

Framing Deservingness to Win Support for Welfare State Retrenchment

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Recent studies of welfare state retrenchment have argued that policy makers can win public support for welfare state reform by framing the issue in terms of deservingness of welfare recipients. However, this literature has not tested the argument at the individual level. Using a Scandinavian context, this experimental study investigates how alternative framing of a welfare state retrenchment proposal affects citizens' perception of welfare recipients' deservingness, policy support and whether perceptions of deservingness mediate policy opinion. A news story was manipulated to present welfare recipients as either deserving or undeserving of welfare benefits. This issue framing affected citizens' perception of deservingness as well as support for retrenchment policy. Opinion change was partly explained by differences in perceptions of deservingness. These results provide strong support for the effectiveness of the deservingness frame.

Since the 1990s, Danish governments have implemented a series of retrenchment initiatives and remarkable changes in labour market and pension policies. For example, the limit on unemployment benefits was lowered from nine to four years, a new set of reciprocal duties required people on social assistance to take part in activation programmes and to be available for work, and the pension system was gradually transformed from a universalistic system into a more contributory one (Cox 2001, 477–83; Green-Pedersen 2002; Larsen & Andersen 2004). Such reforms made Denmark one of the 'model cases of welfare reform in Western Europe' (Cox 2001, 463). Despite their visibility in the political debate, these changes have been pushed through without much protest, and with only a few exceptions such as the retrenchment of the early retirement benefits (*efterlønnen*) in 1998 (see Andersen 1999).

This development contrasts with the perspective on welfare state development forcefully advanced by Pierson (1994, 1996). Taking the popularity of the welfare state among voters and established interest groups as a point of departure, Pierson (1994, 1996) argues that if political parties are to retrench the welfare state successfully, they have to engage in 'politics by stealth',

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employing a number of blame avoidance strategies to hide or diffuse responsibility of retrenchment policies. Recently, however, several studies of welfare state reform have suggested that political parties could pursue more proactive strategies to justify their attempts to present and frame retrenchment policies as necessary or even wise and thereby persuade voters to accept welfare reform (Cox 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Levy 1999; Ross 2001a; Schmidt 2002). Framing welfare reform in terms of the (un)deservingness of welfare recipients has, in particular, been suggested as a powerful tool to win public support for welfare state retrenchment (Cox 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Levy 1999; Torfing 2004).

This framing perspective offers a promising way to better understand the dynamics of welfare state reform and the interplay of political parties and voters. Yet such discussions in the retrenchment literature often contain implicit and untested assumptions about the public's response to information flows from the political elite and about the effectiveness of different appeals. It has rarely been tested how framing retrenchment measures in terms of deservingness can influence citizens' perceptions of the deservingness of welfare recipients and support for the proposed policy. This study provides such a test.

To investigate the effects of alternative framing of deservingness, the present study uses a proposal from the Danish government to cut down welfare benefit rates (*kontanthjælp*) as the empirical test case. In an experiment, participants were exposed to different newspaper articles about the proposal, each expressing an alternative framing of deservingness. Results reveal substantial framing effects on opinion, and these effects are partly mediated through differences in perceptions of deservingness. This article thus contributes to the welfare state literature by explicitly including the framing perspective and by testing effects of framing welfare reform directly at the individual level; hence it takes a step toward narrowing the gap between the welfare state and framing literatures. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature on citizens' attitudes toward the welfare state by emphasising a dynamic perspective on welfare opinion. Most previous studies have focused on static fundamentals like citizens' social background, self-interest, ideological predispositions and core values (e.g. Andress & Heien 2001; Blekesaune & Quadagno 2003; Feldman & Steenbergen 2001; Gelissen 2000; Svallfors 1997; Taylor-Gooby 2001). Finally, this study extends framing research to the important case of framing welfare reform in a European context.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Policy makers in advanced welfare states face a number of challenges deriving from broad processes such as population ageing, changing family structures,

slowdown in economic growth and high unemployment rates (Iversen 2001; Pierson 2001; Taylor-Gooby 1999). These developments all constitute intense fiscal pressures on the welfare state and leave political leaders with an 'unpleasant dilemma' (Green-Pedersen 2002): on the one hand, voters tend to punish political leaders for not keeping the economy on track (Nannestad & Paldam 1994); on the other hand, most welfare programmes are highly popular among citizens, which makes it a risky business for politicians to try to retrench the welfare state (Kitschelt 2001; Pierson 1996; Taylor-Gooby 2001).

What can politicians do if they are caught between considerations of economic sustainability and a population supporting generous welfare programmes? According to Pierson's seminal work, the political logic of the welfare state confronting politicians today differs fundamentally from what it was in the period of expansion (Pierson 1994, 1996). Constrained by voters and interest groups, welfare state retrenchment as seen from political parties becomes 'an exercise in blame avoidance' rather than the politics of 'credit claiming' associated with welfare expansion (Pierson 1996, 145). Because voters react more strongly in response to negative as opposed to positive information, and as retrenchment often harms concentrated groups who react more strongly than the diffuse group of benefiting taxpayers, the central aim of the blame-avoiding strategy is to 'lower the visibility of reforms, either by making the effects of policies more difficult to detect or by making it hard for voters to trace responsibility for these effects back to particular policymakers' (Pierson 1996, 147). Accordingly, governments 'will undertake retrenchment only when they discover ways to minimize the political costs involved' (Pierson 1996, 179) and this situation, in turn, 'dictates new political strategies' (Pierson 1996, 147).

