

**Public perceptions of the economic, moral and
social consequences of the welfare state**

An empirical analysis of welfare state legitimacy

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Abstract

What people believe to be the economic, moral and social consequences of the welfare state is a nearly neglected subject in studies on welfare state legitimacy. This is quite remarkable given that the welfare state is often criticized substantially for its (alleged) economic and moral consequences. This article contributes to the field of welfare legitimacy by offering a first description of people's perceptions of a series of welfare state consequences, and extended analyses of the structural and cultural determinants. Data from a 2006 Dutch survey show that in the eyes of a large majority of the Dutch the positive social consequences of the welfare state outweigh the negative economic and moral consequences. Strikingly, structural variables, like age, income and educational level, which may indicate peoples' social risks and related personal interest in the provisions of the welfare state, play a minor explanatory role, if at all, compared to welfare relevant values and attitudes. The person that is most pessimistic about the economic and moral consequences, and least optimistic about the social consequences, tends to be female, rightist, more authoritarian, less convinced of the deservingness of welfare target groups, and more negative on unemployed people.

1. Introduction

What people believe to be the economic, moral and social consequences of the welfare state is a nearly neglected subject in studies on welfare state legitimacy. This is quite remarkable given that, as noted e.g. by Gough (2001), the welfare state is often criticized substantially for its (alleged) consequences. From an economic perspective the welfare state is accused of, amongst others, being a fiscal burden seriously hampering investments, of endangering a national economy's competitiveness by increasing labour costs, of making labour markets too rigid and inflexible, and of sapping people's will to work with resulting negative effects for dependency rates and labour supply (e.g. Lindbeck, 1995). In the 1990's, for instance, the concept of 'Eurosclerosis' was used to catch in one word all the (alleged) economic evils of the European Social Model (too costly, too rigid, creating dependency), explaining in one strike the higher structural European unemployment rates of that period compared to the USA (e.g. Henderson, 1993). From a moral and social perspective worries are expressed by neo-liberals and conservatives about people losing their sense of self-responsibility when being pampered by the welfare state, and about the development of a culture of dependency (e.g. Murray, 1984). At the same time, christian-democrats and communitarians often argue that social expenditures and comprehensive social programs 'crowd out' informal caring relations and social networks, as well as familial and communal systems of self-help and reciprocity, thereby fostering social isolation, anomie and self-centeredness (e.g. Etzioni, 1995). Recently, the welfare magnetism effect of the welfare state has been added to the list of its alleged negative consequences. European welfare states, and especially the ones among them with more generous provisions, would attract low-skilled migrants from poor countries aiming to improve their socio-economic situation, and thus create problems concerning the economic sustainability and cultural legitimacy of national welfare states (Freeman, 1986; Soroka *et al.*, 2004).

Of course, whether and to what degree the negative consequences actually occur in reality is an important question for empirical research. Typically, empirical studies often find less alarming results than welfare state critiques assume.¹ However, the point of the present paper is not whether the alleged consequences are real, as is the fact that a welfare state's social legitimacy would be in serious jeopardy if large segments of a population

¹ For example, risk investments seem to be higher in countries with higher social spending (Bird, 2001), there seems to be little relationship between replacement rates of unemployment benefits and unemployment duration (Atkinson, 1995), unemployment benefits do not seem to corrupt the work ethic (Barr, 1992; Gallie & Alm, 2000; Esser, 2005), while generally a process of Eurosclerosis has not taken place in European countries in the past decades (Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002). Regarding the moral and social consequences European studies found that provisions and pensions for elderly people do not undermine intra-family and inter-generational solidaristic feelings and behavior (Kohli, 1999; Arber & Attias-Donfut, 2000; Knijn & Komter, 2004), and welfare spending seems to be positively, not negatively, related to civic behavior, community participation, and concern for others (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2003; Van Oorschot *et al.*, 2005). Regarding the welfare magnetism effect of European welfare states results from empirical studies do as yet contradict each other (De Giorgi & Pellizzari, 2003; Menz, 2004; Soroka *et al.*, 2004).

would *perceive* them as being real. The problem at present is that there is hardly any knowledge about such perceptions of welfare state consequences.

This paper aims to contribute to such knowledge by exploring and discussing detailed empirical data from a 2006 Dutch survey where people were asked about their perceptions of the possible positive and negative consequences of the Dutch welfare state. Of course, one can easily criticize a single country study in this field, because it is well imaginable that public perceptions of welfare consequences partly depend on characteristics of the welfare state that people actually live in. There are not only country differences in general approaches to and actual types and levels of welfare provided, but also in actual outcomes as e.g. regarding poverty and standards of living, and there are differences in socio-demographic structures. All of these are factors that may influence people's perceptions of welfare state consequences. Nevertheless, we feel that a single country study is valuable given the near complete lack of any knowledge in the field. The advantage of the data we avail of is that they come from a national survey that was specifically aimed at welfare attitudes, which means that for our analyses we can use a series of survey questions on consequences that are not available in any of the (European) comparative surveys at hand.²

The empirical questions we will explore are: 1) How do Dutch people perceive positive and negative consequences of the welfare state? 2) Do people perceive positive as well negative consequences at the same time, and if so, is the overall balance positive or negative, and what is the degree of possible ambivalence? 3) What are the structural and cultural characteristics of people that determine their perceptions of consequences?

