

THE PUBLIC INTERESTS OF SOCIAL SECURITY: THE SOCIAL SCIENCE APPROACH

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1 Introduction

The concept of public interests has received more and more attention lately. Especially in the policy domain public interests form an important point of concern.¹ Often government policies are justified by arguing that they are in the public interest. Significant factor explaining the current attention to the concept of public interest are the reforms the Western welfare states have been confronted with over the past decades. Important element of the reforms concerned the introduction of market forces and a re-orientation of the role of the government. Where the responsibility for the welfare state used to be attributed to the public domain, in the reforms the advantages of the market, especially with regard to the possibilities of increasing efficiency, were brought forward. Handing over responsibilities from the public to the private domain does, however, raise the question about the definition of public interests in a more private welfare state. What should be considered as the inviolable part of the welfare state for which the government should take responsibility? Especially when the market fails to deliver, the issue of the safeguarding of public interests is raised. Can public interests be safeguarded in the private domain or does the safeguarding of the public interest warrant government intervention? In order to be able to solve the issue of the safeguarding of public interests, first, the question for which public interests the government should take responsibility needs answering.² It is this question that is the object of this chapter. In defining public interests a social science approach will be taken.

2 State of the art

2.1 From public interests to public values

In this chapter the public administration or more broadly the social science approach to defining public interests is central. The reason for not restricting to the public administration literature is that the public administration discipline traditionally has been a multidisciplinary field drawing on theories and concepts from a range of related disciplines. Moreover, the approach towards defining public interests taken by public administration scholars and researchers stemming from related disciplines such as political science and sociology show great similarities. It is important to mention that the social science approach as presented here does

¹ Dicke and De Bruijn 2003; Bozeman 2007.

² WRR, 2000.

not include the economic discipline. In fact, the social science approach to defining public interest is positioned opposite to the economic³ or new public management approach.⁴

Important proponent of the social science approach to defining public interests is Bozeman.⁵ According to Bozeman ‘public interest refers to the outcomes best serving the long-run survival and well-being of a social collective construed as a “public” ’.⁶ The definition of Bozeman resembles the view of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). In their report ‘Het borgen van publiek belang’ (safeguarding public interests), this council defines public interests as those interests that are the result of a normative debate in a country and which are laid down in regulations by the legislator.⁷ Important aspect of the definition of the WRR is, however, that the concept of public interest implies government intervention, while in the line of reasoning of Bozeman the concept of public interests does not necessarily imply government intervention. Bozeman argues that public interests may be realized in the private domain and that only in situations when public interests are not realized without government intervention, the government has the responsibility to take action.⁸ Whether or not governments should intervene therefore depends on the extent to which public interests are realized. Since the definition of public interests, as brought forward by Bozeman, resembles the general view to defining public interests in social sciences, this definition of public interests will be central in this chapter.

The social science approach to defining public interests, raises the question whether a unifying definition of public interests exist. The answer is that it does not. A unifying definition of public interests does not exist since public interests depend on what societies agree on at a certain point in time and ‘certain 18th-century self-evident truths might be subject to very different interpretations today’.⁹ Public interests are therefore ‘ubiquitous’,¹⁰ ‘emergent’,¹¹ and ‘ambiguous’.¹²

The argument that the question for which public interests the government should take responsibility cannot lead to straight answers, raises the question whether the social science approach can provide guidance to decisions about the allocation of responsibilities between public and private actors. Given the ambiguity of the definition of public interests, public interest theories provide little or no guidance in this respect. In the social sciences, over the years, the literature has therefore started to focus more and more on public values.¹³ The distinction between public interests and public values is that the former is regarded as an elusive ideal, whereas public values have specific identifiable content.¹⁴ Public values can therefore

3 Bozeman 2007.

4 Stoker 2006; O’Flynn 2007.

5 Bozeman 2002; 2007; 2008.

6 Bozeman 2007, p. 12.

7 WRR, 2000.

8 Bozeman 2007.

9 Jørgensen & Bozeman 2002, p. 375.

10 Bozeman 2007, p. 143.

11 Stout 2007.

12 Dicke & De Bruijn 2003.

13 Bozeman 2002.

14 Bozeman 2007.

be regarded as the operationalization of the public interest: when something is considered as a public value, the safeguarding of this value becomes a public interest.