Pierson's argument about the new politics of the welfare state has been the point of departure for most scholarly debate on welfare state retrenchment (Green-Pedersen & Haverland 2002; Starke 2006). It is widely accepted as an explanation of why it has proved so difficult for governments to cut back the welfare state despite ideological intentions and budgetary pressures (Starke 2006, 106). However, scholars have argued that political parties can play a more proactive role in order to justify welfare state retrenchment (e.g. Cox 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Ross 2001b). Following this strategy, political leaders should not seek to keep the retrenchment issue away from the public political agenda, but instead attempt to present and frame retrenchment proposals in ways that could persuade voters that the policy is necessary or an improvement on existing welfare state programmes (Cox 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Levy 1999; Ross 2001a; Schmidt 2002).

Issue framing is the process by which a political party, interest group or other political actor attempts to define and construct a political issue or controversy (Nelson et al. 1997, 567). By framing the issue, elites suggest

a particular way of thinking about a policy problem. Issue framing often implies 'defining effects or conditions as problematic', 'identifying causes', 'conveying a moral judgment' and 'endorsing remedies or improvements' in relation to the issue (Entman 2004, 5) and thereby suggesting 'a policy direction or implicit answer to what should be done about the issue' (Gamson & Modigliani 1987, 143). Therefore, political elites struggle to frame issues because if their interpretation of 'the essence of the issue' (Gamson & Modigliani 1987, 143) prevails, it can in turn forcefully affect what voters think about the controversy. Indeed, in the literature on framing effects it is well-established that issue frames can influence citizens' opinions, at least if the messages are one-sided and contain a clear interpretation of the issue (e.g. Berinsky & Kinder 2006; Druckman & Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 1997; Schuck & De Vreese 2006; for reviews, see Chong & Druckman 2007; Kinder 2003, 358–61).

Recent studies of welfare state reform in Western Europe have found one issue-specific frame (De Vreese 2003, 28) to be of particular importance – namely the framing of (un)deservingness of welfare recipients. 'Governments must justify their retrenchment by arguing that they take away benefits from some undeserving group', Green-Pedersen (2001, 967) summarises. Similarly, in an analysis of why Denmark and the Netherlands, but not Germany, experienced welfare reforms in the 1990s, Cox (2001) demonstrates the importance of political elites' 'social construction of the need to reform'. Policy makers in the two former countries were able to frame the welfare issues 'in ways that generated widespread support for reform initiatives' (Cox 2001, 464; also see Torfing 2004), and in both countries the deservingness frame played an important role in the reform process. Specifically, discussion of the (un)deservingness of welfare recipients fuelled the welfare reform debate in the Netherlands (Cox 2001, 483), and in Denmark a Social Commission argued with reference to the Danish Constitution that to deserve social assistance recipients must accept the obligation to work (Cox 2001, 479) – a proposal that was later passed in parliament. In a similar vein, Levy (1999) argued that a 'vice-into-virtue' framing of welfare reform could be effective as a justification strategy if resources are reallocated to more deserving groups (also see Schneider & Ingram 1993).

However, these claims and arguments about the importance of framing welfare retrenchment to convince voters rarely have been subjected to empirical testing. Sometimes scant references are made to public opinion surveys (e.g. Cox 2001) or to empirical studies of framing effects in general (e.g. Ross 2001a), but it remains an open question as to what extent the proclaimed mechanisms still hold at the level of the individual voter. Thus, more work is needed in order to evaluate the effectiveness of issue framing as a strategy of justifying welfare state retrenchment. To fill this gap, the present study specifically investigates the effects of framing deservingness

on citizens' perceptions of the deservingness of welfare recipients and on support for a welfare state retrenchment proposal.

Research on public attitudes toward the welfare state underpins perception of deservingness as an important ingredient in public opinion on this issue. Thus, citizens' willingness to support welfare policies depends to a considerable extent on their perception of the deservingness of welfare recipients (e.g. Alesina et al. 2001; Gilens 1999; Larsen 2006; also see Kluegel & Smith 1986; Will 1993). Therefore, if elites succeed in altering the public image of welfare recipients, they can possibly influence citizens' support for a welfare policy. At the same time, large segments of the public appear to have ambivalent or conflicting considerations and values about welfare state issues (Andersen 2001; Feldman & Zaller 1992). Proposing a model of 'conditional support' for the welfare state, Andersen (forthcoming; see Rothstein 1998) argues that citizens' support for welfare programmes hinges on general solidarity as well as a number of specific perceptions of how the programme is implemented; prominent among them are perceptions of whether recipients of welfare benefits deserve support (Andersen forthcoming). In turn, citizens' perceptions are heavily dependent on how elites frame the issue, Andersen argues, because typically 'such perceptions rest on information received from the media, or more precisely, from those actors who define these problems in the media'.

The combination of citizens' ambivalence and dependency on information from elite actors through the mass media potentially enables governments and political parties to alter support for welfare state programmes and retrenchment initiatives by framing deservingness of welfare recipients (cf. Zaller 1992). Furthermore, because perception of deservingness is an important ingredient in the formation of public opinion, framing deservingness may be especially potent in making welfare reforms more 'palatable' as frames are expected to be more efficient if they resonate with extant frames and beliefs (Ross 2001a; see also Entman 2004; Gamson & Modigliani 1987).