Firstly, we will briefly review the empirical literature on welfare state legitimacy as measured with public opinion surveys and show that the perceived consequences are an as near as neglected aspect. Secondly, we will describe our methods and discuss the findings of our analyses. We round off with a brief summary and discussion of our results.

² A major opportunity for cross-national and multi-level analyses of perceptions of welfare consequences will be offered by the data of the European Social Survey 2008, which will contain questions on the issue in its module on 'Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe'. These data will come available in the autumn of 2009.

2. The social legitimacy of the welfare state

A review of public opinion studies that explicitly aim to measure and analyse welfare state legitimacy shows that all but a few take as main indicators people's opinions on what Roller (1995) has named the 'range' (or 'extensivity') and 'degree' (or 'intensity') of the role of government (see table 1). The range regards the issue of whether government should or should not take up welfare responsibilities and in what range of policy areas, while the degree concerns the issue of whether government should spend little or much, or more or less on welfare provisions. Depending on data availability the studies vary in their exact focus of government responsibilities and spending issues. However, the majority of the 'range' studies use data from the International Social Survey Programme's modules on 'The Role of Government', which asks people's opinions on whether it should or should not be government's responsibility to provide jobs, health care, decent standards of living for various groups, and such like. While the majority of the 'degree' studies use the modules' question on whether people would want to see more or less government spending on various policy areas, including health, education, unemployment benefits and old age pensions. Typically, the studies combine people's opinions regarding the separate areas for responsibilities and spending into one scale to arrive at an overall measure of legitimacy of the welfare state.

Table 1 Empirical welfare legitimacy studies by type of legitimacy indicator used

Role of government		Mixed scales	Consequences of welfare
<i>Range</i> Responsible for...	<i>Degree</i> Spending on...		
(Andress & Heien, 2003) (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003) (Bonoli, 2000) (Bowles & Gintis, 2000) (Brooks & Manza, 2006) (Deitch, 2004) (Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001) (Haller <i>et al.</i> , 1990) (Kluegel & Miyano, 1995) (Linos & West, 2003) (Papadakis & Bean, 1993) (Paugam, 2003) (Roller, 1995) (Svallfors, 1999) (Svallfors, 2003) (Gelissen, 2000) (Kluegel & Miyano, 1995) (Matheson & Wearing, 1999) (Meier Jaeger, 2007) (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003) (Edlund, 2007)	(Blomberg, 1999) (Boeri <i>et al.</i> , 2001) (Edlund, 2004) (Feagin, 1975) (Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001) (Forma, 1997) (Haller <i>et al.</i> , 1990) (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989) (Papadakis & Bean, 1993) (Pettersen, 1995) (Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995) (Gelissen, 2000) (Rehm, 2007) (Veghte <i>et al.</i> , 2007) (Edlund, 2007)	(Bryson, 1997) (Gidengil <i>et al.</i> , 2003) (Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995) (Cnaan, 1989) (Svallfors, 1991) (Ploug, 1996) (Ervasti, 1998) (Goul Andersen, 1999)	(Bryson, 1997) (Gidengil <i>et al.</i> , 2003) (Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995)

There is some debate on which of the ISSP based indicators of range and degree could be best used (Svallfors, 1999), but the fact that they play a central role in empirical studies on welfare state legitimacy is understandable given that taking up responsibilities for welfare provision by governments is an essential characteristic of welfare states and a main reason for their existence. Notwithstanding this, the existing practice, with its focus on role-of-government indicators and sum scales measuring overall legitimacy, can be criticized for various reasons. One reason, which interests us here most, is that people's opinions on the role of government is only one among a series of aspects of the welfare state people may have opinions about, and which may contribute to their overall perception of the welfare state's legitimacy.³ The welfare state is a multi-dimensional institution implying that it is likely that its social legitimacy cannot be captured in a single indicator that only reflects people's preferences for the role of government. This multi-dimensionality and its implications for measuring welfare state legitimacy is readily acknowledged in the literature (Cnaan, 1989; Svallfors, 1991; Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995; Gelissen, 2000; Andress & Heien, 2003)⁴, but as table 1 shows only a few empirical studies actually measure other than role-of-government based indicators.⁵ Some of them focus on a single alternative dimension of e.g. the practices of the welfare state with measures of people's opinions on the bureaucratic character of their welfare state, on abuse of provisions, and on tax levels (Ervasti, 1998), while other studies analyse a broader range of dimensions. Some of these add up scores on dimensions to one single 'welfarism' scale (Bryson, 1997; Gidengil et al., 2003), but the other studies analyse the dimensions separately. No standard practice has developed as to the type and number of dimensions to be included. In effect, the multiple dimensions that are actually distinguished vary strongly between studies. Given the many different perspectives on the functions and boundaries of the welfare state⁶, there is a risk that an exact and final definition of the various dimensions on which people may have opinions and which may contribute to their overall idea of the welfare state's legitimacy will be a subject of endless debate. The important point is that the legitimacy of the welfare state does depend on people's opinions on and perceptions of various aspects of it. People may well endorse a substantial role for government in providing welfare of various sorts

³ Other reasons are e.g.: a sum scale measurement over different welfare policy areas disregards the fact that people's opinions on and preferences for welfare provision often depend on the type of provision and its target groups; asking about welfare preferences without connecting these to costs involved over-estimates legitimacy.

