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Jørgen Goul Andersen

Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies
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Editor: Per H. Jensen
E-mail: perh@epa.aau.dk

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Welfare State Attitudes in Denmark**

Jørgen Goul Andersen

Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies,
Department of Political Science,
Aalborg University

Abstract

Support for the welfare state is usually taken for granted in Danish politics, but there is quite some ambivalence regarding principles of social rights. When speaking of principles, many citizens reveal a preference for targeted rather than universal entitlements. To assess whether this is really the case, we have tried to operationalise universalism across a wide range of cash benefit schemes and services. In relation to cash benefits, universalism is contrasted with means-testing. In relation to services, universalism is contrasted with user charges.

When assessing concrete welfare schemes, people usually support universalism. In this sense, universalism seems firmly rooted in public attitudes. It is demonstrated that support for the principle of means-testing currently pertains only to a small sample of cash benefits and services. Still, an ambivalence remains between abstract principles and concrete schemes. Arguably, this ambivalence reflects conflicting ideals where protection against poverty is a first priority. However, the ambivalence also leaves room for different framing of welfare issues. Appropriate framing, coupled with institutional changes, might install new dynamics that could pave a departure from universalism. In spite of broad support for universalism in practice, it should not be implied that universalism is bullet-proof against change.

1. Introduction

Empirical studies from the last two decades have almost invariably shown overwhelming support for the welfare state across European nations. Seemingly, resistance against cutbacks can be taken for granted - as assumed in the literature about welfare retrenchment (Pierson, 1994). This may seem surprising in light of the emphasis on “legitimacy crisis” of welfare states that was so prevalent during the 1970s and the 1980s. However, normative and historical institutionalist perspectives give us strong theoretical reasons to expect a status quo bias in attitudes towards principles underlying welfare states: Institutions form perceptions of what is “natural” and “just”¹, and structure preferences and behaviour.

Universalism is the foundation of the Nordic welfare states. As such it is firmly rooted in and backed by institutions. Consequently, one might expect very strong support among citizens for the principle of universalism. This article examines to what extent this is still the case in the Danish welfare state. As a by-product, the operationalisation can be considered a contribution towards the clarification of the concept of universalism.

There might be reasons to expect the support for universalism to be on the wane. Targeting welfare on the poor was widely recommended by economic think tanks and organizations like the World Bank (1990) during the 1990s. It is beyond doubt that increased targeting has been an important trend of welfare reforms in several Anglo Saxon welfare states (Spicker, 2011). It has even been suggested that targeting is a common denominator of welfare reforms across welfare models (Gilbert, 2002). As regards the Scandinavian countries, however, this would seem to be something of an overstatement. In general, outside the Anglo Saxon world the evidence is mixed (Jensen, 2004; Whiteford, 2007).

Even though the Scandinavian welfare states have been reluctant to break with universalism, the principle of universalism has not gone completely unchallenged. In accordance with the notion of incremental but transformative change (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Goul Andersen, 2007), de-universalization may take place indirectly by changing the composition of programmes or layers. It may even happen through changes in the tax system, for instance by eliminating tax deduction for contributions to voluntary unemployment insurance. Without formally changing the rules of the scheme, lower tax deduction would increase the element of insurance and push back the economic responsibility of the state (Goul Andersen, forthcoming). In this way, the universalism of the Danish and Swedish welfare states have been affected indirectly, and more than it appears at first glance, by a range of policy shifts, not least as an effect of labour market and tax reforms (Dølvik et al., 2011; Sjöberg, 2011; Goul Andersen, 2011a). In Denmark duration of unemployment benefits was halved in 2010, and volun-

¹ The theoretical underpinnings were different in Pierson’s (1994) argument as it rested less on values and more on a rational choice notion of vested interests of welfare constituencies. It also implied a standard notion of asymmetry: It makes sense for constituencies to mobilize as benefits are concentrated whereas costs are dispersed and do not create incentives to mobilize (e.g. Kristensen, 1987).

tary early retirement was scheduled to be almost abolished according to an agreement in May 2011.² Although each programme remained as universal as previously, the reforms implied increasing reliance on means-testing, by transferring considerable numbers of long-term unemployed to means-tested social assistance and elderly workers from an early retirement allowance to a means-tested disability pension –in both instances those transferred between schemes may lose all support.³ An explosion in supplementary private health care insurance (Møller Petersen, 2007; Dejgaard, 2011) might also be interpreted as a move in the same direction. Formally speaking, this also holds for the Danish multipillar pension system with its fully funded, defined contribution pensions - typically decided in collective wage agreements - as the backbone.

These measures all affect universalism indirectly, and interpreting private health care insurance and private pensions as de-universalization may be open to discussion (see section 2). At any rate, policy reforms with implications for universalism are rarely framed in terms of underlying principles. In Denmark, however, the very idea of universalism as a principle of social policy has come under attack as the alternative principle of targeting welfare to the poor is regularly aired by Conservative and Liberal politicians. For instance, on the Conservative Party website (2011) their social policy was described under the heading “A targeted social effort” which was introduced by the following declaration of principles: “We believe that the social efforts should be targeted to those most in need. Hence, we work to target our benefits so that the help is granted to those in need”.⁴ Further, the introduction under the heading “Reforms” was concluded by the sentence “The community should help those in need – not those who can provide for themselves”.⁵

At the time of writing, these ideas have been elaborated only at the level of general principles, not in terms of specific measures. Yet there is nothing about the ideas themselves that precludes their applications to concrete issues. In the present context of economic decline, which is rather severe even by comparative standards (Goul Andersen, 2011b; 2011c), we simply do not know how firmly rooted the principle of universalism is. Even classical institutionalism acknowledges that economic shocks and mobilization of crisis awareness may facilitate retrenchment with consent (Schmidt, 2002; Goul Andersen, 2010). In Denmark, significant reforms of unemployment insurance and early retirement in 2010 and 2011 were carried out with surprisingly little public outcry. These reforms were not discussed in terms of universal-

² As the 2011 agreement changed an earlier agreement between a larger group of parties, the formal decision was postponed until after the 2011 election, in accordance with a parliamentary tradition of granting veto right to all partners except if the annulment of the previous agreement is announced before an election.

³ In Denmark, means-testing of social assistance is much more strict than for disability pension.

⁴ <http://www.konservative.dk/Politik/Socialpolitik/Socialpolitik>. (Dated 25.March 2011; read 30. Aug.2011). In Danish the text reads ”En målrettet social indsats. Vi er af den opfattelse, at den sociale indsats bør målrettes de personer, der har mest brug for det. Derfor arbejder vi for at målrette vores ydelser, så hjælpen tilfalder dem, der har et behov.”