Testing these expectations also expands extant framing research. While it has been established that issue framing can influence opinion toward welfare reform (e.g. Nelson et al. 1997; Shen & Edwards 2005), the possibility of altering public support for welfare state retrenchment through framing the issue in terms of deservingness has received only limited attention. In a study of television news, Iyengar (1991) found that framing issues like unemployment and poverty in 'episodic' versus 'thematic' news frames affected how viewers attributed responsibility to either the individual or society. These attributions of responsibility in turn affected opinions toward social policy (Iyengar 1991, 85–9). Focusing on general attitudes toward the welfare state, Gilens (1999) demonstrated that (white) Americans' opposition to welfare largely can be attributed to their perceptions of undeserving (black) poor people lacking commitment to a work ethic. Nelson and Oxley (1999) approached the

welfare reform issue more directly and found framing effects on support for a family cap reform proposal to be mediated partly by perception of the mothers' personal responsibility. Although these studies indicate that framing deservingness potentially can be effective in winning support for welfare state retrenchment, it is an open question whether the results can be extended to a European context. Based on this discussion, the present study tests the following hypotheses:

H1a: Individuals exposed to a frame presenting welfare receivers as undeserving will perceive welfare recipients as less deserving.

H1b: Individuals exposed to a frame presenting welfare receivers as deserving will perceive welfare recipients as more deserving.

H2a: Individuals exposed to a frame presenting welfare receivers as undeserving will become more supportive of welfare retrenchment.

H2b: Individuals exposed to a frame presenting welfare receivers as deserving will become less supportive of welfare retrenchment.

The claim that framing effects on opinion result from altering perceptions of deservingness can be illuminated by testing the following hypothesis:

H3: Effects of framing deservingness on support for welfare retrenchment are partly mediated by perceptions of deservingness.

While this study explicitly focuses on the dynamics of welfare opinion and the possibilities of political communication to alter citizens' support for welfare reform, this is by no means to neglect the importance of citizens' prior attitudes in forming opinions toward the welfare state. On the contrary, both dispositional and situational factors are of importance to public opinion (Sniderman et al. 2001). Therefore, two factors that are often suggested to be important to welfare opinion – the core value of egalitarianism (Andersen forthcoming; Andress & Heien 2001; Blekesaune & Quadagno 2003; Feldman & Steenbergen 2001) and perceptions of the economic pressure on the welfare state (Andersen forthcoming) – will be included in the following analysis as control variables. Assessing the effect of these variables on opinion will also provide a standard by which to judge whether framing effects should be considered small or large. Egalitarianism is expected to decrease support for retrenchment because cutting down welfare benefits or services might increase economic inequality. Conversely, perception of economic pressure on the welfare state is expected to enhance support for retrenchment because lowering welfare benefit rates could potentially improve public budgets.

Research Design and Measures

To test the effectiveness of the deservingness frame as a strategy to justify welfare state retrenchment, I rely on a case concerning a recent proposal

from the Danish government to cut down welfare benefit rates. The actual draft bill was proposed by the government in October 2002, and the official aim of the bill was to give unemployed citizens receiving welfare benefits a greater economic incentive to find a job in order to reduce the number of people receiving benefits. To achieve this end, the bourgeois government, among other elements, proposed that welfare benefit rates should be decreased after six months on welfare, and that there should be a limit on how much a person could receive in overall benefits from the welfare state.¹ The government framed the issue as if some recipients of welfare benefit rates had refused to take a job and just leant back and passively received welfare benefits. Thus, the message was that they did not really deserve the existing benefit rates because they did not try hard enough to find a job. This interpretation of the issue can be denoted the 'job frame'. On the other side, political parties in opposition as well as interest groups emphasised that the proposal would create more poor people and not increase employment as many of the citizens receiving welfare benefits would not be able to find a job – that is, people on welfare really deserved help. This interpretation can be denoted the 'poor frame'.² Thus, the job frame depicts welfare receivers as undeserving, whereas the poor frame depicts welfare receivers as deserving. While both the job and poor frames were actually present in this particular debate as well as in other recent policy discussions, the job frame has dominated this issue in Danish political discourse since the 1990s (Cox 2001; Larsen & Andersen 2004; Torfing 2004).

The effects of the job and poor frames on citizens' perceptions of deservingness and their support for retrenchment policy will be tested in an experiment. The experimental design was chosen because it enhances the ability to draw reliable causal inferences that could otherwise be difficult in observing effects of political discourse on individuals' opinion formation. The advantages of experimentation are well-known (Kinder & Palfrey 1993; McGraw 1996). Through random assignment of experimental conditions to participants, all factors other than the independent, or treatment, variable and the dependent variable are held constant (within statistical limits) because individual differences in, for example, demographics and political predispositions, are cancelled out between the groups. Thus, differences in opinion between experimental groups at the outset are assumed to be absent, and any subsequent difference in opinion and perception can hence be attributed to the variation of the independent variable. Furthermore, the experimental design enables the researcher to vary the independent variable according to the values of greatest theoretical interest – in this case: the alternative framing of the welfare benefit proposal in terms of the job frame and the poor frame, respectively. These features make the experiment an excellent test of causal hypotheses about the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

The experimental method is, of course, not without limitations. Typically, experiments are weak on external validity making generalisations of results questionable, which also applies to this study. However, in attempts to avoid experimental artifacts and enhance the external validity of results, the present experiment was conducted in surroundings familiar to the participants, the experimental stimulus material carefully mimicked actual press coverage of the policy debate and the articles were edited in cooperation with editorial staff from one of the largest newspapers in Denmark.