⁴ Sachweh *et al.* (2007) argue on results of a national German survey that also Rolller's 'range' and 'degree' dimensions of the role of government need to be seen as separate dimensions, because people's opinions on them have a very different structure of determinants.

⁵ The fact that most of the role-of-government based studies are international comparative studies while most of the studies measuring legitimacy on multiple dimensions are national studies (from Finland, the UK, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, the US) suggests that the dominance of single dimension studies has more to do with practicalities of a lack of multi-dimensional questions in international comparative surveys (notably in the much used ISSP), than with theoretical or other substantial reasons.

⁶ Note that Richard Titmuss, who invaluablely contributed to our understanding of the welfare state, refers to the central subject of his scholarly life as an 'undefinable abstraction' (Titmuss, 1968, p. 124).

and by various means, but at the same time they may be disappointed in what it costs (too high taxes), in how the welfare state functions in practice (too much misuse, too bureaucratic administrative practices, and such like), they may be disappointed in the outcomes of the welfare state (too much poverty, too large or too small inequality, too bad quality of services, etc.), and/or they may perceive serious negative consequences of welfare (drain on the economy, sapping the will to work, etc).

The brief review learns that welfare legitimacy is multi-dimensional, and that empirical studies up till present mainly focus on the one dimension of the role of government. The dimension of the consequences of the welfare state, on which we focus here, figures in three studies only (Table 1), but in a minimalistic way. With no further analysis of determinants, Gidengil et al. (2003) show that in 2000 38% of Canadian women and 30% of Canadian men disagree with the libertarian statement that ‘the welfare state makes people less willing to look after themselves’, while Bryson (1997) shows that in 1996 44% of respondents of the British Social Attitude Survey agree with this same statement, and also that 33% agree with the related statement that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous people would learn to stand on their own feet’. Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995) offer a first explorative insight in the determinants of consequence perceptions where they show that in 1992 older, richer, more rightist, and higher class Fins more strongly feel that ‘social security and welfare services have made people passive and reduced their initiative’. All in all, a meagre body of knowledge that we will try to extend here with an empirical description of how Dutch people perceive a series of positive and negative consequences of the Dutch welfare state; whether they perceive positive as well negative consequences at the same time, and if so: is the overall balance positive or negative, and what is the degree of possible ambivalence? In addition, we analyse and discuss the structural and cultural characteristics of people that determine their perceptions of welfare state consequences. Before explaining our data and methods we will first discuss the determinants we will analyse.

3. Determinants of consequences perceptions

Regarding the analyses of determinants of consequences perceptions we apply an explorative strategy, since this is an as near as untrodden field. We referred to the fact that Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995) are the first, and as far as we know, the only authors who offered some insight in such determinants. As mentioned earlier, in their Finnish study of 1992 they found that older, richer, more rightist, and higher class Fins more strongly felt that ‘social security and welfare services have made people passive and reduced their initiative’. In this list of characteristics we recognize the two sets of determinants, which in a variety of empirical studies on welfare opinions have shown to play a role (see e.g. Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Groskind, 1994; Pettersen, 1995; Chong *et al.*, 2001; Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003), as is the case in a series of theoretical studies on pro-social behaviour,

altruism and welfare support (Elster, 1990; Lindenberg, 1990; Mansbridge, 1990; Thernborn, 1991; Kangas, 1997; Taylor-Gooby, 1998). On the one hand, there are structural characteristics of people, like age, income level and work status, which often indicate a degree of personal interest that people have in the benefits and services of the welfare state. A usual hypothesis, which is often corroborated to a degree, is that people with a stronger interest in social protection have more positive attitudes towards and positive perceptions of the arrangements and outcomes of the welfare state. From this perspective one could expect less critical perceptions of the negative economic and moral consequences of welfare among those who usually depend more on the welfare state, like women⁷, older people, people with lower incomes and/or more economic stress, people with lower educational level, employees in the public sector, unemployed people, and people who use or have been using social benefits generally. From the same perspective one could expect that these groups would be more positive about the social consequences, but perhaps more critical on migration consequences for reasons of a stronger felt economic competition with migrant workers. Migrants themselves, however, may be less critical towards the migration consequences.

