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DOI

[10.1177/0958928715621711](https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928715621711)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of European Social Policy

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Marx, P., & Schumacher, G. (2016). The effect of economic change and elite framing on support for welfare state retrenchment: a survey experiment. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 26(1), 20-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928715621711>

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The effect of economic change and elite framing on support for welfare state retrenchment: A survey experiment

Journal of European Social Policy
2016, Vol. 26(1) 20–31
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0958928715621711
esp.sagepub.com
 SAGE

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Abstract

How do economic downturns affect citizens' support for welfare state retrenchment? Existing observational studies fail to isolate the effect of economic conditions and the effect of elite framing of these conditions. We therefore designed a survey experiment to evaluate how economic change in conjunction with different elite frames impact citizens' support for welfare state retrenchment. We hypothesise and demonstrate that the effects of these frames differ by income group and partisanship. Our survey experiment – carried out in the United Kingdom – demonstrates that poor economic prospects generally motivate support for unemployment benefits vis-à-vis deficit reduction. Emphasis on inequality does not change this picture. Emphasis on government debt and deficits increases support for retrenchment compared with objective information. We find support for the hypothesis that partisans are less responsive to the economy than independents. However, income differences are a surprisingly weak moderator of our treatments. We derive two main conclusions: first, elite frames significantly influence the effect of economic change on welfare state preferences. Second, party identification is crucial to understand individual differences in welfare state preferences and should receive more attention in future research.

Keywords

Economic crisis, elite framing, partisanship, preferences, welfare state

Introduction

Under which conditions welfare state retrenchment is politically feasible is an important debate in contemporary social policy research. It has been noted that retrenchment often occurs against the background of poor economic conditions (Kitschelt, 2001; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Starke, 2008; Vis, 2009). The reason for this can partly be related to a

functional logic: poor economic conditions create 'objective' problem pressure, possibly implying the

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need to reform the welfare state. However, there is also a political logic: poor economic conditions might be used by political elites, such as parties and politicians, to convince citizens of the need to reform the welfare state (Van Kersbergen and Vis, 2014).

In this article, we want to shed light on the link between economic conditions and popular support of welfare state retrenchment. In doing so, we make four contributions to the literature. First, we advance the debate about welfare state retrenchment by linking it to a broader political science literature on how the economy affects citizens' left–right preferences. Second, we use a framing experiment in the United Kingdom to analyse the effect of different ways in which elites can communicate economic developments. While common in psychology and communication research, framing experiments are not frequently used in social policy research. This is unfortunate, because social constructivism, a dominant perspective in welfare state theory, emphasises the crucial role of elite framing on public opinion (Béland, 2005; Cox, 2001; Schmidt, 2002). Third, the results of our survey experiment in the United Kingdom show that objective information about the economy has a significant and negative effect on public support for retrenching unemployment benefits. The results change, however, when objective economic information is combined with different frames, for instance, about budget deficits. Fourth, we show that there is meaningful individual variation in how citizens receive frames about the economy. While income differences matter surprisingly little, party identification is a strong moderator of framing effects. Respondents who feel close to a party show significantly weaker responses to our stimuli than independents. By pointing to the relevance of partisan bias, we challenge the political economy assumption that social policy preferences primarily reflect economically instrumental motives.

Economic conditions and economic preferences

Whether and how economic downturns affect citizens' economic left–right preferences is an unresolved question. Do economic downturns increase support for left-wing economic policies through

citizens' concern about unemployment risk and social inequality? Some studies indeed demonstrate that in times of economic crises, public opinion shifts to the left (Blekesaune, 2007; Kam and Nam, 2008; Soroka and Wlezien, 2005). Others claim that economic hardship strengthens materialist considerations at the expense of 'luxury' post-materialist considerations (Inglehart, 1985) so that citizens on average become more critical of the welfare state. Some studies indeed show that in times of economic crisis, public opinion shifts to the right (Durr, 1993; Stevenson, 2001).¹

After welfare state research sought to explain the absence of reform, the consensus now seems to be that radical retrenchment does occur (Levy, 2010; Van Kersbergen and Vis, 2014). Different scholars have argued that retrenchment is more likely under the condition of economic problem pressure (Cox, 2001; Kitschelt, 2001; Korpi and Palme, 2003; Marx and Schumacher, 2013; Schmidt, 2002; Starke, 2008; Vis, 2009). But we still know little about the micro-foundation of this process. Does retrenchment occur in bad economic times, *because* public opinion swings to the right, as some argue? Or does it happen *despite* the public's swing to the left, which has been observed by others? Or does the effect of the economy depend on political agency, as social constructivists argue? Accordingly, it is not the economy per se, but the way in which it is communicated by reform-minded politicians that makes public opinion shift.