Participants

For convenience, a diverse group of Danish students ($N = 219$) were recruited as participants on a voluntary and non-payment basis.³ Although not representative of the Danish population, this student sample is more diverse than would be the case had participants been recruited among university students, which is common practice in framing experiments (e.g. Nelson et al. 1997; Schuck & De Vreese 2006), and there is a reasonable variation in demographic and political variables.⁴ Due to the young age of the participants, traditional scepticism would suggest that the observed framing effects were a little stronger than what applies to the population as a whole (Sears 1986), but recent studies have found no differences in framing effects or related processes between student and non-student samples (Druckman 2004; Kühberger 1998, 36; Miller & Krosnick 2000, 313). Thus, framing effects on perception and opinion are presumably generalisable beyond the group of participants. To cover the purpose of the study, participants were informed that they were participating in a study about 'how clearly newspapers are able to communicate with their readers' (for similar cover stories, see Iyengar 1991, 20; De Vreese 2003, 129).

Experimental Procedure

The experiment consisted of two sessions. In the first session, participants completed a paper-and-pencil pre-test questionnaire booklet containing various demographic questions, pre-test measures of support for retrenchment of welfare benefit rates, and questions about egalitarianism, perception of social fraud and economic pressure on the welfare state (see below). Standard practice in experiments on priming and framing effects is to measure political values and other predispositions in the post-test right after the experimental treatment (see, e.g. Druckman & Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 1997; Valentino et al. 2002). However, there is a risk that the expected framing effects affect not only the dependent variable measure, but also the specific items tapping a control variable like egalitarianism. Therefore, to eliminate any possible impact of the experimental treatment on the measures of political

predispositions, these were measured in the pre-test questionnaire. Furthermore, while randomisation makes a between-subjects analysis of the post-test sufficient to gauge framing effects, a pre-test–post-test within-subjects analysis makes it possible to assess whether the framing manipulation resulted in actual opinion *change*. The measure of opinion change also provides us with an assessment of the effectiveness of each of the frames (see Chong & Druckman forthcoming).

In the second session – held between five and 14 days later in order to prevent pre-test sensitisation and context effects – participants were assigned randomly to either the job frame condition or the poor frame condition.⁵ The framing manipulation consisted of different versions of a newspaper story covering the debate on the welfare benefits proposal. The newspaper articles were inserted in the post-test questionnaire booklet. After reading the article, participants were asked a series of post-test opinion questions and a number of questions about their perceptions of deservingness. In order not to risk alerting participants to the purpose of the study, the deservingness questions were asked only in the post-test. Thus, it is not possible to analyse whether the issue framing actually changed perceptions of deservingness. After completion of post-test questionnaires, participants were debriefed. Of the 219 participants in the post-test, 55 did not take part in the pre-test, thus reducing the number of cases to 164 in the pre-test–post-test analyses and analyses including egalitarianism and perception of economic pressure as control variables.⁶

Measures

The *independent variable* was issue framing of the welfare benefit proposal. This variable was operationalised by the two different newspaper articles, expressing the job frame and poor frame, respectively. In the beginning of the post-test booklet, participants were asked to read ‘a newspaper article from *Politiken*’, one of the largest nationwide newspapers in Denmark. However, the two articles were constructed for the purpose of this experiment and were edited in cooperation with *Politiken*’s editorial staff to make the articles appear as if they were real. Still, both articles were constructed based on information and quotations from the actual press coverage of the case (see Note 2 below).

Previous framing studies have used either actual news reports (e.g. Iyengar 1991; Nelson et al. 1997) or constructed news stories (e.g. De Vreese 2003; Nelson 2004; Nelson & Oxley 1999) as experimental stimuli. Following the latter approach allowed me to keep several variables constant across articles, including length, headline size, byline and number of sources. Furthermore, both stories contained identical paragraphs presenting the same factual information about the proposal, such as exactly how much the welfare

benefit rates would decrease and how much a citizen could earn if he or she found a job. In addition, each article contained a summary of both issue frames. Consistent with definitions of issue framing, this was done to ensure that the main variation between the articles was the selective interpretation of the same issue, not that they presented totally different information or positions on the issue (Nelson 2004, 27). Including these identical features also served to make the articles appear consistent with journalistic norms about presenting conflicting positions as well as the objective of not making the manipulations unrealistically strong (Kinder & Palfrey 1993, 27).

Following previous studies, the issue frames were established by varying headlines, story lead and quotations (e.g. Nelson & Oxley 1999). The job frame carried the headline 'More People to be Forced into Jobs', whereas the headline of the poor frame was 'New Bill Creates More Poverty'. The framing of deservingness was in particular expressed through the quotations. Thus, the interpretation of welfare recipients as undeserving was emphasised in the job frame by quoting the Minister of Employment, Mr Claus Hjort Frederiksen. Among other things, he explained: 'Some people categorically refuse to take a job or to get some help finding a job. Of course they shall not be able to just lean back and passively receive welfare benefits at the expense of taxpayers.' Conversely, in the poor frame, welfare recipients were interpreted as deserving, quoting the leader of the Danish Association of Heads of Social Services, Mr Ole Pass: 'The motivation is large among most welfare recipients. However, their qualifications are not in demand by employers and therefore they cannot just go out and find a job. . . . We are talking about a group of people cut off from the job market'⁷ (see Appendix A for the articles in their entirety).