2.2 Identifying public values

The public value approach was first articulated by Moore.¹⁵ According to Moore ‘The idea of managerial work in the public sector is to create *public* value just as the aim of managerial work in the private sector is to create *private* value’.¹⁶ Important aspect of public values is, however, that they are expressed by the citizenry and determinations of the citizenry inherently are collective choices.¹⁷ Public value can therefore not be derived from the aggregation of individual preferences such as done in the economic approach, but only from individual and public preferences resulting from public deliberation.¹⁸ Public values thus rely on ‘politically-mediated expression of collectively determined preferences’.¹⁹

Given the link between public interests and public values, in the social sciences the concepts are often used interchangeably.²⁰ According to Bozeman ‘a society’s “public values” are those providing normative consensus about a) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; b) the obligations of citizens to society, the state, and one another; and c) the principles on which governments and policies should be based’.²¹ Moreover, public values can be traced in many ways. Public values are, for example, reflected in fundamental laws and constitutions. Public values often are also reflected in policy and politics, public speeches, elections, and public policy. Furthermore, in countries with a strong judiciary, the high courts are regarded as an excellent viewing point for identifying public values.²² Without defining what public values actually are, Bozeman therefore does define a set of core public values for which the government is responsible. Other authors follow the same line. De Bruijn and Dicke, for example, distinguish between procedural and substantive values²³. Procedural public values refer to the way the public sector should act and to standards that the process of government action should meet, while substantive values are defined as those ‘values for which the state, either directly or indirectly, is responsible’. The content of such core or substantive values is, however, not specified and may differ from sector to sector, from country to country and even over time.²⁴

Lately, in the social science literature, analyses of public values are conducted for many different countries and different sectors. As a result, different lists of public values have been proposed.²⁵ Jørgensen and Bozeman have, for example, examined leading public administration periodicals on writing on public values.²⁶ On the basis of their analysis they come up with a list of 72 public values including, amongst others, social cohesion, legality, equity, and

15 Moore 1995.

16 Moore 1995, p. 28.

17 Alford 2002.

18 Kelly et al 2002.

19 O’Flynn 2007, p. 360.

20 Dicke & De Bruijn 2003.

21 Bozeman 2007, p. 13.

22 Bozeman 2007.

23 Dicke 2006, p. 719.

24 Jørgensen 2007.

25 Schreurs 2003.

26 Bozeman 2007.

accountability. In the Netherlands, public values in utility sectors are intensively studied. In these sectors, public values such as affordability, safety, and the protection of the environment are important.²⁷ In an analysis of the reorganizations in the Dutch social insurances, public values as social cohesion, effectiveness, and accountability are brought to the foreground.²⁸ The public values that most often come up probably are: quality, accessibility, and efficiency. The consequences of the introduction of market forces in several Dutch sectors for the safeguarding of these public interests have recently been analyzed.²⁹

The different lists of public values show that in each context different values are emphasized. An important aspect that the lists of public values bring forward is therefore that public values are a social construct. A weak aspect of the social science approach to identifying public values is, however, that it provides little guidance in making decisions regarding the allocation of responsibilities between government and private parties. To some extent the identification of a different set or a change in public values may be helpful in deciding about which institutional setting is best suited for safeguarding these values, for different public values may ask for different safeguards. The analysis of Van Gestel,³⁰ for example, shows that a changing attitude towards the position of the social partners in the Dutch welfare state, has resulted in a handing over of responsibility for the safeguarding of public interests from the social partners as a collective to individual employers and employees.³¹ Also in the history of the Dutch welfare state, changes in the organization of the welfare state can be explained by a reorientation of public values.³² However, if it is possible at all to measure normative consensus about public values, which can be questioned, such an analysis does not provide the government with a decision making tool with regard to the allocation of responsibilities. Recently, however, an important step towards developing such an analytical tool has been taken by Bozeman³³ with his public values failure approach.