On the other hand, there are cultural characteristics of people, that is, their welfare relevant beliefs, values, and attitudes that play a role in addition to interest factors. In our exploration of determinants we include a series of possibly relevant values and attitudes that are available in our data set. First and foremost there is people's political stance, which has shown in many welfare opinion studies to play a role, in that leftist people tend to be more positive on all aspects of the welfare state. In accordance with this, and as Sihvo and Uusitalo (1995) found in their Finnish study, we expect that leftist people are less critical about the negative economic, moral and migration consequences, and more positive about the social consequences. However, since Lipset's seminal study on class related values (Lipset, 1959), it is recognized and often proved that 'leftist' and 'rightist' attitudes tend to conceal a more fundamental division in two mostly un-related ideological domains: one regarding economic issues, which is about favouring equality or inequality, and one regarding cultural and moral issues, which is about favouring freedom or authority (for a review and discussion see: Houtman, 2003). These underlying dimensions may be important here, since we analyse respondent's answers to economic and moral consequences. We assume that egalitarian people are less critical on the economic consequences, and more positive on the social consequences of welfare, while we expect that authoritarian people will especially be critical about the moral consequences. Furthermore, with a view on the christian-democratic and communitarian critique on the welfare state, we expect that religious people are especially more critical about the moral consequences, compared to non-religious people. We include religious denomination to see whether there is a difference in

⁷ See e.g. Deitch (2004).

moral welfare scepticism between various religious groupings, and we include frequency of attending religious meetings to see whether the intensity of people's religious practices has an influence. Finally, since people's ideas about the recipients of welfare often influence their welfare opinions (Gilens, 1996; Van Oorschot, 2006a), we include in our exploration people's attitudes to the deservingness of welfare target groups (like pensioners, single parents, sick and disabled people, etc.) in general, and to that of immigrants in particular. We also include the image people have of unemployed people. We expect more critical perceptions of economic, moral and immigration consequences among people who have less favourable attitudes towards welfare target groups and immigrants, and among people who have stronger negative images of unemployed people

4. Data and methods

Data

Our data are from a national representative welfare opinions survey among the Dutch population of 16 years of age or older, which was held in October-November 2006. The total questionnaire was divided in three parts, which were put successively to all respondents in three waves in the course of a six-week period. The sample was taken from a large, national representative panel (run by Center Data of Tilburg University, The Netherlands) and respondents filled out computer-based questionnaires on line. Of the 2682 selected respondents 1972 filled in the sub-questionnaires of all three waves, and thus completed the total questionnaire, giving a response rate of 73%. In this group response group correction was necessary for some under-representation of younger people, people with lower educational level and people with lower income. In our analyses presented here we use the weighed data set, which contains 1941 cases. The Dutch *Stichting Instituut Gak* financed the survey.

Dependent variables: perceived consequences

In the survey people were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of economic and moral criticisms of the welfare state that are commonly expressed in the Dutch media. The economic criticism that was put forward to respondents regards the idea that, because of their financing from pay roll taxes, welfare expenditures on Dutch social benefits substantially increase the cost of labour and thus have a negative effect on the international competitiveness of the Dutch economy, which in turn leads to structural unemployment and a general downturn of the national economy. Respondents were asked for their opinions on each of these elements separately. The moral criticisms referred to neo-liberal views that because of the welfare state people get lazy, and lose their sense of personal responsibility, as well as to the christian-democratic and communitarian views that the

welfare state makes people egoistic and calculative, and not willing to care for each other anymore. Typically, in the public debate the possible positive consequences of the welfare state are often little heard of.⁸ But to have a complete picture of the ‘consequences-based’ legitimacy of the welfare state it is also important to study whether and to what degree people acknowledge any positive effects. Therefore, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of positively formulated social consequences: that, because of the welfare state, people in general live happier, wealth is distributed more justly, everybody gets a chance of making something of their life, large scale poverty and misery is prevented, societal unrest is prevented, and that the life of many is more pleasant and free. To this a single statement on the alleged ‘welfare magnetism’ phenomenon was added.

The answers to the four items on negative *economic* consequences were added to form a Likert-scale, which has an alpha reliability of .80. Higher scores indicate stronger perception of negative economic consequences. The answers to the four items on negative *moral* consequences were added to form a Likert-scale, with an alpha of .83. Higher scores indicate stronger perception of negative moral consequences. A factor and reliability analysis on six statements regarding positive *social* consequences revealed that three of them form a scale with alpha .80 (that because of the system of social benefits ...people in general live happier, ...wealth is distributed more justly, ...everybody gets a chance of making something of their life). Higher scores on this scale indicate stronger perception of positive social consequences. The other three items on social consequences are not included in the scale because of low inter-item correlations. The statement about the *migration* consequences of the welfare state (because of the system of social benefits ...many foreigners come and live here) is included as a single variable, with higher scores indicating stronger perception of a welfare magnetism effect.

The four scales are inter-correlated. See the table below. The correlation between the economic and moral consequences scales is high (.722), which is why one would expect a closely similar structure of determinants for each. Notwithstanding, we analysed them separately, and found close similarity between the structure of their determinants, with some exceptions regarding the influence of gender, ethnicity and egalitarianism.

Pearson correlations between consequences scales

	Economic consequences	Moral consequences	Social consequences	Migration consequences
Economic consequences	-			
Moral consequences	.722*	-		

⁸ This is also true for the possible positive economic effects of the welfare state, like e.g. that social benefits can function as buffers for up keeping consumption levels in times of recession, that pension savings are an important source of investment capital, that welfare services stimulate the development of human capital, etc. Unluckily, our survey data do not contain related statements.