By varying more than one aspect of the articles, I would not be able to attribute a framing effect on opinion to any particular piece of information in the articles. Some participants might be influenced by the headline, others by a quote (see Aronson et al. 1990, 50; Nelson & Oxley 1999, 1046). Therefore, the issue frames might be able to influence opinion through mechanisms other than by altering perceptions of deservingness, as they were particularly expressed in the quotations. I chose this operationalisation, however, in order to present realistic and meaningful articles to participants, thus improving external validity.

The *dependent opinion variable* was support for the welfare benefits proposal. This opinion measure varied slightly between the pre-test and post-test in order to fit the situation where participants had just read a newspaper article about the case: 'Social welfare benefits should be cut down in order to give people on welfare a greater incentive to find a job', in the pre-test, and 'In the article above, a proposal from the government is presented to cut down social benefits in order to give people on welfare a greater incentive to find a job. We would like to hear your opinion on this. Do you

agree or disagree with this proposal?', in the post-test.⁸ Furthermore, to see if the framing affected participants' willingness to support the welfare benefits system in general, they were asked about their opinion on the general level of welfare benefit rates (see Appendix B). This opinion measure was asked in both the pre-test and the post-test.

The expected mediating variable, *perceptions of deservingness* of welfare benefit recipients, was measured on a 4-item scale. The items focused on a central aspect of the concept, often emphasised as the most important: whether the welfare recipient is in 'control' of his or her situation (Larsen 2006, 66–79). Thus, the four items pointed to whether welfare recipients were themselves to blame for their situation. The questions were inspired by Kluegel and Smith's (1986) Explanations for Poverty Scales, translated and adjusted to the Danish context (see Appendix B). As noted, these deservingness questions were only asked in the post-test, making it impossible to assess directly whether issue framing was able to actually change this perception (although, see Note 10 below). Finally, *egalitarianism* and *perception of economic pressure* on the welfare state are included in the analysis as controls and to compare the magnitude of framing effects. A measure of egalitarianism was created based on a 5-item scale, while perception of economic pressure was measured with a single question (see Appendix B).

Results

The first two sets of hypotheses predicted issue frames to affect both perceptions of the deservingness of welfare recipients (*H1a* and *H1b*) and support for the welfare benefits retrenchment proposal (*H2a* and *H2b*). To test these hypotheses, perceptions and opinions in the two experimental groups are compared and the level of statistical significance is tested with independent samples t-tests.⁹ In addition to the two variables directly relevant to the hypotheses, support for the general level of welfare benefit rates is also analysed in order to investigate whether potential framing effects spread beyond the specific proposal discussed. Results of these between-groups analyses are presented in the first columns of Table 1.

Participants exposed to the job frame were expected to perceive welfare recipients as less deserving and express greater support for the retrenchment proposal compared to participants in the poor frame condition. The results support these expectations, both with respect to deservingness, where participants in the poor condition find welfare recipients more deserving ($M_{\text{job}} = 0.54$ versus $M_{\text{poor}} = 0.61$; $p < 0.05$), and with respect to issue opinion, where the job group is more supportive than the poor group ($M_{\text{job}} = 0.55$ versus $M_{\text{poor}} = 0.36$; $p < 0.000$). Described in raw numbers, among participants in the job condition, 57 percent support the proposal compared to only half

Table 1. Issue Framing Effects on Policy Opinion and Perception of Deservingness

	Frame	Between-subjects analysis: Opinion differences		Within-subjects analysis: Opinion Change		
		Post-test	Difference	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference
Perception of Deservingness	Job	0.61	0.07*			
	Poor	0.54				
Support for Retrenchment	Job	0.55	0.19***	0.44	0.54	0.10***
	Poor	0.36		0.43	0.38	-0.05*
Support for Level of Welfare Benefits	Job	0.46	-0.03	0.47	0.47	0.00
	Poor	0.49		0.47	0.47	0.00
N (minimum)		218		162		

Notes: Entries are mean opinions or perceptions as measured on 0 through 1 scales. Variables are coded such that higher values indicated higher level of support or of perception of deservingness. N is lower in within-subjects analyses compared to between-subjects analyses because some participants in the post-test did not take part in the pre-test. *p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001 (one-sided test).

as many (31 percent) in the poor condition. However, apparently the issue frames did not affect participants' general support for the level of welfare benefit rates ($M_{\text{job}} = 0.46$ versus $M_{\text{poor}} = 0.49$; $p > 0.30$), indicating that framing effects did not spread beyond the specific problem debated.

Within-subjects analyses were conducted to investigate if the framing manipulation was actually able to *change* opinions among participants. Because Perception of Deservingness was not measured in the pre-test, only the opinion measures can be analysed.¹⁰ Results from paired-samples t-tests, reported in the last columns of Table 1, reveal that support for the retrenchment proposal increased in the job condition and decreased in the poor condition (+0.10 versus -0.05, respectively), whereas no opinion change occurred in relation to the general level of welfare benefit rates. In sum, results lend empirical support to both hypotheses that the frames affected perceptions (*H1a* and *H1b*) and support for the retrenchment proposal (*H2a* and *H2b*).