⁵ www.konservative.dk/Fokusområder/Reformer. Read 30.Aug.2011. In Danish the text reads: “Fællesskabet skal hjælpe dem, der har behov for hjælp – ikke dem der godt kan forsørge sig selv.”

ism; in fact they might be described as covert de-universalisation. However, if targeting of social protection enjoys public support, or if there are ambiguities in the support for universalism, further changes would be facilitated.

The current article seeks to assess to what extent Danes - living in a predominantly universal welfare state - adhere to the principles of universalism. Is there support for the principle of targeting or selectivism usually associated with a liberal or residual welfare model? Is there consistency between attitudes to universalism across policy programmes, or are there ambiguities in values that might be exploited to overcome resistance to change? The measures below will cover both general principles and concrete policy measures, and they will also include social services, not just cash benefits.

It is often pointed out that the concept of universalism is complex and vague (Goul Andersen, 1999; Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). Operationalizations in this article will reveal why universalism is a difficult concept, but discussions about operational measures is also an important means through which the concept can be clarified.

The article is structured as follows: First, the concept of universalism and its possible operationalizations are discussed. In addition to definitions, the following section also locates principles in a broader context of changing attitudes towards social policy. In section three, the data are presented alongside discussion of concrete operationalisations. This is followed by a presentation of the main findings from a 2000 (nation-wide, representative) survey, partially replicated in 2008. In the penultimate section social and political determinants of attitudes towards universalism are analysed. Finally, in the concluding section the findings are summarized and their implications for welfare state change are discussed.

2. Universalism and a Conceptual Map of Social Policy Attitudes

At least in a Scandinavian context, a decline of public support for the welfare state rarely reflects erosion of solidarity if solidarity means that people are committed to pay for the security and welfare of others (Goul Andersen, 2008). Even in the Danish 1973 tax revolt election, support for social welfare only seems to have changed at the margins. Rather, attitudes to the welfare state occasionally turn negative because of bad performance: Suspicions of abuse, inefficiency or unsustainable expenditures. All of these issues were questioned in 1973.⁶

Even though solidarity is not contested, however, there may be quite ambiguous perceptions of what it really *means*. There are different principles of solidarity, universalism being one of them, targeted support another. Before specifying this, however, we briefly present an overarching conceptual map of welfare state attitudes, aimed at analysing macro-level change.

Until quite recently, research on attitudes to welfare and social policy has focussed on individual level variations. Macro level perspectives have been gaining weight over the last decade or so with greater availability of comparative cross-national data and the accumulation of time series (e.g. Aalberg, 2003; Svallfors, 2006; Svallfors, ed., 2007; Kumlin, 2007; Mau & Veghte, eds., 2007; Ervasti et al., ed., 2008; Svallfors, 2010). It is useful to begin with a macro level conceptual map (Goul Andersen, 2008)⁷ if we want to address the question of potentials for change, even though the current study is based on microdata from a single country.

The model in figure 1 distinguishes between support for the welfare state (“welfare solidarity”) on the one hand, and trust in the performance of the welfare system on the other. As mentioned above, low or declining support for welfare typically results from perceived problems of performance. We have used the labels reciprocity, efficiency and sustainability. Briefly, *reciprocity* includes (1) perceived fairness in the distribution of the tax burden, (2) transparency and certainty that everyone is treated the same way, and (3) perception of fraud, abuse or corruption. All three aspects refer to prisoner’s dilemma problems: Even people with a strong sense of solidarity will only cooperate and contribute if they are confident that everyone else will do the same. The second problem is perceived *efficiency*. Do welfare programs achieve their goals? Do citizens get ‘value for money’? Even people with a strong sense of solidarity will only support a system that is considered reasonably efficient. Finally, there is *economic*

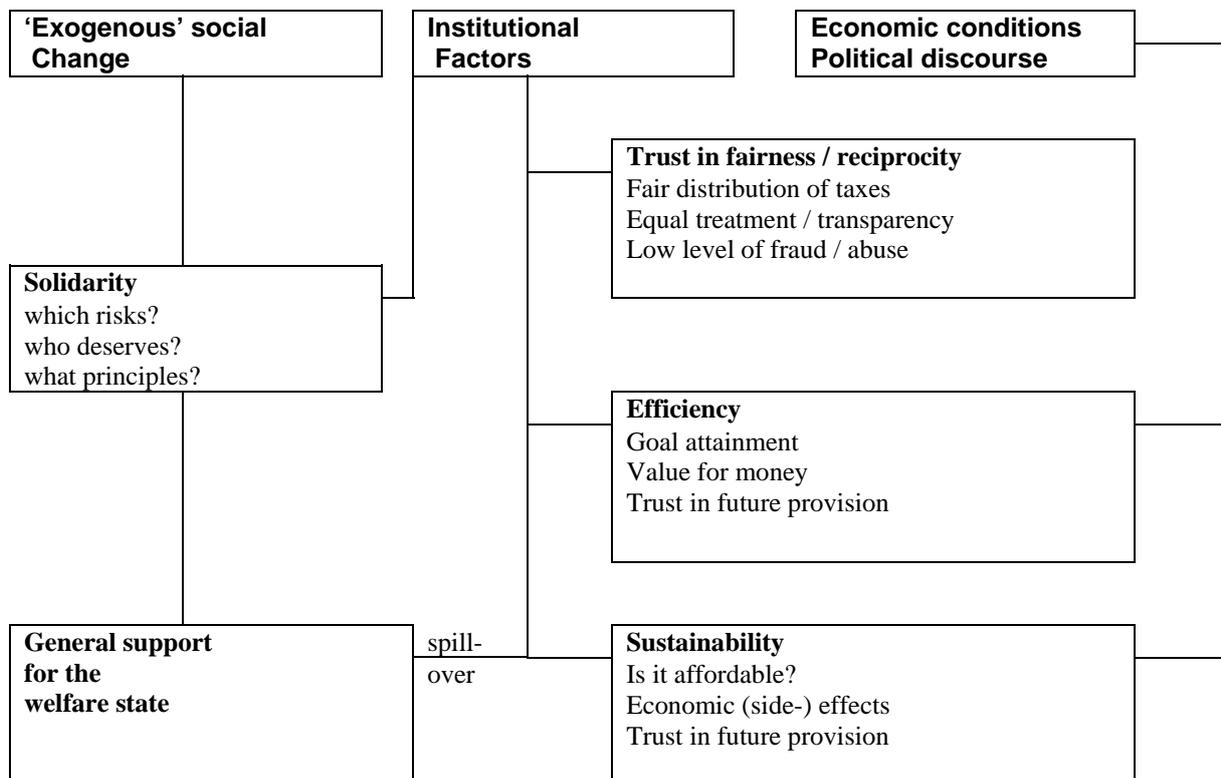
⁶ Modern Danish history only contains this single instance of major welfare backlash when the anti-tax Progress Party received 15.9 per cent of the votes in its first election. Politicians of the “established” parties lamented the loss of solidarity in 1973. But the problem was much more a loss of *confidence* in the tax/welfare system. When the party leader M. Glistrup revealed that he paid no income tax at all, the legitimacy of the tax system disappeared over night. According to the 1973 election survey the tax rebellion was accompanied by the highest support ever measured for increasing taxes for high incomes. The survey also revealed the highest perception of social fraud ever measured. To complete the picture, there was concurrently much discussion about a government report warning against uncontrollable public sector growth. This added up to a “perfect storm” of distrust, but support for welfare soon recovered (Goul Andersen, 2008).