2.3 Identifying public values failures

In order to be able to make decisions about the allocation of responsibilities between public and private, Bozeman proposes a pragmatic approach to public interest theory.³⁴ In this view it suffices to pay attention to public values in decisions about the allocation of responsibilities. More specifically, one should focus on instances where public values fail. The public values failure approach of is positioned opposite to the economic approach.³⁵ Where the economic approach starts with an ideal, that of a perfect market, and applies this ideal to concrete policy issues, the public value failure approach begins with the policy issue ‘and then works toward a limited ideal – a practical solution to a recognized public failure’.³⁶ According to Bozeman, in decisions about the allocation of responsibilities between public and private actors, public

27 De Bruijn & Dicke 2006; Stout 2007; Lijesen et al.2007.

28 Van Gestel 2003.

29 Ministerie van Economische Zaken 2008.

30 Van Gestel 2003.

31 Van Gestel 2003.

32 Plantinga & Tollenaar 2007.

33 Bozeman 2007.

34 Bozeman 2007.

35 Bozeman 2002.

36 Bozeman 2007, p. 100.

value failure instead of market failure should be leading. This raises the question, however, how to define instances where public values fail.

According to Bozeman ‘from one perspective it is not possible for public values to fail; they simply change.’³⁷ But if we consider a public value about which there is consensus and observe that the value is not being obtained, then perhaps it can be said to have failed’. In line with market failure criteria, Bozeman poses eight criteria for identifying public value failures.³⁸ Public values failures are, for example, likely to occur in the case of extended time horizons, cases of imperfect public information and in situations that threaten human dignity and subsistence. The criteria suggested are not meant to be exhaustive, but are debatable and are meant to promote deliberation about public value.³⁹ In instances where public values are not provided, it is a responsibility of the government to take action.

Although questions regarding the allocation of responsibilities can be considered as an issue of safeguarding and therefore beyond the scope of defining or identifying public interests or public values, the importance of defining public values or public interests is given by the link between defining public interest and safeguarding them. In fact, if it is not possible to define the public interests or public values for which the government should take responsibility, it is also not possible to analyze to what extent the government fails or succeeds in doing so. If the social science approach wants to operate on an even playing field with the economic approach to defining public interests,⁴⁰ that is influencing decisions regarding the allocation of responsibilities between public and private, developing analytical tools for guiding such decisions can be argued for. The public value failure criteria Bozeman proposes forms a first step in such a direction and can therefore be regarded as an important development in the social science approach to defining public interest.⁴¹

3 Applying the social science approach to the welfare state

3.1 Identifying public values in welfare states

Without defining what public values actually are, by using the concept of public value failure as an argument for government intervention, Bozeman does imply that there exists a set of core public values or public interests for which the government is responsible. The content of such a set of core or substantive public values is, however, not specified since it may differ from sector to sector, from country to country and even over time.⁴² Research, for example, shows that changing economic conditions go hand in hand with changes in public attitudes towards welfare state policies.⁴³ The question therefore remains what presently should be considered as the inviolable part of Western welfare states for which governments should take responsibility. A social science approach to answering this question demands an analysis

37 Bozeman 2007, p. 16.

38 Bozeman 2007.

39 Bozeman 2007.

40 Bozeman 2007.

41 Bozeman 2007.

42 Bozeman 2007; De Bruijn & Dicke 2006.

43 Blekesaune 2007.

of the public values that are held within a given country, regarding a certain policy context, during a certain period of time.

In the history of the Dutch welfare state, public values about which there is consensus are, for example, the redistribution of income through the provision of a minimum level of subsistence as well as the protection of income, legitimacy, solidarity, equality of rights, legal certainty, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the institutional design of the welfare state⁴⁴. Goodin et al.⁴⁵ come up with a slightly different list. According to them there is a broad consensus across all welfare regimes that welfare goals should include the following: promoting economic efficiency, reducing poverty, promoting social equality, promoting social integration and avoiding social exclusion, promoting social stability, and promoting autonomy. Social objectives of the European Union, linked to the concept of fundamental rights, for example, are freedoms, such as the right to liberty and security, equality, solidarity, citizens' rights, and justice⁴⁶. And according to Esping-Andersen,⁴⁷ the essence of social policy can be captured in one policy goal: the extension of social rights, where social rights can be regarded in terms of their capacity for decommodification.