Social consequences	-.398*	-.341*	-	
Migration consequences	.494*	.543*	-.262	-

*P < .01 (2-tailed)

Determinants

The structural determinants included in our analyses are: *sexe* (1 = male, 2 = female); *age* (in years); *income* (net monthly income of household); *economic stress* (how hard respondents perceive to manage on the household income: low stress-high stress); *educational level* (1-6: 1 = primary school, 2 = lower vocational, 3 = middle vocational, 4 = secondary school, 5 = higher vocational, 6 = university); *work status* (1 = employed private sector, 2 = employed (semi) public sector, 3 = self-employed, 4 = unemployed, 5 = other (student, homemaker, pensioner, other), *use of benefits* (1 = respondent uses now and/or has used previously and/or expects to use in future an unemployment benefit and/or a disability benefit and/or sick pay and/or social assistance), *ethnicity* (0 = nonDutch (at least one parent not born in the Netherlands), 1= Dutch).

The cultural determinants are: *political stance* (self-placement on a 10-point scale: 1 = most left and 10 = most right); *religious denomination*(1 = none, 2 = catholic, 3 = protestant, 4 = evangelical, 5 = humanistic, 6 = Islamic, 7 = other); *religious practice* (how often one attends a religious meeting, apart from weddings and funerals: (1=more than once a week, 2=once a week, 3=once a month, 4=only on special occasions, 5=once a year, 6=less frequent than once a year, 7=hardly ever, 8=never); *egalitarianism* (sum scale of answers to five statements: ...government has to increase social benefits, ...there is no real poverty in the Netherlands, ...large differences in income are unjust, ...government should take substantial measures to reduce income differences, ...companies must be obliged to share profits with their employees; alpha reliability = .78; low-high); *authoritarianism* (sum scale of answers to six statements: young people may have rebellious ideas, but they should return more conformist when they grow older, ...what we need are less laws and institutions, but more dedicated and energetic leaders, ...because of rapid social change it is difficult to tell good from bad, ... there are two kinds of people: strong and weak, ...our social problems would be solved if we could remove criminals from our society, ... things would be better if people would talk less and work harder: alpha reliability = .73: low-high); *deservingness general* (sum scale of answers to the questions to what degree one would say that various groups would be entitled to social protection (10 point scale: 1 = not at all, 10 = very much): groups mentioned are pensioners. disabled persons, social assistance clients, widows, sick people, unemployed people, people who cannot work, single parents, lowly educated people, people with poor health: alpha reliability = .85: low-high); *deservingness of immigrants* (sum scale of answers to four statements: ...non-western im-

migrants should have less rights to social assistance than Dutch people, ... western immigrants should have less rights to social assistance than Dutch people, ... economic fugitives should have less rights to social assistance than Dutch people, ... political fugitives should have less rights to social assistance than Dutch people: alpha reliability = .92: low-high); beliefs about *unemployed people* (most unemployed people could have a job if they would want to, ... the work ethic of unemployed people is much lower than that of employed people, ... unemployed people profit much more from the welfare state than employed people, ... unemployed people should be grateful towards society for the benefits and services they receive, ... many unemployed people use benefits and services to which they are not entitled: alpha reliability = .83; positive-negative).

5. Results: The economic, moral and social consequences of the welfare state

Positive and negative perceptions

As table 2 shows the Dutch public do not strongly perceive negative economic consequences of the welfare state. There are clear majorities of 45% and 51% respectively who do not agree that, because of the system of social benefits, unemployment would increase, or the economy would turn down, while there is a more or less equal divide over its effect on labour costs and the international competitiveness of the Dutch economy. There is also a divide regarding the negative moral consequences, although in all cases those who do perceive such consequences form a small majority, ranging between 32% and 40%. Regarding the positive social consequences, however, there are clear majorities agreeing (ranging from 46% to 65%). Finally, a majority of 52% of the Dutch population perceives a welfare magnet effect, that is, they agree with the idea that many foreigners come and live in the Netherlands because of the system of social benefits.

Table 2. “The system of welfare benefits can have positive and negative consequences. Do you agree or disagree with the statement that because of the system of social benefits:...” (%)

	(totally) disagree	agree, nor disagree	(totally) agree	Don't know
Economic consequences				
...labour costs are too high	23	34	33	10
...unemployment increases	45	28	18	9
...the competitiveness of the Dutch economy decreases	36	26	23	15
...the economy turns down	51	30	9	10
Average	39	29	21	11
Moral consequences				
...people get lazy	28	28	40	4
...people get egoistic and calculative	31	30	32	7
...people are not willing to care for each other anymore	29	28	36	7

...people lose their sense of personal responsibility	30	27	39	5
Average	30	28	37	6
Social consequences				
...large scale poverty and misery is prevented	10	20	65	6
...societal unrest is prevented	13	28	51	8
...wealth is distributed more justly	19	25	50	6
...the life of many is more pleasant and free	12	32	48	8
...everybody gets a chance of making something of their life	11	28	56	5
...people in general live happier	15	31	46	8
<i>Average</i>	30	27	53	7
Migration consequences				
...many foreigners come and live here	20	22	53	7