⁷ Inspired e.g. by Bo Rothstein’s (1998) distinction between ‘substantial’ and ‘procedural’ justice, and by Svallfors’ (1989) distinction between dimensions of attitudes (notably the “abuse dimension”).

sustainability. People will only support welfare schemes that are considered sustainable – vis-a-vis ageing, global competition or other ”challenges”. Whether scepticism prevails depends not only on the ”objective” problems, but also on the construction of ”problems” by political actors. The optimal political strategy for opponents of the welfare state is to convince voters that the welfare state suffers from performance problems.

Economic conditions as well as political discourse must be supposed to be particularly important for perceived efficiency and economic sustainability (e.g. in relation to ageing or other problems). Such problems have to be defined and put on the agenda. Institutional variables are important for all three aspects, but logically, it should be related in particular to reciprocity. For instance, universalism is transparent and provides fewer opportunities for abuse than means-tested systems. An efficient and fair tax system is also a basic precondition of acceptable performance.

Figure 1. A Macro-Level Model of Support for the Welfare State



Solidarity side of welfare:
 Few legitimacy problems
 But uncertainty about principles of solidarity

Performance side of welfare:
 Many potential legitimacy problems

While norms of solidarity tend to be quite strong in most societies, there may be uncertainty as to what solidarity exactly means with regards to at least three issues: Which risks should be covered – and what is outside the realm of public responsibility? Which recipients are consid-

ered deserving (van Oorschot, 2006)? And what principles should guide eligibility and entitlements? The issue of universalism belongs to the last category of questions.

How should we understand universalism? At minimum it entails social rights rather than discretionary support.⁸ Fundamentally, universalism means that all citizens are eligible, i.e. that eligibility rests on residence/citizenship rather than on contribution and/or employment as in the corporatist model. Next, as this does not distinguish between universalism and residualism, we have to add to the *entitlement* criterion that means-testing is absent or moderate (Goul Andersen, 1999). However, means-testing may refer to three different situations: (1) targeting the poor; (2) excluding the rich; or (3) including everybody, but target the poor through supplements on top of what everyone gets. The third possibility is also referred to as "targeting within universalism" (Skocpol, 1991), or as "positive selectivism" (Thompson & Hoggett, 1996).

Finally, we have to add the entitlement criterion that benefits are *adequate*. A minimalist replacement rate providing only poverty protection or less cannot be considered universalist except in a very narrow formal sense. If private supplements are necessary to maintain a decent standard of living, we would hardly speak of universalist arrangements.⁹

There are further complexities in modern welfare states. First, we face a "mixed economy of welfare" where one has to look at the *ensemble* of public and "private" schemes (including those negotiated between the social partners).¹⁰ Sometimes the public component (as in the Danish pension system, cf. Goul Andersen, 2011d) appears residual if seen in isolation whereas the *ensemble* looks entirely different. This may be handled by focussing on *outcomes* and trying to determine a mixed-economy-of-welfare equivalent of universalism in the classical sense (Goul Andersen, 2007). However, this affects only one programme in this study where well-defined social rights and entitlements can be taken for granted. Hence, the basic operational question below in relation to cash benefits simply is whether they should be means-tested or not.

The second problem is that the concept of universalism is seldom applied to services, which have become the economically and politically most important part of the welfare state, especially in Scandinavia. In principle, we can follow the same definitions as we make for cash benefits (needless to say, people receive services only if they fulfill *professional* criteria like being in need of hospital treatment). However, the challenge is to identify what constitutes the

⁸ In the early history of social policy, eligibility and entitlements were highly discretionary. A legacy remains in some social assistance schemes. However, in Nordic social policy discretion has also served to provide extraordinary support in complex instances, equivalent to the "targeting within universalism" below.

⁹ It may be difficult to define *precisely* what constitutes *adequate* replacement, but this does not constitute a problem for the analysis to follow.

¹⁰ As regards non-public schemes, there is an important difference between completely private and various sorts of collective schemes.

opposite of universalism.¹¹ Operationally, this can be approached as a question of user charges. Should people receive services for free/for a low charge, or should user charges be introduced/be raised to a higher level? And if so, should user charges be means-tested or apply to everybody? With the latter question we face the problem whether (higher) user charges to everybody is *more* universal than means-tested user charges. By themselves both user charges and means-testing move us away from universalism, But what constitutes “more universalism” when they are applied together? This is discussed further in section 4. Although the present analysis is focussed on the user charges or not dichotomy, a full specification is needed in order to provide respondents with an exhaustive list of policy alternatives.

3. Data and operationalisation of universalism

The analysis is based on two nation-wide representative surveys of welfare state attitudes. The key survey was conducted as face-to-face interviews (CAPI) in 2000. Some of the questions were replicated in a 2008 survey. This survey was conducted as a mail questionnaire, supplemented by telephone calls to non-respondents. The number of respondents was 1235 and 1464, respectively.¹²¹³

As regards operationalisation of universalism vs. targeting/residualism, we began by asking a few questions about *general principles*, e.g.

How just or unjust is it ... to target welfare support to the most poor rather than giving to everybody?
(scale from 0 to 10)

The juxtaposition of targeting with universalism is comprehensible to most respondents. After all, there is a historical legacy, and some means-tested schemes remain a part of the Scandinavian welfare system. Further, arguments about targeting surface regularly in the public sphere. We intended to contrast universalism with the corporatist principle of mandatory so-

¹¹ A particular issue is whether supplementary private health insurances should be considered a break with universalism. In Denmark, employer-paid health insurances have become widespread. However, as insurances are only tax deductible if they apply to *all* employees, they are universal, at least *within* the company. Further, except for services at the margins of genuine medical treatment, public health care gives access to the same treatment, even with a treatment guarantee of (currently) one month. Health insurance allows people to jump a few days or weeks forward in the queue, but in a Scandinavian context, it does not necessarily represent a significant break with universalism *per se*. As a side effect, however, it may involve over-treatment.