The different lists of public values show that in each context different values are emphasized, although the lists are characterized by some overlap. As mentioned, the fact that something is perceived as a public value provides, however, little guidance in making decisions regarding the allocation of responsibilities between government and private parties. According to the social science literature, the responsibility for the government comes up only in instances where public values fail. In order to be able to make decisions about the allocation of responsibilities between public and private it is, therefore, importance to focus on identifying public values failures in Western welfare states.

3.2 Identifying public values failures in welfare states

One way of identifying public values failures in welfare states is by investigating to what extent welfare states are publicly supported or democratically legitimized, for if welfare states are found to receive low public support, this might be an indication of public values failure. As table 1 shows low public support may, however, also be explained by a low importance that is attached to the specific welfare state regime. In this case, a low level of public support does not indicate a public values failure but rather forms an indication that something is not considered as a public value. In order to be able to identify public values failures in welfare states it is therefore important not to focus on low levels of welfare support only, but also investigate how low levels of public support can be explained.

44 Plantinga & Tollenaar 2007.

45 Goodin et al. 1999.

46 D'Antonio 2006.

47 Esping-Andersen 1990.

Table 1: Identifying public values failures in welfare states

Importance attached to welfare state regime	Public support	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Low</i>	No public value	No public value
<i>High</i>	Public value failure	Public value realization

In sociological explanations for the legitimacy of welfare states, solidarity is often brought forward as an important explanatory factor. Recently, however, solidarity is said to be under pressure due to processes of individualization and globalization.⁴⁸ According to Van Oorschot,⁴⁹ the question whether solidarity is under pressure depends heavily on the way the concept is operationalized. Van Oorschot argues that solidarity consists of several elements: solidarity out of perceived self-interest, solidarity out of moral conviction, and solidarity because of emotional ties.⁵⁰ In the Netherlands, perceived self-interest is found to be the most important motivator for willing to contribute to the welfare state. From the Dutch 82% regards perceived self-interest as an important motivator for contributing to welfare, 64% is motivated to pay for reasons of moral convictions, and 42% because they have compassion for the beneficiaries. Van Oorschot argues that when the concept of perceived self-interest is taken into account, developments of processes of individualization are not found to be threatening for solidarity.⁵¹ In fact, according to him, in order to receive high public support the key is to make large parts of the population stakeholder of the welfare state. Crepaz,⁵² however, argues that due to rising diversity as a result of increased immigration, solidarity out of perceived self-interest is not sufficient and attitudes of universal trust and a sense of social solidarity are of high importance for the willingness to support the welfare state.

Although there is disagreement with regard to the question which type of solidarity is most important when explaining the public support for the welfare state, the importance of solidarity for the legitimacy of the welfare states is clear. The importance of different types of solidarity is also shown in the extent to which benefits for different needy groups are publicly supported. Van Oorschot has investigated European public perceptions with regard to the relative deservingness of several needy groups.⁵³ Over the past decades in Western welfare states, the public was found to be most in favor of social protection for old people, closely followed by sick and disabled people. Unemployed people were found to be a little less deserving and social assistance receives least support of all. Howard also finds that the rank order of priorities between different needy groups is similar across different nations, including the United States.⁵⁴ According to Van Oorschot the distinction in support for the various groups

48 De Beer & Koster 2007.

49 Van Oorschot 2006b.

50 Van Oorschot 2000.

51 Van Oorschot 2006b.

52 Crepaz 2008.

53 Van Oorschot 2006a.

54 Howard 2007.

of needy people can therefore be regarded as a ‘truly universal element in the popular welfare culture of present Western welfare states’.⁵⁵