Clearly, the moral criticisms on the welfare state appeal more to the Dutch public, than the economic criticisms.⁹ However, the most revealing finding from table 2 is that, despite the fact that the positive consequences of the welfare state are rarely emphasized in the public debate, large segments of the Dutch public nevertheless have a clear eye for them. As further calculations showed, it is even the case that for a large majority of 67% the positive social consequences outweigh the negative economic, moral and migration consequences.¹⁰ It is known that for decades on end support for the welfare state is invariably high in the Netherlands, since this is measured annually by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau over a period from 1970 onwards (Becker, 2005). Elsewhere we suggested that Dutch welfare popularity can be understood from the fact that no less than 70% of the Dutch experience a direct interest in the system of social benefits covering the risks of unemployment, sickness, disability and poverty, because either they themselves or family members and close friends actually receive such benefits, or they have received them in the past (Van Oorschot, 2006b). To this broad, interest based cornerstone of Dutch welfare legitimacy, another can be added now: the fact that in the eyes of a large majority of the Dutch population the positive consequences of their welfare system outweigh the negative ones. Presumably, the overall positive perception of the system's consequences is related to the fact that so many profit from it. However, one would need cross-national comparative data to test this relationship, that is, to see whether overall positive 'consequences-based' welfare legitimacy could also be present (to a degree) in the context of a less encompassing, more selective welfare state.

Although a positive balance between positive and negative perceptions can be seen as a necessary condition for a 'consequence based' legitimacy of the welfare state,

⁹ We should note that apparently people had more difficulty in responding to the economic consequences items, compared to the other items, given that the proportions of 'don't know's' generally are larger in the first case.

¹⁰ We subtracted the average of respondent's scores on the negatively formulated items regarding the economic, moral and migration consequences, from the average of scores on the positively formulated social consequences: the balance was positive in 67% of cases, zero in 4% of cases, and negative in 30% of cases.

such legitimacy will also depend on the degree of ambivalence among the population at large. That is, the overall balance may be positive, but the legitimacy would be more fragile to the degree that people more closely combine positive as well as negative perceptions at the same time¹¹. We have measured the degree of ambivalence in consequences perceptions as the percentages of people who on average score higher than three¹² on the positive social consequences items, and who score on average higher than three as well on the negative economic, moral and migration consequences items. We found that 10% of all respondents combine high scores on the positive social consequences and on the negative economic consequences, 22% combine high scores on the positive social and the negative moral consequences, and 28% combines high scores on the social and migration consequences. Although we have no data from other sources to compare these results with, we are inclined to conclude that these percentages reflect modest levels of ambivalence.

¹¹ Attitudinal ambivalence is usually defined as a person's combination of positive and negative evaluations of a single attitude subject (Priester & Petty, 1996).

¹² On the 1-5 agreement-scale.

Determinants of perceptions

To analyse determinants we have regressed the set of structural variables (model 1), and a combination of the structural and cultural variables (model 2) on the four consequences scales. The results of the multivariate regressions are summarized in table 3.

Rather strikingly, what table 3 shows first is that the structural variables (Models 1) hardly explain any part of the variance of the consequences perceptions. Admittedly, some effects are visible: people with a higher educational level, those who are employed in the public sector and those who make, or have made use, of social benefits are less critical about the consequences (that is, they agree less with the negative consequences, and agree more with the positive consequences). However, these effects total up to very modest percentages of explained variance (ranging from 2.0% to 4.4%), but most importantly, they disappear in the Models 2 where the cultural variables are added. What remains in the Models 2 is that people with higher incomes and those with work status 'other' (consisting of students, pensioners and housewives) agree more with the positive social consequences of welfare. Typically, when controlling for cultural variables the difference between men and women becomes significant, in that women on average perceive negative economic and migration consequences a bit more than men, while they perceive the positive social consequences a bit less. How this female pessimism can be explained is a puzzle, since the Models 2 control for the cultural variables as well as for a series of other structural variables, and usually it is found that women are stronger supporters of the welfare state than men (see e.g. Deitch, 1988; Gidengil et al., 2003).¹³ In one case also the age effect becomes statistically significant in the Models 2: older people are less in agreement with the positive social consequences. Ethnicity only plays a role with regard to the morality issue: people who have at least one foreign born parent generally agree more with the negative moral consequences.

¹³ This finding may reflect that people may think differently about the good or bad of the welfare state as a whole, and about its consequences, which actually is the explicit assumption of this paper. Preliminary further analyses of the Dutch 2006 survey data corroborate this assumption, since first analyses show that the correlations between consequences scales and scales measuring general welfare state support are positive, but low (in the range of .10 - .20).