¹² Response rates were 67 and 49 per cent, respectively (corrected for missing address and other forms of “neutral” non-response, the figures were somewhat higher). The 2000 survey was financed by the 2000 Foundation and conducted by Mandag Morgen in cooperation with the author. The 2008 survey was financed by the Danish Research Council as part of a project about Danish welfare architecture, directed by the author. Data were collected by AC Nielsen AIM and Danish National Institute of Social Research, respectively.

¹³ Marginal distributions on the background variables and on the dependent variables did not indicate sensitivity to differences in response rates or data collection methods. Questions included from Danish Election studies also revealed no significant differences (Goul Andersen, 2008).

cial insurance but had to give up on that as such questions were too difficult due to the absence of a historical record and public discussions.¹⁴

We also asked about concrete welfare programmes. We have tried to specify what targeting vs. universalism means in different fields of social welfare. With regards to cash benefits, we asked

“Now I have a question whether social benefits like people’s pension, unemployment benefits etc. should be a right for everybody or only be granted according to economic need so that the benefit lapses for people who can manage on their own (say, because of their spouse’s income)... When it comes to <social benefit in question>, do you think this should be a right for everybody, or should it only be given according to economic need?

1. right for everybody
2. only according to economic need
3. [spontaneously] should not be given to anybody
7. [spontaneously] don’t know about benefit
8. don’t know”¹⁵

Specifying explicitly that spouse’s income might affect people’s entitlements may cause a slight overestimation of support for universalism. In a tax/welfare system where the individual is typically the basic unit, spouse’s income may be the least legitimate reason for deductions. Still, the wording is realistic, and it clarifies the meaning of the question.

As already mentioned, the equivalent question about universalism as regards services is about user charges. Having identical measures for a series of services was deemed preferable, though there is a case to be made for asking about increase or decrease for some services (like child care) for which user payments are already being charged. The question was phrased as follows:

“Now we have a question whether public services should be free for everybody, or whether there should be user charges, perhaps exempting economically weak groups for payment (showcard): What is your opinion regarding ... [service mentioned] ... – should it be free for everybody; partly financed by user charges, but free for economically weak groups; partly financed by user charges for everybody; or full user charges for everybody”

As indicated, the response categories are:

1. free for everybody
2. partly financed by user charges, but free for economically weak groups
3. partly financed by user charges for everybody
4. full payment of costs
5. [spontaneously] not a public task as all.
(missing values as above)

This question was posed for ten public services. The analysis focuses on whether people are for or against user charges. It can be argued that because any payment is a deviation from

¹⁴ We experimented with this in the 2008 pilot, but found that this was too far away from respondents’ frame of reference, and only a couple of questions asked for the purpose of cross-national comparability remained. By 2011 the idea temporarily entered the public sphere via discussions about immigration policy.

¹⁵ Categories 3 and 7 only appeared rarely and were collapsed with 2 and 8, respectively.

universalism, means tested user fees is closer to universalism than are uniform payments. Whether this matches public perceptions is examined below.

In sum, the surveys study people's attitudes towards general principles, and towards some of the most important cash benefits and social services (health care, elderly care, child care, education etc.). Do people adhere to universalist principles or to targeting? Do they do so both in principle as well as in terms of specific programmes? What does it mean if abstract and specific questions lead to different conclusions? Is it a matter of ambivalence or a measurement problem? Regarding measurement, the conventional wisdom is that concrete questions are more reliable than abstract ones – in particular for low-saliency issues that are only sporadically discussed. However, inconsistency may also express genuine ambivalence that is not reduced with higher saliency. Instead reactions may depend on how political actors frame the issue.

4. Support for universalism or targeting

4.1. Support for targeting as a principle

First, people were asked about the principle of targeting welfare benefits (table 1). Would it be just to target welfare support to those most in need, instead of providing it to everybody? It turns out that only 15 per cent answer in favour of universalism whereas 69 per cent support targeting. This indicates a resonance for arguments for targeting and a potential for critique of universalism in these terms. The question then becomes the extent to which this is the case.

A little later in the same questionnaire we asked about the basic amount of state pensions, using the same format. The responses indicate that the potential for targeting may be small on concrete issues. 84 per cent felt that the basic state pension should be paid to everybody. Only 10 per cent found universalism unjust in this case.¹⁶

¹⁶ The question is a bit “tricky” since basic pension is an instance of increased “targeting within universalism”. Since 1994 the “basic amount” only constitutes one half of the maximum basic pension; the other half (so-called “pension supplement”) is means-tested by income (Goul Andersen, 2011d; even the basic amount is means-tested, but only against *high* income from *employment*). Originally, the supplement was very small and given to a huge majority. As funded pensions mature, more people will not receive the full pension supplement.

Table 1. How just is universalism vs. targeting to the poor? 2000. (N=1235).

How just or unjust is it ..	Very unjust 0-2	Rather unjust 3-4	neutral 5	Rather just 6-7	Very just 8-10	Average Score 0-10
Targeting welfare support to the most poor rather than giving to everybody	8	7	16	21	48	6.89
That all Danes aged more than 67 receive the basic amount of the state pension ("people's pension")	6	4	6	9	75	8.30

Surprisingly, the two variables are completely uncorrelated ($r = -.02$). This might reflect problems of measurement. However, as we find a high correlation between the attitudes to pensions as measured in table 1 and table 2 ($r = .45$), this measurement at least seems reliable. Rather, the figures reflect ambivalence: Either the implication of the general principle is not perfectly clear, or the principle does not include pensions. This is confirmed by responses to the more specific questions reported below, which confirm a gap between declared principles and people's attitudes toward specific programmes. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the attitudes towards "principles" are simply a measurement of non-attitudes.¹⁷

4.2. Universal cash benefits

We asked whether a large number of cash benefits should be given to everybody, or only to those in need. Although reference to spouse's income might exaggerate resistance to means testing a little bit, findings in table 2 suggest that general principles and specific attitudes are two different worlds. According to three quarters of the respondents people should have universal rights to pensions (basic amount), unemployment benefits, and early retirement allowance (as they currently do). Two of these questions were repeated in the 2008 survey with almost identical results. There is also a clear majority (two-thirds) against means testing in the case of disability pension (which is currently not completely universal in Denmark).

¹⁷ To take a parallel instance, it has often been documented in Denmark that people want stronger sentences for crime. Thus was also confirmed in a survey of attitudes to law compliance and law enforcement (Goul Andersen, 1998). However, a little later in the survey the same people were asked about appropriate sentences in a number of specific cases, and almost invariably a majority preferred milder sentences that would be given by the courts (according to a panel of judges). The latter answers could be considered the "true" indication of what people *really* wanted. This would be an over-simplification, however, as people were actually politically supportive of claims for stronger sentences, to the detriment of the incumbent centre-left government (Borre, 2003).

