paradigm. This is because since the 1990s the EU has been elevating social policies as core policies of the EU, in order to support and complement national welfare states, foster better socioeconomic outcomes for European citizens and combat Euroscepticism (Hemerijck, 2019). Particularly, successive presidencies of the Council of the European Union have put targeted welfare policy harmonization on top of their agendas over the last decades. The European Commission's response to the COVID-19 pandemic had a particular strong social policy dimension, for example with NextGenerationEU (2021, funded with €800 billion) or more targeted policies (e.g., the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency [SURE]). However, after decades of investment, this social integration is still being criticised for lacking teeth and unsuccessful outcomes in some domains because of its frequent soft law character (De la Porte and Pochet, 2012). Thus, it is important to investigate why the future of a Social Europe or even a European Social Union (see, Vandenbroucke, 2013) is still uncertain.

As a form of welfare policy opposition, welfare Eurosceptics argue that the development of the social dimension of the EU could not only threaten national sovereignty (Sørensen, 2007), but

also threaten the sustainability of established social security regimes through welfare tourism (Gago, 2021; Nielsen, 2016), by creating a ‘race to the bottom’ following successive enlargement rounds (Kvist, 2004), or through the EU’s association with neoliberal policies especially after the Great Recession (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). A link between welfare populism and welfare Euroscepticism could also be made when Eurosceptic actors justify their positions based on an anti-elitist rhetoric, accusing the ‘corrupt Brussels elite’ to threaten the wellbeing of the ‘common people’.

Thus, the implications of welfare Euroscepticism can be quite significant. As it is no longer uncommon to see Eurosceptic parties join (or even lead) governments across the European Union, the increasing political weight given to social policy harmonization carries the risk of fermenting ideological divisions within the bloc (Corti, 2022). In the Council of the EU, unanimity is usually required when it comes to the harmonization of social security policy, which also explains the relatively slow progress made on the matter over the past decades. Yet, welfare Eurosceptic voices could ultimately lead to an increase in the use of differentiated mechanisms of integration in the EU, under which a core group of pro-integrationist national governments grant opt-outs to reluctant member states (Gänzle et al., 2021). This would carry the risk of creating a multi-tier Europe in which European citizens are no longer being treated equally across the bloc (see e.g. Leruth et al., 2019).

And while welfare Euroscepticism is not as salient as the other paradigms in party discourses yet, parties across the political spectrum (and in a range of member states) have pronounced opposition to the social dimension of the EU at least to some degree already (see, for example, Vesan and Corti, 2019). This is also problematic in light of Eurosceptic parties basing their welfare Eurosceptic stances along two lines, based on their broad ideology: concerns over national sovereignty for (radical) right-wing parties, and concerns over the EU’s neoliberal agenda for (radical) left-wing parties (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012).

Considering the overwhelming evidence found for Euroscepticism and related challenges (democratic deficit, information deficit, Brexit), it is surprising that the literature has thus far overlooked the issue of opposition to the development of a common European social policy, or

the broader ‘Social Europe’ agenda advocated by European institutions. For example, Baute et al. (2018) demonstrate that (public) Euroscepticism is higher in countries with more generous welfare states. And Eick (2023b) demonstrates that specific EU-level social policies are less popular in countries and parts of the public that contribute more to the EU budget. Eick (2023b) specifically shows that the traditional EU supporters –higher socioeconomic status groups– are particularly reluctant to support a European social assistance scheme. These new cleavages on EU policies emphasize even more how important it is to introduce this policy paradigm to the welfare opposition family, especially in times where the EU is making historically high investments into social policies. Generally, with the radical right entering at full pace the national parliaments across Europe and potentially the EU parliament in the 2024 elections, welfare opposition should not be underestimated.

4. Conclusions and avenues for future research

As discussed throughout this paper, welfare policy opposition does not entail a literal ‘farewell to welfare’, as the title of the paper provocatively suggests. Instead, it challenges the welfare state as we know it and poses significant threats which, as this paper argues, must be studied altogether in order to understand what we would call the new politics of welfare opposition affecting the whole policy process.