The welfare state literature claims that political elites can win support for retrenchment through a proactive strategy of framing deservingness. By depicting welfare recipients as (un)deserving, elite communications can change citizens' perceptions of recipients' deservingness, which in turn will affect their support for welfare state reform. In other words, public opinion toward retrenchment policy is mediated through public perceptions of deservingness. This relationship is captured in *H3*, according to which framing effects on support for the welfare benefit proposal will be, at least in part, mediated through perception of deservingness. Using the same

Figure 1. Perception of Deservingness as a Mediator of Issue Framing Effects on Opinion



Notes: The figure displays unstandardised OLS regression coefficients. All variables are recoded to range from 0 through 1. Issue frame is coded such that job frame = 1 and poor frame = 0. Deservingness and Support for Retrenchment are coded such that higher values indicate higher perception of deservingness or higher support, respectively. N = 218. *p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001 (one-sided test).

path-analytic approach as previous framing studies (e.g. Druckman & Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 1997; cf. Baron & Kenny 1986), three empirical conditions must be met in order to demonstrate perceptions of deservingness as a mediator of framing effects on support for retrenchment: first, the framing manipulation must have an effect on perceptions of deservingness, which the results in Table 1 indicate; second, perceptions of deservingness must have an impact on support for retrenchment; and third, the direct effect of issue framing on support must decrease after controlling for perception of deservingness.

To test if these conditions are met, three regression analyses were conducted. The results are presented in Figure 1 and illustrate how the findings collectively suggest Deservingness as a mediator of framing effects on Support for Retrenchment proposal. Thus, compared to the poor frame, the job frame decreased beliefs in the deservingness of welfare recipients, which in turn increased support for the retrenchment proposal. At the same time, the direct effect of issue framing on support decreased from 0.19 in a bivariate correlation to 0.13 (compare first column and Model 1 in Table 2).¹¹ In sum, these results support *H3*.

Finally, two alternative factors often suggested as important ingredients in welfare opinion were considered. To assess the magnitude of the effects of Issue Framing and Perceptions of Deservingness on Support for Retrenchment compared to the impact of Egalitarianism and Perceptions of Economic Pressure on the welfare state, results of bivariate as well as multiple regressions are reported in Table 2. First, as indicated by the bivariate regressions and consistent with expectations, Egalitarianism is correlated negatively with support for the welfare benefits proposal, and Perceptions of Economic Pressure are correlated positively with policy support. Indeed, Egalitarianism appears to be a very strong predictor of opinion in the specific case,

Table 2. Determinants of Support for Retrenchment Proposal

	Bivariate regressions	Multiple regressions	
		Model 1	Model 2
Issue Frame (Job = 1)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.13*** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.04)
Deservingness	-0.88*** (0.07)	-0.84*** (0.07)	-0.60*** (0.10)
Egalitarianism	-0.84*** (0.09)		-0.37*** (0.12)
Economic Pressure	0.26*** (0.06)		0.16*** (0.06)
Constant		0.87*** (0.05)	0.89*** (0.08)
Adjusted R ²		0.42	0.44
N		218	163

Notes: Dependent variable is Support for Retrenchment Proposal. Entries are unstandardised OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are scaled from 0 through 1. Variables are coded such that higher values indicated higher level of deservingness, egalitarianism and perceptions of economic pressure, respectively. N is lower in Model 2 compared to Model 1 primarily because some participants in the post-test did not take part in the pre-test where Egalitarianism and Perception of Economic Pressure were measured. *** $p \geq 0.001$ (one-sided).

approaching the magnitude of the bivariate effect of Deservingness. This clearly suggests that opinion formation on this issue is driven by fundamental values, but also that beliefs about the economic shape of the welfare state are of some importance.

Second, turning to multiple regression results, it is indicated in Model 1 that perceptions of deservingness exert a far larger impact on policy support than issue framing. Nevertheless, framing effects were large enough to tip the balance between opposition and support on the issue (Table 1). Model 2 tests the joint effects of all four variables. First, the effect of Issue Framing is practically unchanged compared to Model 1 and still clearly statistically significant as would be expected because the experimental manipulation was unrelated to the pre-test measures of Egalitarianism and Perception of Economic Pressure. Second, in the multivariate analysis effects of Perception of Deservingness, Egalitarianism and Perception of Economic Pressure on Support for the Retrenchment proposal are all diminished compared to the bivariate regressions. Interestingly, however, Perceptions of Deservingness remain a very strong predictor of opinion on the retrenchment proposal while both other variables are also of some importance.

Discussion

An important body of research on welfare state reform has suggested that political leaders can pursue proactive strategies of justifying their policies to the public. By framing welfare recipients as undeserving, political elites can

win popular support for retrenchment policies (e.g. Cox 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Levy 1999; Ross 2001a; Schmidt 2002). In this article, I have extended these studies by actually testing this claim at the level of individual voters. My results clearly support the argument that influencing citizens' perceptions of deservingness is an effective way to move support for retrenchment policy. Participants exposed to a newspaper article interpreting welfare recipients as lacking incentives to find a job perceived welfare recipients as less deserving and became more supportive of cutting welfare benefit rates. In contrast, participants exposed to the alternative frame interpreting welfare recipients as lacking opportunities on the labour market perceived welfare recipients as more deserving and became less supportive of the policy proposal. A mediational analysis revealed that framing effects on opinion were, in part, mediated by perception of deservingness. Even after controlling for egalitarianism and perceptions of economic pressure on the welfare state, issue framing and perception of deservingness had substantial impact on opinion.