Table 2. *Universalism of Cash Benefits. Should benefits be a right for everybody or be given only according to economic need?*

		Right for everybody	Only according to economic need	Don't know	PDI
Pensions: Basic amount	2000	78	21	1	57
	2008	78	19	3	59
Unemployment benefits	2000	75	24	1	51
	2008	74	22	4	52
Early retirement allowance	2000	73	25	2	48
Students' benefits	2000	70	30	0	40
	2008	74	23	3	51
Disability pension	2000	67	32	1	35
Rebates for pens., such as coll. transp.	2000	55	44	1	11
Social assistance	2000	44	55	1	-11
Child benefits	2000	34	64	2	-30
	2008	39	58	3	-19
"Now there is a question regarding whether social benefits like people's pension, unemployment benefits etc. should be a right for everybody or only be granted according to economic need so that the benefit lapses for people who can manage on their own (for instance because of spouse's income)"					

Universal students' benefits are not disputed, either. This is remarkable because students' benefits were means tested against the incomes of parents until the 1980s. Moreover, in accordance with the relative recency of universal students' benefits we find a "maturation effect": The proportion preferring means-testing fell from 30 per cent in 2000 to 23 per cent in 2008.

Danish economists have sometimes questioned universalism, in particular universal students' benefits (Velfærdskommissionen, 2006), yet universalism appears unassailable; it would seem politically suicidal to propose targeting in the programmes reviewed so far. Benefits in terms of discount prices for pensioners are also accepted by a majority, though a smaller one (55 per cent). The question refers to collective transportation which is the most important example of such discount prices for all pensioners, regardless of income.

Social assistance, by contrast, has always been means tested, and much more strictly so than other benefits as it is tested not only against income (including spouse's income), but also against property. Although the majority accepts the status quo, it is revealing that a sizable minority (44 per cent) advocates universal social assistance.¹⁸

The results presented here show that support for universalism depends on whether it is formulated at the level of specific programmes or as a general principle. There is little support for universalism as a general principle while the opposite holds for nearly all questions

¹⁸ It would be easy to construct an argument for the minority position: Individualised social assistance would appear a logical completion of universalism. Working age people are supposed to work or to study if possible. Otherwise they should have a right *as individuals* to receive an income replacement from the state. Moreover, individualised assistance reduces moral hazard, and much control could be avoided. However, as such arguments have hardly been mentioned in the public sphere for decades, the answers provided in the survey are even more remarkable.

regarding specific programmes. Only in the case of child benefits do we find a break with the status quo in favour of targeted support. A clear majority favoured the means-testing of child benefits in both 2000 and 2008.

Universal child benefits were (re-)introduced in Denmark in the mid-1980s (partly as a compensation for a reduction in the tax deduction granted to homeowners on the basis of interest payments).¹⁹ Tax deductions for children had constituted a functional equivalent until 1971.²⁰ In the years between there were various sorts of means-tested child benefits. Regardless of public opinion, though, it is unlikely that political decision makers will reintroduce targeting. The reason is that targeting child benefits would involve higher composite marginal taxes for families with children, whereas the emphasis in tax policy over the last 25 years has been on reducing marginal taxes in order to stimulate labour supply. Raising the marginal taxes for this large prime age workforce would be particularly counterproductive. In addition, governments in Europe are interested in maintaining or improving fertility rates.²¹

Table 3. Association between attitudes towards targeting of benefits and towards general principle and pensions. 2000. Pearson correlations.

	targeting in general just/unjust (0-10)	maintenance of state pensions for all just/unjust (0-10)
Pensions: Basic amount	.13**	-.45**
Unemployment benefits	.03	-.19**
Early retirement allowance	.03	-.16**
Students' benefits	.09**	-.17**
Disability pension	.10**	-.22**
Discount for pensioners	.12**	-.24**
Social assistance	.12**	-.17**
Child benefits	.15**	-.15**

Whereas the items above exhibit fairly high intercorrelations, correlations with attitudes towards targeting in principle are low. In two instances the correlations are not even statistically significant (see table 3). All measures, with the exception of child benefits, correlate more strongly with attitudes towards universal pensions than with attitudes towards targeting as a principle. This should not be taken as an indication that the latter item is irrelevant or that it measures a non-attitude. There may be a potential for linking the general principle to concrete reform proposals.

¹⁹ It should be noticed, however, that provision of child care with relatively low user charges constitutes the most important form of supporting families with children in the Nordic countries. Moreover, as regards user charges there is a considerable discount for siblings.

²⁰ As tax value of deductions was largest for high incomes, this was a sort of "inverted" targeting. From the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s, child benefits were means tested according to a complex "social income" formula introduced by the Social Democrats.

²¹ Some countries (notably Japan) not only face ageing, but serious population decline. Ironically, from an economic perspective, supporting middle class fertility looks particularly attractive. Avoiding child poverty is certainly an "investment", but middle class children are "profitable" as the incidence of social problems is smaller, and educational and occupational attainments are better.

Table 4. Factor analysis of attitudes to specific targeting questions, maintaining basic pensions for all, and targeting welfare to the poor.

	Factor analysis # 1	Factor analysis # 2	Factor analysis # 3 (rotated)	
	Factor 1	Factor 1	Factor 1	Factor 2
Eigenvalue	2.92	3.12	3.14	1.08
Pensions: basic amount	.65	.69	.64	.27
Unemployment benefits	.62	.61	.67	
Early retirement allowance	.69	.67	.67	
Students' benefits	.58	.56	.47	.31
Disability pension	.70	.68	.66	
Discount for pensioners	.49	.48	.31	.48
Social assistance	.59	.56	.57	
Child benefits	.48	.47	.26	.57
Maintaining basic pension for all	.	-.52	-.55	
Target welfare to the poor	.	.		.81

Variamax rotation in analysis # 3. Rotation converged in 3 iterations. Only scores > .20 presented.

More specifically, a factor analysis may indicate what people have in mind when they declare themselves in favour of targeting. As revealed by the last two columns in table 4 (analysis 3), the first two questions (targeting welfare to the poor and maintaining basic pensions for all) belong to different dimensions. All questions regarding specific schemes (analysis 1) may be summarized by one factor, and adding the universal pension question (analysis 2) leaves us with a nearly identical solution. If we include support for targeting as a principle, however, we obtain a two-factor solution. The high factor loading for this question indicates that the factor is mainly made up by it, though two other questions exhibit a higher score on the second dimension than on the first. These questions are child benefits and discounts for pensioners. In addition, the students' benefits question loads to some extent on the second factor.