Table 3. Multivariate regression results: determinants of perceived consequences
(Beta-coefficients)

	Negative economic consequences		Negative moral consequences		Positive social consequences		Negative migration consequences	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Sexe (M-F)	,032	,061**	,013	,037	-,074**	-,098**	,026	,058**
Age	-,035	,001	-,020	,021	-,017	-,065**	-,023	,029
Income	-,001	,002	,031	,032	,067**	,062**	,032	,038
Economic stress	-,041	-,004	-,047	-,012	-,017	-,047	,008	-,001
Educational level	-,099**	,005	-,122**	-,004	,073**	,017	-,129**	-,016
Work status								
<i>Employed private sector*</i>								
Employed public sector	-,080**	-,028	-,091**	-,039	,061**	,011	-,097**	-,025
Self-employed	,006	-,019	,016	-,006	,043	,049	-,019	-,037
Unemployed	-,041	,021	-,106**	-,041	,033	-,010	-,056*	-,002
Other	-,058	-,037	-,065	-,040	,135**	,102**	-,012	,023
Use of benefits	-,072**	-,013	-,110**	-,043	,037	-,015	-,051	,003
Ethnicity (nonNL-NL)	,018	,013	-,058**	-,074**	-,028	-,022	,023	,006
Religious denomination								
<i>None*</i>								
(Roman) Catholic	-	-,009	-	-,012	-	-,021	-	,001
Protestant	-	-,005	-	-,019	-	-,015	-	-,038
Evangelical	-	-,020	-	-,050	-	-,014	-	,002
Humanistic	-	,000	-	-,017	-	,011	-	-,029
Islamic	-	,012	-	-,033	-	-,037	-	-,026
Other	-	,010	-	-,012	-	,016	-	-,015
Religious practice	-	,018	-	-,014	-	-,063*	-	-,007
Political stance (L-R)	-	,069**	-	,075**	-	-,073**	-	,099**
Egalitarianism	-	-,085**	-	-,024	-	,072**	-	-,043
Authoritarianism	-	,258**	-	,235**	-	-,031	-	,094**
Deservingness general	-	-,151**	-	-,192**	-	,225**	-	,036
Deservingness immigrants	-	-,070**	-	-,092**	-	,175**	-	-,407**
Negative beliefs re. unemployed	-	,225**	-	,267**	-	-,012	-	,158**
Adjusted Rsquared	.020	.319	.044	.385	.020	.187	.032	.354

*: reference category

** : significant p <.01

The very modest role of the structural variables suggests that perceptions of welfare consequences are hardly related to people's personal interests in the welfare state. That is, as far as such interests would follow from social risk factors like people's income level, work status and educational level. This interpretation is enforced by the absence of effects from more direct interest indicators, like people's economic stress, use of social benefits, and being unemployed or not. However, two remarks seem warranted. Firstly, social risk factors and related personal interests in welfare benefits and services may have an indirect effect on consequence perceptions to the degree that they determine people's ideas and values reflected in our set of cultural variables. To check for this we have regressed separately our cultural variables on the set of structural variables and found indications for some such indirect effects (for reasons of space we do not present the complete tables), like

for instance: people working in the public sector and people with lesser financial means are more leftist; people who experience more economic stress, who are unemployed and those with lower education are more egalitarian; older people, and especially lower educated people are more authoritarian; people with greater benefit use and more economic stress regard welfare target groups, including immigrants, as more deserving; and, older people, unemployed people and people with lower education have less negative images of unemployed people. However, the totals of such effects add up to small proportions of explained variance of less than 10%. In other words, the indirect effects of risk factors on perceptions of welfare consequences, via people's values and beliefs, are small. Secondly, again, our findings may be typical for an encompassing welfare state as the Dutch one is, where large groups of people and their close relatives and friends are entitled to social benefits and services - in the past, now, or expectedly in future - which could make that perceptions of welfare interest do not vary that strongly among categories of the Dutch population. In a 1995 Dutch study we also found little or no effects of structural variables on people's welfare solidarity opinions (Van Oorschot, 2000), and the longitudinal welfare opinion data of the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau consistently show small effects from structural variables over a period of three decades (Becker, 2005). The finding is not particularly Dutch, though. Also Sihvo and Uusitalo conclude in their Finnish study that the differences in opinions on welfare consequences that they find to exist between population groups 'are in quantitative terms quite small' (Sihvo & Uusitalo, 1995;221). And a survey of welfare opinions in Denmark led to the same conclusion (Ploug, 1996). Typically, like The Netherlands, both Finland and Denmark have comprehensive welfare systems. In short, the main conclusion from table 3 is that among Dutch people perceptions of welfare consequences are hardly related to their structural positions, if at all. They are, however, related to other variables.