These findings help us to understand why framing deservingness is often at the core of political discussions about welfare policies. Not only is perception of deservingness in itself an important ingredient in welfare opinion; elites can also effectively influence the way the public thinks about a welfare issue by framing deservingness. Furthermore, the findings here underline the dynamic nature of welfare opinion, hence complementing studies more oriented toward the role of citizens' socio-structural position, values and interests (e.g. Feldman & Steenbergen 2001; Svallfors 1997).

This study has also extended framing effects research to the important and controversial issue of welfare state reform in a European context. The strong effects of the deservingness frame found here are particularly striking because Scandinavian political culture can be considered a least-likely case for the deservingness frame to be effective. First, in universalist welfare state regimes like the Scandinavian countries, public opinion is distinctively more supportive than in other welfare regimes of policies directed toward the poor and unemployed (Andress & Heien 2001; Larsen 2006; Svallfors 1997). Second, in universalist welfare regimes, discussion of deservingness is often downplayed because it is less relevant to single out deserving groups if all citizens are usually covered (Andersen forthcoming; Rothstein 1998). Hence, we found considerable framing effects even in a context where we should expect framing deservingness to be less effective.

It is important to note that not all of the framing effects were mediated by perceptions of deservingness. In designing this study, care was taken to create experimental manipulations that enhanced realism, and hence external validity, at the expense of controlling exactly what bits of information in the stimulus articles accounted for what effect. Therefore, it is likely that the articles stimulated other considerations – related to perception of deservingness

or not – and that these considerations, in turn, could have mediated some of the framing effects (Slothuus forthcoming; see Chong & Druckman 2007). Another important aspect is that framing effects might be moderated by individuals' political values (see Hansen 2007) or level of political sophistication or awareness (see Oscarsson 2007; Togeby 2007; for further discussion, see Chong & Druckman 2007; Druckman & Nelson 2003; Slothuus forthcoming). Following this logic, some receivers of deservingness frames would be even more influenced than was documented in this study, while framing effects would be minimal among others.

Finally, citizens are often confronted with multiple competing frames on contested political issues, limiting the impact of any single issue frame (e.g. Chong & Druckman forthcoming; Sniderman & Theriault 2004). However, the political discourse about welfare benefits in Denmark, and other countries in Western Europe, has been dominated by one particular framing of the issue – namely that welfare receivers must fulfil reciprocal duties in order to deserve social assistance, as captured in the 'job frame' of this study (Cox 2001; Larsen & Andersen 2004; Torfing 2004). Therefore, exposing participants to a single issue frame may in some situations mimic actual political debate quite well, as in this study. Thus, given the strong impact of framing deservingness found here, this finding suggests that elites can be successful in persuading voters to accept otherwise unpopular retrenchment measures by framing the issue in terms of deservingness.

Appendix A. Stimulus Articles

Job frame

More people to be forced into jobs

Government will effectively stop the possibility of people receiving welfare benefits without trying to find a job.

By Christian Hüttemeier

‘A new government proposal is to motivate people on welfare benefit rates to get out and work instead of passively receiving benefits from the government. Experts and social workers criticise the proposal for creating more poor people, but the government rejects this criticism. “We have to arrange our social system in a way that always provides an incentive to take a job. We do welfare recipients a disservice if we don’t try to find them a job,” says Minister of Employment Claus Hjort Frederiksen. The controversy is about a new governmental legislative proposal aimed at setting an upper limit on how much money people on welfare can receive from the government. Furthermore, welfare benefit rates will automatically be reduced after six months on welfare. This means a family can lose up to 2,580 DKK and singles up to 1,290 DKK each month, after taxes. The argument behind the proposed cut down is to give welfare benefit receivers an incentive to find a job. Figures from the Ministry of Employment show that today people on welfare do not gain much by taking a job.’

Away from the dole

‘“We can neither morally, politically nor in human terms maintain a system that keeps people on the dole because there is no pay off in finding a job. If this proposal is approved, we offer an incentive so that even a little extra effort will give a pay off,” says Minister of Employment Claus Hjort Frederiksen. “Some people categorically refuse to take a job or to get some help finding a job. Of course they shall not be able to just lean back and passively receive welfare benefits at the expense of tax payers without any consequences whatsoever,” Claus Hjort Frederiksen underlines. Parliament is expected to vote on the proposal before the summer holidays.’

Poor frame

New bill creates more poverty

More poor people and greater inequality in society will be the consequences if government cuts welfare benefits to the poor.

By Christian Hüttemeier

‘A wide range of experts and social workers attack the government’s proposal on reducing welfare benefit rates. The bill will hurt the weakest people in society and help to create new generations of poor and socially marginalised citizens, critics warn. “These cuts hurt the poor. The standard of living of the most weak and vulnerable will no doubt be reduced. If you push people this way, you definitely end up making people really weak,” says leader of the Danish Association of Heads of Social Services, Ole Pass. The controversy is about a new governmental legislative proposal aimed at setting an upper limit on how much money people on welfare can receive from the government. Furthermore, welfare benefit rates will automatically be reduced after six months on welfare. This means a family can lose up to 2,580 DKK and singles up to 1,290 DKK each month, after taxes. The argument behind the proposed cut is to give welfare benefit receivers an incentive to find a job. Figures from the Ministry of Employment show that today people on welfare do not gain much by taking a job.’