In other words, it appears that people's positive attitude towards targeting as a principle only refers to a few specific schemes, i.e. child benefits, discounts for pensioners, and to a lesser extent to student benefits. In Denmark these are indeed the issues where the possibility of targeting has been raised most frequently. Targeting students' benefits was proposed by the government's Welfare Commission (2006), and abolishing universal basic pensions or discounts for pensioners has occasionally been aired by political youth organizations. Yet there remains a discrepancy between the apparent adherence to targeting as a principle and support for universalism regarding specific programmes. As regards the latter, universalism seems firmly grounded in public attitudes. Support for targeting as a principle is also quite strong, but currently it is only linked to a very small number of concrete programmes.

In short, even though support for the principle of targeting is strong, it seems to have a very narrow reference in practice. Still, one should not completely rule out the possibility that there might be a potential in the future for extending the linkage by framing more issues in terms of principles.

4.3. Universal services?

User fees are the equivalent of targeting when it comes to services. Universalism in services varies across two sub-dimensions: 1) The size of the fees (from no payment at all to user charges covering all costs) and 2) if the fees are differentiated for different service users (from means tested to uniform charges). This makes it difficult to provide a clear ranking according to degree of universalism. Service without payment is the universalist ideal. Full user charges covering all costs is not only far away from universalism but even beyond targeting as there is no support even for the poor. Universal charges covering a small part of the costs (as in child care) could be considered quasi-universal. It is debatable whether user fees are more or less universal if they are means-tested. Means testing can be seen as the equivalent to targeting, but it could also be viewed as approaching universalism as it reduces average user payment and makes the service in question available to more people. This is a matter of definition that will not be settled here. The important question for the present analysis is how this is seen by ordinary citizens.

It is hardly surprising that we also find a widespread support for universalism when it comes to services, along with a conditional status quo bias (table 5). Nearly all education in Denmark is provided free of any charges. User fees for basic education remain unthinkable,²² but in 2008 a minority of about one third declare themselves in favour of introducing some means tested user charges in this field. Denmark also has a strong tradition of public libraries lending out books for free, yet 40 per cent favour user charges here. Free access to arts and culture generally enjoys less support. Most significantly, 66 per cent of the population favour full user payment for visits to the Royal Theatre.

²² Except for private schools, which are attended by some 15 per cent of the pupils. They are financed mainly through public support, but also by small to modest user payments. In Denmark, private schools is not an upper class phenomenon but originated in 19th Century countermovements.

Table 5. Universalism or user charges in services. 2000 and 2008. Percentages.

		free for everybody	partly user charges, means-tested	partly user charges, uniform	full user charges for everybody*)	don't know
School education	2000	96	3	1	0	0
	2008	91	5	3	0	1
University education	2000	71	20	6	2	1
	2008	66	19	12	1	2
Library loans	2000	60	17	17	6	0
Visit in Royal Theatre	2000	2	6	26	66	0
Hospital treatment	2000	91	8	1	0	0
	2008	91	5	2	0	2
Consultation at GP	2000	77	18	4	1	0
	2008	80	12	7	0	1
Meals at hospitals	2008	80	12	6	1	1
Prescribed medicine	2000	21	57	21	1	0
Dental care	2000	24	42	30	4	0
	2008	38	31	27	3	1
Home help for pensioners	2000	45	51	4	0	0
Home help: practical help	2008	42	40	14	2	2
Home help: personal care	2008	61	28	8	1	2
Child care	2000	15	51	30	4	0
	2008	24	42	30	2	2

*) Including "no public engagement at all".

Q: "Now we have a question whether public services should be free for everybody, or whether there should be user charges, perhaps exempting economically weak groups for payment (showcard): What is your opinion regarding ...[service mentioned]... – should it be free for everybody; partly financed by user charges, but free for economically weak groups; partly financed by user charges for everybody; or full user charges for everybody"

Fees for hospital treatments appear out of the question and only 20 per cent would accept some kind of payment for consultation with a general practitioner. Payments for meals at hospitals are also rejected by 80 per cent of respondents. On the other hand, charges for prescribed medicine are quite high in Denmark. This situation appears to be widely accepted, with a majority favouring means tested payments. Dental care is another service for which public support is not very generous (except for children). This is a frequent topic in public discussions and here we find a significant turn towards support for free dental care from 2000 to 2008 (from 24 to 38 per cent) while some 30 per cent favour means-tested fees.

Universal home help free of charge was implemented in Denmark in 1993. In contrast to students' benefits, this programme has always been controversial. In 2000, 45 per cent supported universalism whereas 55 per cent favoured user fees. In 2008 we asked separate questions for "practical help" (cleaning etc.) and for "personal care". The proportion in favour of the universal provision of the former was only 42 per cent compared to 61 per cent for the latter. As in the field of social transfers, universal services are uncontroversial, except for a few and rather marginal services.

Still, some services have become less universal than previously. Because of budget cuts practical home help has become rather inadequate, and thereby less “universal” according to the definition here.²³ In childcare, user charges have covered up to about 25-33 per cent of costs during the period in question, with discount for siblings and for poor families. It would have been useful to have included questions about the size of fees since free child care is seldom proposed by anybody. None the less, the proportion supporting free childcare increased from 15 to 24 per cent from 2000 to 2008. We are unable to tell whether current user charges are considered too high, but our data seem to indicate support for the status quo in broad institutional terms.

To conclude, little support was found for introducing means testing in universal social policy schemes, with the exception of home help for pensioners where opinions are divided. More specifically, this pertains only to practical assistance, which account for only a small proportion of expenditures. On the other hand, a majority of respondents accept user charges where these are currently found, i.e. in childcare, dental care, and for medicine. By 2008, support for free childcare and free dental care had increased. Over the same period there was a small decline in support for free university education. Overall, however, a large majority supports the status quo.

4.4. Welfare for the poor = poor welfare?

The classical social policy argument in favour of universalism and against targeting, originally put forward by Richard Titmuss, is that “welfare for the poor” inevitably ends up with “poor welfare”. Not surprisingly, those in favour of targeting often claim that they are not against welfare spending but only want to concentrate the effort which could even provide better support for people “really” in need. Now, Titmuss does not argue that “poor welfare” is simply attributable to attitudes. A poor outcome may be unintentional, attributable to stigmatization, coalition building and resources. However, a strategy of targeting welfare has sometimes been pursued even by Social Democratic governments (to some extent also by the Danish government around 1980), and it would be relevant to know to what extent support for total welfare spending differ between those favoring targeted and universal welfare.

Regarding services, positive correlations are found in our data between preference for means-tested user charges and support for the principle of means-testing in general. For all services except for university education, the highest support for means testing as a principle is found among the respondents choosing the response alternative “partly financed by user charges, but free for economically weak groups”. The differences are significant in all instances but two.

²³ By 2005, personal care was provided for 55 per cent of recipients, but required 84 per cent of resources, c.f. Agger Nielsen & Goul Andersen, 2006: 112-118). From 1999-2005 municipalities cut resources for practical help by 32 per cent. Accordingly, the share of all resources declined from 26 to 16 per cent.