Van Oorschot explains the distinction in support for the various groups of needy people by five deservingness criteria: control, need, identity, attitude, and reciprocity.⁵⁶ Control refers to the control people have over their neediness. The less control, the more deserving people are found to be. Need refers to the level of need: the higher the level of need, the more deserving. Further, people who we can easily identify with and people with an attitude of gratefulness and willingness to conform to our standards are found to be more deserving. Finally, people who have contributed to our group before or who can be expected to contribute in the future are found to be more deserving. Empirical research based on a Dutch solidarity study stemming from the year 1995 shows that the most important deservingness criteria are control, identity, and reciprocity. Control has also found to be an important criterion in other European and American studies.⁵⁷

To conclude, the sociological literature shows that support for the welfare state is influenced by the deservingness criteria control, need, identity, attitude, and reciprocity. Also different forms of solidarity such as solidarity out of perceived self-interest, solidarity out of moral conviction, and solidarity because of emotional ties, are important. In the next section, we will investigate the public support Western welfare states receive and describe to what extent differences in welfare state support can be explained by deservingness criteria and different forms of solidarity. In doing this, we hope to identify, in the case when low levels of public support are found, whether these low levels of support form an indication of public values failure.

4 Identifying public values failures in Western welfare states

4.1 Western welfare states

Before addressing the public support for Western welfare states, it is important to pay attention to the concept welfare state. Since each country has its own welfare state with its own unique culture and institutional set-up, one cannot speak of ‘the’ welfare state. However, it is also not the case that the welfare states are totally different from each other. Most Western welfare states share similar characteristics. In the literature, three types of welfare states or welfare regimes are distinguished: the liberal, corporatist/conservative, and social democratic regime.⁵⁸ An overview of the differences between the three regime types is given in Table 2.

55 Van Oorschot 2006a, p. 25.

56 Van Oorschot 1998.

57 Van Oorschot 1998.

58 Esping-Andersen 1990.

Table 2: Overview of differences between the liberal, corporatist/conservative, and social democratic welfare regime (based on Table 1 of Clasen & Van Oorschot 2002, p. 94).

Welfare regime	Liberal	Conservative	Social democratic
<i>Underlying principle</i>	Need	Reciprocity (equity)	Universalism (equality)
<i>General aim of regime</i>	Minimum level of subsistence	Income protection	Promotion general well-being
<i>Safeguarding instrument</i>	Social assistance	Social insurance	Universal benefits
<i>Responsibility</i>	State responsibility	Involvement of social partners	State responsibility

Each regime type is characterized by different underlying fundamental values⁵⁹ or principles.⁶⁰ Liberty forms an important value in the liberal welfare state. In relations of free exchange, people are able to make mutually beneficial exchanges. However, when the market fails and some people are in danger of falling below the poverty line, the government needs to step in. On the basis of the principle of need resources are redistributed to only those who are worst off. The reduction of poverty or the provision of a minimum level of subsistence therefore forms an important goal of the liberal welfare state. Social assistance forms an important instrument for safeguarding these goals and the provision of social assistance is considered a state responsibility.⁶¹

In a conservative or sometimes also called corporatist welfare state social cohesion forms an important underlying value. In such a regime, cooperation and collaboration are important. People contribute to the group they belong to and, in case of problems, can fall back on this group. The principles of reciprocity and equity are also important: the entitlements depend on the contributions that have been made. Important goal of the conservative or corporate regime is therefore income protection, and in doing this, preserving the social order and realize social stability⁶². Social insurances are an important instrument for realizing these goals. Furthermore, in the provision of these insurances the social partners play an important role.

Finally, in a social democratic welfare state social equality as well as freedom, justice and solidarity form important underlying values⁶³. The principle of universalism also plays a role: everyone should be able to participate in society. The promotion of general well-being therefore is an important aim of the social democratic welfare state, but also goals such as reducing poverty, enhancing economic equality and personal autonomy are important for

59 Goodin et al. 1999.

60 Clasen & Van Oorschot 2002.

61 Clasen & Van Oorschot 2002.

62 Goodin et al. 1999.

63 Stjernø 2008.

realizing social equality. Redistribution of resources from the rich to the poor forms an important safeguarding instrument in a social democratic welfare state as well as the provision of universal benefits.