Recall the three broad research questions investigated within the framework of this paper. While this paper cannot do justice in summarizing the depth of findings of each individual contribution, we can draw some general answers. First, *how and why do different public actors advocate welfare policy opposition?* Essentially, public actors tend to use the same mechanisms that have been explored in the literature on welfare attitudes and policy formulation, although these tend to be refined to address specific policies: self-interest, ideology, and the institutional environment under which they operate.

Second, the paper explores the following question: *What role does welfare policy opposition play in shaping the transformation of welfare states across Europe?* Overall, the paper has demonstrated that a public welfare policy opposition is of relevance for national and European-level policymaking and has the potential to further grow and further increase inequalities. Some of the main challenges we identify are the (1) mainstreaming of far right narratives that pose a

threat to democracy, (2) deservingness perceptions that are increasingly based on market and border logics, (3) further polarization in society and across countries and (4) a lack of commitment to changes that are needed to make welfare states fit for the current challenges and crises. Regarding expectations about the future of national- and European-level policy making, it is likely that the welfare policy opposition will block at least part of welfare expansion, or even cause retrenchment at least in some policy areas and for some groups of the population. Considering the increasing neoliberalisation and normalisation of the radical right, one can expect that market solutions are not likely to be crowded out and that private solutions are likely to be crowded in. Still, we also expect this to differ significantly across countries and governance levels. Another issue we did not touch on specifically is about the outcome regarding who will actually benefit from the designed policies and take them up.

Finally, *how can we explain the varying influence of welfare policy opposition across Europe?* As hinted above, the context under which political actors and the public operate is of crucial importance. To be more specific, the politicisation of welfare policy opposition tends to be more prominent where radical right political actors are successful. Unsurprisingly, context matters: the level, relevance and influence of welfare policy opposition is shaped by crises of all kinds, which might be used by political actors to make gains (in line with the argument made in this paper that welfare policy opposition is a political strategy). What is particularly interesting to note is that the three paradigms of welfare policy opposition investigated within the framework of this paper cuts across all welfare regimes, thereby confirming that no country is immune to such patterns of opposition.

We also want to propose three avenues for future research since there are still many open questions and gaps in the research on welfare policy opposition. First, studies that analyse welfare opposition and the three paradigms *more systematically across political actors, countries and time*. Recently, there has been a plethora of new studies focusing almost exclusively on welfare chauvinism. One of the core goals this paper hopes to reach is that instead of focusing on one such specific paradigm, the phenomenon of welfare policy opposition should be studied as a whole in order to understand how different political and policy strategies are part of a broader narrative. In a similar vein, within the framework of this paper and other recent works (see e.g. Rathgeb and Busemeyer, 2022), the radical right has been a core focus of welfare policy opposition; however, the phenomenon is not limited to these political actors, especially since populist, chauvinistic and Eurosceptic rhetoric has been copied

by mainstream parties for electoral gains. Such a line of research is also important to understand the cleavage dilemmas we have identified (such as traditional EU supporters being more welfare Eurosceptic), trade-offs and underlying causalities of these paradigms.

Another avenue for future research are studies that look into *countering or overcoming welfare opposition* and into creating more sustainable policies that work in the long-term and are more resilient from welfare opposition. The strategies advocated by most political actors aim at making political gains and influencing public policy in the short run, but the impact of these rhetoric on the long-term sustainability of the welfare state tend to be overlooked by elites and the public. For example, we can still see a denial of the scale of the climate emergency in current (welfare) policies. Think of the inevitable increase of ‘climate refugees’ in the coming decades: what impact will this have on welfare chauvinist rhetoric?

Finally, it may be intuitive to start researching welfare opposition in contexts where already existing welfare arrangements are at stake. Still, there is a lack of research on welfare policy opposition in the *countries that would most benefit from a (more generous) welfare state*, particularly developing countries (see also Mares 2009). Considering the importance of structural factors, mobilization based on self-interests and ideologies, political institutions and discourses around policies and their (potential) recipients, it would be important to see how these play out outside of the European/EU context that we focused on in the paper.

To close this paper, we want to emphasise that welfare opposition is here to stay and welfare states need to decide how to respond to it. This means in particular, whether they will give in to the welfare critiques and adjust to their exclusionary, and often neoliberal logics or whether they will be guided by their original principles: equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to those most in need that cannot provide for themselves.

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