We find a similar association with attitudes to targeting of specific cash benefits, as measured by the number of answers for targeting (c.f. table 2). The associations (eta coefficients) for individual services are presented in table 6. University education is omitted as the form of association is different.

Regarding support for targeting in principle, we find the strongest associations with library use, hospital treatment, prescribed medicine, and home help. It may be conjectured that this small sample of services constitutes the frame of reference for the question about universalism and targeting as principles, supplementing the frame of reference regarding cash benefits above. When it comes to hospital treatment, however, the association rests upon only a few respondents since nearly everybody supports free treatment. The answers for prescribed medicine are largely consistent with the current situation. This leaves us with two services where a significant proportion might support more targeting than now: Home help and the use of libraries. In both instances there is also a highly significant association with support for targeted cash benefits, especially for home help (eta=.26).

Table 6. Association between attitudes towards user charges for specific services and targeting as a general principle and targeting of cash benefits. 2000. Eta coefficients.

	targeting in general just/unjust (0-10)	Targeting of cash benefits (index) ¹⁾
School education	.06 ^{n.s.}	.11 ^{**}
Use of libraries	.14 ^{***}	.15 ^{***}
Hospital treatment	.15 ^{***}	.16 ^{***}
Consultation at GP	.08 [*]	.16 ^{***}
Prescribed medicine	.16 ^{***}	.08 ^{n.s.}
Dental care	.04 ^{n.s.}	.09 [*]
Home help for pensioners	.15 ^{***}	.26 ^{***}
Child care	.12 ^{***}	.05 ^{n.s.}

¹⁾ Simple count of answers to questions in table 2 (incl. persons spontaneously answering "3. Not to anybody")

Next we may examine the overall association between the indicators above and the number of answers in favour of free services, means-tested user charges, uniform user charges, and full user charges, respectively. Correlations are presented in table 7.

Table 7. Association between attitudes towards targeting as a general principle, targeting of cash benefits, and user charges for services. 2000. Pearson correlations.

User charges for services:	Targeting of cash benefits: Number of answers ¹⁾	Targeting in general just/unjust (0-10)	Welfare spending index (-100 to +100) ³⁾
No charge (number of answers) ²⁾	-.26***	-.10***	.30***
Some user charge, means tested ²⁾	.23***	.18***	-.12***
Some user charge, uniform payment ²⁾	.01n.s.	-.05n.s.	-.16***
Full user charge, or not a public task ²⁾	.03n.s.	-.09***	-.15***
Targeting of cash benefits ¹⁾		.16***	-.21***
Targeting in general just/unjust (0-10)			-.02n.s.

Significance: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; n.s. not significant.

¹⁾ Simple count of answers to the questions in table 2.

²⁾ Number of answers "free for everybody"/"partly user charges, means-tested"/"partly user charges, uniform"/"full user charge", respectively (table 5).

³⁾ Composed of 10 items, coded -100, -50, 0, +50, +100 and divided by 10. +100 means "spend a lot more", +50 "spend a little more", 0 "neutral", -50 "spend a little less" and -100 "spend much less". Issues include health care, education, culture, basic pensions, child care, home help, rest homes, child benefits, social assistance (level), unemployment benefits (level).

Correlations between number of answers given in favour of cash benefits for everybody and number of answers in favour of free services is $r = .26$. The correlation with number of answers given in favour of means-tested user charges is $-.23$. There is also a clear correlation with attitude to targeting as a matter of principle, corresponding with the findings above ($r = .18$). Indeed there is an association between support for targeting of services and support for targeting of cash benefits.

Our final and most important question is whether preferences for targeting are driven by a desire to concentrate spending on the poor or to reduce spending. For this purpose, a spending index based on 10 welfare items is constructed (see footnote 3, table 7). Not so surprisingly, people favouring free services also are more likely to favour increased spending ($r = .30$). This correlation is stronger than that between public spending and favouring equal right for cash benefits ($r = .21$). On the other hand, there is a negative association ($r = -.12$) between preference for means-tested user charges and attitudes to social expenditure. This is almost as strong a negative correlation as are found for preference for uniform user charges, or full user charges.²⁴

This analysis can be taken one step further by examining the association within individual programmes, e.g. the association between attitudes to user charges for home help and attitudes to total spending for home help. In that instance, the spending index for home help is +54 for those favouring free home help services, +39 for those who prefer means-tested user fees, and +34 for those who prefer uniform user fees (almost nobody supported full user charges). Without exception, those who supported means-tested fees, were less positive towards increase in expenditures than were those who preferred no fees. In some instances (e.g. dental

²⁴ If uniform user charges and full user charges are collapsed, we find a stronger negative association ($r = -.23$). Findings are roughly the same if we exclude education and culture from these computations.

care, day care, universities) there was no significant difference in expenditure attitudes between those who wanted to exempt the poor and those who supported uniform user fees for everybody. In all other instances, those who supported uniform fees were significantly less generous with public money.

As revealed by table 7, preference for the principle of means-testing is not associated with support for social expenditure ($r=.02$), but we do find a preference for lower spending when means-testing is specified in terms of concrete policy areas. It would be an exaggeration to conclude that those who prefer “welfare for the poor” support poor welfare, but they *do* support lower spending; they are generally less supportive of welfare spending.

5. Social variations

The institutional structure of the welfare state in terms of universalism or targeting has impact on distribution, and it would be obvious to analyse social variations from an interest perspective. However, as underlined by normative institutionalism, institutions also socialize people to see particular principles as natural, inevitable, or just. In this section, we briefly examine social variations from these two perspectives.

Generally speaking, there has been increasing gender difference in support for the Danish welfare state (Goul Andersen, 2008). This gender gap is easily explainable both in terms of interests and values. Women are generally less affected by taxes and more affected by cuts in welfare expenditure than men, and women care more about welfare than men. The impact of universalism vs. targeting on gender interests is somewhat more complex to trace out, and it is rarely discussed in the public sphere. At any rate, when it comes to universalism vs. targeting, gender differences in attitudes are very small. The only exception is that women are significantly more in favour of universal cash benefits (table 8).

From normative institutionalism, one might expect higher support for universalism among the younger generations. From a narrow interest perspective, on the other hand, this should mainly be expected for education-related issues. However, the small but significant age variations do not point clearly in either of these directions. If we look at each question separately we find much higher support for universal students' benefits among the youngest generations who are also slightly more in favour of targeting some social security programmes for the elderly. This might seem explainable in terms of interests, but the young are also more inclined to accept user charges for higher education. This disconfirms a simple interest interpretation, and the support for targeting among the young does not pertain to all schemes for the elderly. In short, there does not appear to be as much socialisation effect among the young as might be expected from normative institutionalism, and even though there are some interest-related differences, they are not consistent across all programmes. Taking another perspective, young people are often affected by changes in public discourse which has been questioning

the sustainability of welfare more than previously increasingly, but we do not find any consistent trend towards questioning existing welfare institutions among young people either.