Although the welfare regime classification of Esping-Andersen is criticized the distinction between three different ideal types is used up until today since it provides a useful heuristic for identifying broad differences in welfare regimes.⁶⁴ Moreover, what is important for our discussion is that the three welfare regimes are expected to differ with regard to the public support that is given to their welfare policies.⁶⁵

4.2 Public support for Western welfare states

According to Esping-Andersen social-democratic welfare states have the highest capacity for decommodification, that is, the extent to which individuals can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independent from their participation on the market.⁶⁶ The capacity for decommodification is lower in conservative welfare states, while liberal welfare states have the least capacity for decommodification. According to this typology, in social democratic welfare regimes the highest public support for government intervention can be expected, followed by conservative welfare regimes. Finally, liberal welfare regimes are expected to be characterized by the lowest public support for government intervention.⁶⁷ The evidence supporting these hypotheses is, however, mixed.

Gelissen,⁶⁸ for example, does not find support for the hypothesis that a relationship exists between welfare regimes and levels of support. His analysis is based on the Eurobarometer 1992 and 2001 surveys and includes the public support for a broad range of government interventions, such as, government intervention aimed at ensuring a decent standard of living for children and the unemployed and housing support. Individuals who live in social democratic welfare regimes show less support for these types of government intervention compared to individuals living in liberal welfare regimes. When using the 1989 Eurobarometer survey and investigating the question ‘which social welfare programs are absolutely necessary to be able to benefit from social welfare when needed’, Lapinski et al.⁶⁹ also find that social democratic welfare states did not attract greater support.

Variations between welfare state regimes are found when the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) data for 1985 and 1990 are used. Lapinski et al.⁷⁰ find a difference in attitude between, on the one hand, liberal countries, and on the other hand, conservative and social democratic countries. Individuals living in liberal welfare regimes are less supportive. No differences between conservative and social democratic countries are observed. Andreß and Heien use the ISSP data of 1992.⁷¹ They also find that people in liberal welfare states show low levels of support for governmental action. They further find medium level of support in

64 Esping-Andersen 1990; Svallfors 1997; Lapinski et al 1998.

65 Lapinski et al.1998.

66 Esping-Andersen 1990.

67 Lapinski et al.1998.

68 Gelissen 2000; 2008.

69 Lapinski 1998.

70 Lapinski et al, 1998.

71 Andreß & Heien 2001.

conservative regime and high support in social democratic regime. The questions they use are: whether it is the responsibility of the government to reduce income differences, whether it is the responsibility of the government to provide jobs for all, and whether it is the responsibility of the government to provide a basic income for all. The measure of public support in the ISSP data is therefore different from the measure of the Eurobarometer surveys.

According to Larsen,⁷² when focusing on items measuring attitudes towards policies concerning the poor and the unemployed, a regime pattern can be found. Liberal welfare regimes receive low support, conservative regimes moderate support, and social democratic regimes high support. Svallfors comes up with similar conclusions.⁷³ Basing also on the ISSP data of 1992, he concludes that the social democratic welfare regime shows the highest redistribute attitude and highest support for government intervention, while the redistribute attitude and support for government intervention are lowest in the liberal welfare regime. The analyses of the public support for Western welfare states thus show that welfare states show large similarities in public support for a broad measure of government intervention. Public support does, however, differ for policies concerning the poor and the unemployed. In the next section possible explanations for these differences in public support are brought forward.

4.3 Explaining differences in public support

In explaining why social democratic welfare regimes are characterized by the highest public support and liberal welfare regimes by the lowest public support with regard to policies concerning the poor and the unemployed, Svallfors focuses on differences in attitudes to income differences.⁷⁴ He finds that citizens from different welfare regimes vary in the extent to which income differences are regarded as legitimate. Compared to citizens living in the liberal welfare regime of the United States, citizens of social democratic welfare regimes, in particular Norwegians, are much less in favor of income differences. From this respect, differences in public support for income redistribution by the government can be explained by different attitudes with regard to the legitimacy of income differences.