Large motivation

‘“The motivation is large among most welfare recipients. However, their qualifications are not in demand by employers and therefore they cannot just go out and find a job. This proposal is a completely wrong way of dealing with this problem,” Ole Pass says. “We are talking about a group of people cut off from the job market; we require a more individual effort instead of a standardised welfare cut. All this will do is to make these people even poorer,” Ole Pass underlines. Parliament is expected to vote on the proposal before the summer holidays.’

Appendix B. Question Wording

Support for general level of welfare benefit rates: 'Do you think the amount people on welfare benefit rates receive should be increased or decreased compared to today?' (7-point 'decrease significantly' through 'increase significantly' scale).

Deservingness scale: 'Next, we would like to hear, in your opinion, what might be the reason for some people to receive welfare benefits. Below is a list with different explanations you can agree or disagree with. Please indicate for each explanation how important you think it is as a reason for people receiving welfare benefits. A lot of people receive welfare benefits . . .'. Subsequently, a list of different explanations was to be rated on 5-point scales (1 = 'Not at all important explanation' to 5 = 'Very important explanation'). The Deservingness scale consisted of the following four items ($\alpha = 0.78$): 'because welfare benefit rates are so generous that people have no incentive to find a job', 'because they lack proper moral standards and ability to pull themselves together', 'because they need to learn not to be a burden for society' and 'because they don't do enough to find a job and get on'.

Egalitarianism scale: The scale contained five items ($\alpha = 0.66$). Three of the items were measured with response categories on a 7-point disagree-agree scale: 'High incomes ought to be taxed more strongly than they are today', 'In politics, one should strive to give everybody the same economic conditions, no matter their education and employment' and 'Many public sector activities could be made both better and cheaper if left to private firms'. Two items were measured in the format with opposing statements: 'First a question about social expenditures. A says: Social reforms have gone too far in this country. More than now, people should manage without social security and support from the public sector. – B says: Those social reforms that have been made in our country should be maintained at least to the same extent as now. Do you mostly agree with A or B?' and 'It is also discussed whether the users of public sector services should pay more. A says: There should be more users' payment in the public sector. – B says: Apart from small and insignificant areas, there should be no more users' payment' (response categories were: 'agree with A', 'agree with B', 'neither' and 'don't know').

Perception of economic pressure: 'In the long run we can't afford keeping up the welfare state as we know it today' (7-point 'disagree'–'agree' scale).

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NOTES

1. The new rules became effective on 1 January 2004 (*Lov om social service* §25, stk. 5, §§25b–d).
2. The two issue frames were identified based on a review of actual press coverage of the social welfare proposal in the leading newspapers and the Danish news agency, *Ritzaus*

Bureau. The identification process followed guidelines suggested by Cappella and Jamieson (1997, 47): the frames had their own conceptual and linguistic characteristics; they were commonly observed in a variety of media outlets over a couple of years or more; and both represent a simplistic and stereotypical interpretation that would enable most people to distinguish them from each other.

3. The participants were students at seven folk high schools, a traditional Danish kind of non-degree education, usually undertaken between high school and college (the schools of Brandbjerg, Hadsten, Odder, Rønne, Ry, Testrup and Uldum). The experiment was conducted from 30 April–2 June 2004.
4. Some 66 percent of the participants were female, median age was 21 years. Participants' political orientations were more left-wing than the population as a whole (62 percent left-wing; 19 percent centrist; 20 percent right-wing) as were their party preferences (31 percent voted for left-wing parties; 36 percent for centre-left parties; 10 percent for centre-right; 22 percent for 'others' or 'don't know'). However, variation in political interest and factual political knowledge approximated the pattern in the entire population (see Andersen & Clement 2003, 413; Togeby 2004, 192–5). No significant differences between experimental groups could be observed on these variables (or on any of 14 other policy opinion items included in the pre-test). This suggests a successful randomisation, and hence, differences between conditions can be attributed to the experimental stimuli.
5. In fact, other participants were assigned to a control group; this part of the dataset is not analysed in this article (see Slothuus forthcoming).
6. Because randomisation was implemented in the beginning of the second session, those participants dropping out could not influence experimental results.
7. Part of the quotes attributed to Ole Pass were in fact taken from other sources in the news representing the poor frame. However, only Ole Pass's name was included in the article to keep the number of sources constant across articles.
8. All responses were measured on 7-point disagree–agree scales.
9. All tests of significance are one-sided because expectations are directional.
10. However, one question, not included in the Deservingness scale, asked both in the pre-test and post-test, suggests that the observed between-groups difference in Perception of Deservingness is due to actual pre- and post-exposure change in perceptions. The question had a Likert format and read: 'Many of the unemployed really don't want to take a job' (7-point disagree–agree scale). Endorsement of this statement changed in the expected direction in the job condition ($M_{\text{pre-test}} = 0.31$ versus $M_{\text{post-test}} = 0.38$; $p < 0.05$), but not in the poor condition ($M_{\text{pre-test}} = 0.28$ versus $M_{\text{post-test}} = 0.27$; $p > 0.70$).
11. A Sobel test was calculated to assess simultaneously the statistical significance of the two paths involving Deservingness (see Baron & Kenny 1986; MacKinnon et al. 2007). Test results clearly corroborate Deservingness as a mediator of framing effects ($z = 2.177$; $p < 0.015$; one-sided test).

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