When it comes to social status, mainstream welfare state theory argues that institutional inclusion of the middle classes is important for solidarity. Somewhat misleadingly, critics of the universalist welfare state sometimes describe this as the “bribery hypothesis”.²⁵ The latter is not confirmed by the data, however. As it emerges from table 8, there is lower support for universalism and higher support for targeting among people with master-level education, and among people within the highest income bracket (400.000 Dkk or more). Otherwise, support for universalism is roughly the same across education and across income groups. These figures suggest that universalism remains the project of the working class and the lower middle classes. In spite of institutional inclusion, people with high class positions and high incomes are more sceptical of universalism – without being straightforwardly critical.

Table 8. Social and political variations in attitudes to targeting as a general principle, targeting of cash benefits, and user charges for services. Index values. 2000.

	Universal Cash benefits	Universal Services	Means-tested user charges	Targeting as principle	(N)
Men	4.8	5.0	2.7	7.0	585
Women	5.1	5.1	2.7	6.8	650
18-29 y.	4.8	5.2	2.4	6.5	350
30-39	4.8	4.7	2.8	7.1	244
40-49	5.1	5.2	2.7	7.0	223
50-59	5.1	5.1	2.8	6.9	217
60-70 y	5.0	5.0	2.8	6.9	199
No vocational training	4.9	5.2	2.5	6.7	433
Apprenticeship	5.1	4.9	2.9	6.8	448
Short tertiary	5.0	5.0	2.7	7.0	98
Bachelor level	5.0	5.1	2.5	6.9	167
Masters level	4.3	4.7	3.4	7.6	79
0-199 DKK	5.0	5.2	2.6	6.7	567
200-299	5.1	5.0	2.7	6.9	378
300-399	4.5	4.9	2.8	7.0	121
400+	4.6	4.4	3.3	7.7	79
New Left	5.0	5.7	2.6	7.1	146
Social Dem.	5.2	5.1	2.7	6.9	341
Centre Parties	4.8	4.8	3.3	7.4	100
Liberals, Cons.	4.8	4.6	2.7	6.9	356
New Right	5.2	5.1	2.4	5.9	64
eta:					
Gender	.08**				
Age		.10*	.10*	.09*	
Vocat. educ.		.09*	.14***		
Pers.income		.10*	-.10*	.11**	
Party		.21***	.14*		

²⁵ The misleading assumption is that people act from a narrow self-interest perspective. However, the impact of universalism, according to welfare state theory, rather is that the middle classes abstain from thinking in terms of narrow self-interests (which would be extremely complex to calculate anyway).

Party political differences are somewhat surprising. Historically the main centre party, the Radical Liberals, has supported universalism – sometimes even more than the Social Democrats. Currently, however, supporters of the centre parties lean towards targeting of both cash benefits and services. Supporters of the Social Democratic Party are most supportive of universalism, followed by the supporters of the New (populist/nationalist) Right.²⁶

With a few exceptions, the effects discussed above are small. The effects are almost identical in a multivariate analysis (results not shown). Universalism enjoys a broad support, although with reservations among the most educated and the highest income groups. Politically, universalism has a stronghold among Social Democrats and New Left voters, but also among New Right voters who are typically recruited from the social strata that used to vote Social Democratic. As regards single issues, a few effects could be interpreted in terms of interests or socialisation (normative institutionalism), but there is no uniform confirmation of any of these. What we do find consistently across all social groups, however, is a discrepancy between support for targeting as a principle, and universalism in practice.

6. Conclusions

From an institutionalist perspective, one would expect universalism to be firmly rooted in the Scandinavian welfare states. Departure from the universalist path with public consent would seem unlikely except in a major crisis or through obfuscation. Surprisingly, however, when asked about preferences for universalism vis-a-vis targeting, an overwhelming majority of Danish citizens seemed to support targeting.

Questions about attitudes to targeting in specific areas reveal a different picture, both for cash transfers, and for services. With a couple of exceptions, any move towards targeting would seem to meet public resistance. It might be argued that this mainly reflects a simple measurement problem, and that people do not really know what they are answering when they answer the general question about principles – in short that we are measuring non-attitudes. It has been pointed out, however, that arguments about the principle of targeting actually are relatively prominent in public discourse as it is emphasized by one of the large parties (The Conservatives). It also appears that there is some relationship between principles and attitudes to more specific programmes.

It appears more plausible to interpret these findings in terms of ambivalence. First, people probably do believe that if one had to choose, it would be first priority to support the poor. Secondly, there also an element of consistency between principles and specific attitudes

²⁶ This includes The Danish People's Party (and in 2000 the remains of the Progress Party after the break in 1995 when former chairman Pia Kjaersgaard broke with the party and formed the Danish People's Party which started from roughly the same programme but soon threw the neoliberal legacy away in favour of a much more egalitarian but welfare chauvinist ideological stance).

where those who support targeting are more inclined to support changes of existing programmes. Currently, however, this only pertains to a small number of cash benefits and services - in particular child benefits and elder care, where there is also quite large proportions of the population favouring means testing. In short, the reference for questions about principles is currently very narrow. Currently the general principles are not very general, and universalism seems to rest on solid ground. Only a few programmes have actually been discussed in terms of universalism vs. targeting whereas in most instances universalism is simply taken for granted – at least until now – even by politicians declaring themselves in favour of targeting as a principle.

It is a classical argument that targeting welfare to the poor allows the state to do more for those in real need than could be done through universal measures. The counter-argument is as old as the discipline of social policy: Due to stigmatization, weak coalitions, and inability to influence politics effectively, it would work the other way around in practice. This does not even presume lack of solidarity among those favouring targeting, but the data actually reveals that those who support targeting also tend to prefer smaller public budgets for welfare.

It is in conformity with the conventional wisdom that universalism is supported most strongly by social groups that benefit from universalism in the long run. Perhaps the most interesting signs of departure are among the groups with the highest educational level and the highest incomes. Currently, however, the social variations are small, and universalism seems strongly founded.

Still, there remains a genuine attitudinal ambivalence and even though the support for targeting as a principle is currently linked only to a small sample of benefits and services it might gradually extend to include other programmes. If the contradiction between principles and attitudes towards targeting in concrete situations is ever to be solved, it could go both ways. Even though this is probably not the most likely scenario, there remains a certain resonance for targeting welfare which could facilitate institutional change if discussions about specific programmes are framed in the language of targeting, e.g. in a situation of acute economic pressure.

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