Alesina & Angeletos explain different in public support by differences in perceptions regarding the fairness of market outcomes.⁷⁵ They argue, that when income differences are believed to be highly determined by luck higher income redistribution is supported compared to situations where income differences are believed to be highly determined by ones own effort. Lower public support for income redistribution in the United States can, from this respect, be explained by a strong belief that income differences are highly determined by ones own effort and not by luck. The World Values Survey, for example, shows that 71% of the Americans versus 40% of the Europeans believe that the poor could become rich if they tried hard enough.⁷⁶ According to Alesina & Angeletos,⁷⁷ this argument is not limited to a comparison of the United States versus Europe, but holds for European welfare regimes as well. They find

72 Larsen 2008.

73 Svallfors 1997.

74 Svallfors 1997.

75 Alesina & Angeletos 2003.

76 Alesina & Angeletos 2003.

77 Alesina & Angeletos 2003.

a significant relationship between a leftist political orientation in a country and the belief that luck determines income.

The follow-up question is how differences in attitudes toward the legitimacy of income differences can be explained. Comparing the United States with European welfare regimes, Alesina & Glaeser find that economic explanations in terms of a lower pre-tax income inequality and lower income mobility give little explanation of why citizens from social-democratic welfare regimes favor income differences less.⁷⁸ They find that the political institutions and heterogeneity of the population in the United States do form an important explanation. Brooks & Manza also find that the context in which individuals are situated forms an important explanatory factor for welfare state preferences.⁷⁹

Larsen offers an explanation of how differences in institutional structures may influence welfare state preferences.⁸⁰ He argues that ‘the institutional structure of the different welfare regimes influences or frames the way the public perceives the poor and unemployed’.⁸¹ His analysis is based on the deservingness criteria we discussed in section 3.2: control, need, identity, attitude, and reciprocity. According to Larsen a liberal welfare regime, characterized by a selective welfare policy, opens the discussion of whether people are in need, in control, and have a grateful attitude.⁸² Moreover, it creates boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ negatively affecting the willingness to support the welfare state for reasons of identity and reciprocity. The logic of a social democratic regime, characterized by a universal welfare policy, is in many respects contrary to the liberal regime. In a social democratic regime, the discussion of whether people are in need, are to blame for their need, or are grateful for the welfare resources they receive, is far less important. This increases the willingness to support the welfare state for reasons of meeting the deservingness criteria need, control, and attitude. Moreover, in a universal welfare state regime everyone belongs to a national ‘us’ and the boundaries between those who give and those who receive are blurred, positively affecting the willingness to support the welfare state for reasons of identity and reciprocity.

The hypothesized link between welfare regimes and the fulfillment of deservingness criteria is verified in an analysis of the World Values Study of 1990. Larsen, for example, finds that in the liberal welfare regime of the United States 39% of the people believe that the reason for people living in need is due to laziness and lack of willpower, while in the social democratic regime of Sweden only 16% of the people believe so.⁸³ In addition to the deservingness criteria, Van Oorschot has emphasized the importance of solidarity for welfare state support.⁸⁴ According to Van Oorschot, the support for solidary welfare policies highly depends on the interest that the middle class has in the regime.⁸⁵ He argues that in order to retain high public support it is important to make a large part of the population stakeholder of the welfare regime. The involvement of the social partners is therefore important. Moreover, it might form an impor-

78 Alesina & Glaeser 2004.

79 Brooks & Manza 2007.

80 Larsen 2008.

81 Larsen 2008, p.148.

82 Larsen 2008.

83 Larsen 2008.

84 Van Oorschot 2000.

85 Van Oorschot 2006b.

tant explanation for the finding that social democratic welfare regimes are characterized by higher levels of public support.

All in all, the research described in this section shows that an important factor explaining differences in public support between welfare states, is the extent to which different groups are perceived as being deserving or meet the deservingness criteria. From this respect, a low level of public support for policies concerning the poor and the unemployed found in liberal welfare regimes does not seem to be an indication of a public values failure. Rather, it indicates that citizens of liberal welfare states perceive the position of the unemployed and the poor differently compared to citizens of social-democratic welfare states.