As for the cultural variables, table 3 shows, rather unexpectedly, that people's religious denomination and intensity of religious practice have no significant effects, not even on perceptions of moral consequences. Political stance, however, does have effects, which are in expected directions: leftist people are less pessimistic about the economic, moral and immigration consequences of the welfare state, and at the same time they are more optimistic on the positive social consequences, compared to more rightist people. As expected, we also see that egalitarian people are less critical about the economic consequences and more positive about the social consequences, while there is no effect of egalitarianism on perceptions of moral and immigration consequences. More authoritarian people, as expected, are more critical on the moral consequences, but the table 3 shows that they also are more critical on the economic and migration consequences. It seems, therefore, that authoritarian people tend to be more anti-welfarist generally, which would be in line with for instance Cozarelli et al. (2001), who found that authoritarian Americans are more inclined to attribute poverty to personal characteristics of the poor themselves in

stead of to external, social-structural factors. Such victim-blaming is often linked to an anti-welfare sentiment (Kluegel & Miyano, 1995). What becomes clear from table 3 is that, also as expected, people's perceptions of welfare consequences are strongly related to the variables that reflect their ideas on the specific target groups of welfare. Those who score lower on the general deservingness variable, which are people who are less generous in granting social protection rights to needy groups (like unemployed people, sick and disabled people, single parents, and social assistance claimants) are also those who are more pessimistic about the economic and moral consequences, than people who are more generous. At the same time they are less optimistic about the social consequences. People's ideas on the deservingness of immigrants also play a role, especially with regard to the perception of migration consequences. As expected, people who regard immigrants as less deserving, perceive a higher 'welfare magnetism' effect. The effects of negative images of unemployed people are quite strong. Negative images are associated with more negative perceptions of welfare consequences. Of course, one can question the causal direction as our regression model assumes it: that deservingness attitudes and beliefs about unemployed people influence perceptions of welfare consequences. One could also argue for a reversed causality where people's worries about the consequences of the welfare state lead to a more restraint position on granting rights to social protection and to stronger doubts on the trustworthiness of unemployed people. Another possibility could even be that both factors are not directly causally related, but in stead are mutually influenced by a broader underlying (pro- or anti-) welfarism attitude. Regrettably, our cross-sectional data do not allow exploring the causal relationship further, but it is an important point for future research.

6. Conclusions and discussion

What people believe to be the economic, moral and social consequences of the welfare state is a nearly neglected subject in studies on welfare state legitimacy. This is quite remarkable given that the welfare state is often criticized substantially for its (alleged) economic and moral consequences. Here we contributed to the field by offering a first description of people's perceptions of a series of welfare state consequences, and explorative analyses of some structural and cultural determinants of these perceptions. Data from a 2006 Dutch survey show that in the eyes of a large majority of the Dutch the positive social consequences of the welfare state outweigh the negative economic and moral consequences. Strikingly, structural variables, like age, income and educational level, which may indicate peoples' social risks and related personal interest in the provisions of the welfare state, play a minor role, if at all, compared to cultural variables. Most pessimistic about the economic and moral consequences, and least optimistic about the social consequences, are women, rightist people, authoritarian people, people who attribute less deservingness to

welfare target groups and who have more negative images of unemployed people. In addition, egalitarian people perceive more negative economic consequences and less positive social consequences.

Clearly, a single country analyses like ours, in an underdeveloped field of study, raises the question of the generalizability of results. We would not want to claim that our results could be generalized, over time nor over place, since there are no comparative studies as yet, which use a similar series of statements about economic, moral and social consequences. Even from a Dutch national perspective our results could be rather typical for the year 2006 in which the survey was conducted, compared to for instance the 1980s, when the Dutch welfare state was in a deep fiscal crisis, and unemployment rates were about three times as high as in 2006. It could be that people's perceptions of the economic consequences were much more negative then, than we have seen to be the case for 2006. It could also be that perceptions of the migration consequences were less pessimistic in the 1980s, because the issue of welfare magnetism and problems of the multi-cultural society were not that strongly on the Dutch socio-political agenda as they are nowadays. The point is that macro-level social factors of various kinds may affect the ideas people have about the consequences of the welfare state, and that one would need comparative data over time to analyse their influence. The same kind of argument holds when one adopts a cross-national perspective. Our findings may be typical Dutch. In the paper we already alluded to the possible influence of the fact that the Dutch welfare state is relatively comprehensive. Even after a period of serious restructuring, which set in in the 1980s, in a global and European comparative perspective it still covers a broad range of social risks and needs among large segments of the population. This may help in understanding that for most Dutch people the positive social consequences outweigh the negative economic and moral consequences. Comparative data from other countries, with smaller or higher degrees of 'welfare stateness', would be needed to show whether the size and type of the welfare state people live in affects their ideas about welfare state consequences.

Finally, we have claimed that welfare state legitimacy is multi-dimensional, since people may think differently about the various dimensions and aspects of the welfare state. We tend to doubt, therefore, that one single or composite indicator can capture welfare state legitimacy. Of course, this is also true for the indicator we studied here: people's perceptions of positive and negative consequences of the welfare state. Interesting for future study is to see how different indicators, regarding e.g. perceptions of the role of government, implementation practices, the costs, and actual outcomes of the welfare state, would relate to each other, and to perceptions of consequences. We would especially be interested to see whether there is empirical ground for a concept like 'welfarism', or its counterpart 'anti-welfarism', which is sometimes used in the literature to refer to a general and rather basic positive or negative attitude people may have to any welfare related issue. At some

points in the presentation and interpretation of our findings we have alluded to the possible existence of such an overall attitude dimension.

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