5 Towards an interdisciplinary approach to defining public interests

An important message the social science public interest literature brings forward is that public interests or public values are a social construct. Therefore, public interests or public values inherently are dynamic and involve political decision making regarding different possible competing public interests or public values. With regard to the question what can be regarded as the public interests of the welfare state for which governments should take responsibility, the social science literature therefore also does not come up with a unifying answer. Such an answer depends on the country and the specific period of time under study. From the perspective of social science, an interdisciplinary approach should therefore take the context into consideration when trying to define public interests.

Moreover, the fact that something is regarded to be in the public interest or is perceived as a public value does not, in itself, have any implications for decisions with regard to the allocation of responsibilities between public and private. According to the social science literature, the responsibility for the government comes up only in instances where public interests are not realized or public values fail. The question is then, of course, in which instances public values fail. Important development in the social sciences is the public values failure approach of Bozeman which formulates general criteria, in line with market failure criteria, to describe situations in which public values are more likely to fail.⁸⁶ A second important element the social science approach to defining public interests brings forward is therefore that in order to be able to make decisions about the allocation of responsibilities between public and private, it is necessary to focus on public values failure.

When focusing on the question what can be regarded as the public values of the welfare state, a social science approach will emphasize that such a definition depends on the country and the specific period of time under study. However, the social science approach also brings forward that by adopting the public values failure framework some general notions might be made with regard to what should be considered as the inviolable part of the welfare state for which the government should take responsibility.

One way of identifying public values failures in welfare states is by analyzing to what extent welfare states are publicly supported or democratically legitimized. What is clear from the

⁸⁶ Bozeman 2007.

welfare state literature is that the rank order of public support for different needy groups is similar across different welfare regimes. All over modern Western welfare states, in various decades, the public was found to be most in favor of social protection for 1) old people, 2) sick and disabled people, 3) needy families with children, 4) unemployed people, and 5) people depending on social assistance.⁸⁷ The hierarchy in public support between the different groups can be explained by five deservingness criteria: control, need, identity, attitude, and reciprocity.⁸⁸ Given the stability in rank order of public support for different needy groups, the low level of public support that is attached to government interventions for the unemployed and for people depending on social assistance does not seem to be an indication of public values failure but rather indicates a difference in importance that is attached to the protection of these groups (see Table 3). That is, the unemployed and people depending on social assistance are perceived as less deserving in comparison to the old, sick, and disabled.

Table 3: Identifying public values failures for policies concerning different needy groups

Importance attached to different needy groups	Public support for policies concerning the different groups	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Low</i>	No public value (Poor and unemployed)	No public value
<i>High</i>	Public value failure	Public value realization (Old, sick and disabled)

The question is whether the low levels of public support for policies concerning the poor and the unemployed found in liberal welfare regimes can also be explained by differences in public values or whether it forms an indication of a public values failure. Here, the explanations also seem to be more in line with the former. Research shows that the extent to which different groups are perceived as being deserving or meet the deservingness criteria, differs between welfare regimes. A low level of public support for policies concerning the poor and the unemployed in liberal welfare states therefore does not necessary indicate a public values failure. Rather it indicates, as Table 4 shows, that citizens of liberal welfare states perceive the position of the unemployed and the poor differently compared to citizens of social-democratic welfare states.

Table 4: Identifying public values failures for different welfare regimes

Importance attached to the poor and unemployed	Public support for policies concerning the poor and unemployed	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Low</i>	No public value (Liberal welfare regime)	No public value
<i>High</i>	Public value failure	Public value realization (Social democratic regime)

⁸⁷ Van Oorschot 2006a.

⁸⁸ Van Oorschot 1998.

Although within each welfare regime, the extent to which certain groups are perceived as deserving changes over time and is adjusted to economic developments such as levels of unemployment, changes in perceptions between welfare regimes are likely to persist since they originate from institutional factors and are historically grounded.

To conclude, our analysis of the public support for Western welfare states shows that some general notions can be made with regard to what should be considered as the inviolable part of the welfare state for which the government should take responsibility. A public interest to protect vulnerable groups can be identified. Which groups are believed to deserve protection or which level of protection is believed to be necessary does, however, depend on the institutional context. As a result, the allocation of responsibilities between public and private for the protection of these groups depends on the institutional context and may therefore differ from country to country and over time.

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