A cause of the inconclusiveness of previous research is that the observational micro- or macro-level data this research uses provides no control over the impact of subjective economic perceptions *and* the objective state of the economy on preferences for social policies. Economic conditions vary over time, but also (competing) elites differ in how they frame economic conditions over time. Because of this, the causes of public opinion change are difficult to isolate in observational studies. A second potential cause for the inconclusive results is that individuals may vary in how they respond to changes in economic conditions. Some people strongly identify with political parties. This goes beyond narrow support for a party's policies and has even been portrayed as a source of social identity (Green et al., 2002). As such,

party identification is a powerful psychological mechanism which helps individuals organizing their political world-views and which motivates them to perceive reality in a way favourable to their party. Accordingly, partisans are more likely to take cues from elites they identify with (Taber and Lodge, 2006), whereas political independents are less biased in their perception of the economy (Kayser and Wlezien, 2011). So far, the social policy literature has tended to ignore the concept of party identification, but based on political behaviour research, we would expect it to be a powerful mechanism moderating the susceptibility to welfare state discourses. A second important source of individual differences is income. Simply put, poor, rich or middle-class individuals have different propensities to benefit from or pay for redistribution (Korpi and Palme, 1998). Hence, they should respond differently to economic downturns.

As a consequence of these problems, we argue that experimental research designs that disentangle the effect of the objective economy from the effect of elite interpretations of the objective economy are important complements to existing observational studies.

Objective and ideological frames

Framing experiments randomly assign individuals to different messages, and differences in attitude between treatment groups are interpreted as framing effects. In the area of economic policy preferences, several experiments report framing effects (Kangas et al., 2014; Malhotra and Margalit, 2010; Petersen et al., 2012). We build on this small but emerging literature to analyse the effect of three different frames – the *objective frame*, the *inequality frame* and the *deficit frame* – on a specific economic policy preference: support for benefits for the unemployed vis-à-vis support for deficit reduction. Specifically, our dependent variable is the answer to the question

Which of the two following goals do you personally think the government should prioritize? (1) Maintaining the standard of living for the unemployed even if this leads to a higher budget deficit or (2) reducing the budget deficit even if it means cuts in unemployment benefits.

We force respondents to choose between options to mimic real-world political discourses in which these options are typically presented as mutually exclusive. Now we turn to discussing the design and expectations for each of the three frames.

First, the objective frame provides a concrete statement about unemployment ‘Next year unemployment in UK will reach an all-time high. Many jobs in the public and private sector will be cut’. The treatment aims to signal a poor prospective economic situation.² By doing so, we expect to activate two mechanisms: (1) people from low-income brackets, who have little savings and pay little taxes, will be mainly concerned with the risk of personal job loss and therefore choose to defend unemployment benefits more than people in a similar socio-economic situation who did not receive this treatment (the control group); (2) people with higher incomes may feel threatened by this negative economic prospect, too, and therefore support unemployment benefits as a means to insure themselves against future income loss. On the other hand, worries about higher tax burdens because of a bloated welfare state, government debts and budget deficits may dominate and individuals with higher incomes become more supportive of retrenchment. In sum, there are competing hypotheses for the effect of poor economic prospects on the entire population (H1A: more support, H1B: less support; see Table 1), but we unambiguously expect more support for keeping unemployment programmes compared with the control group among low incomes (H2).

Second, the inequality frame is similar to the objective frame plus this information: ‘Experts say that unemployment benefits need to be kept at their current level to keep people from falling into poverty. Otherwise the UK will become a more unequal country’. We expect that our emphasis on inequality activates inequality aversion. Individuals are highly sensitive to the framing of unequal outcomes and are motivated to seek some form of distributive justice (Bowles and Gintis, 2011). Hence, we expect inequality aversion to be activated by this frame which leads to more support for the unemployment programme than in the objective frame (H3). As Fong demonstrates (2001), the effect of inequality aversion should be irrespective of income.³ This would

Table I. Overview of hypotheses.

H1A:	Poor economic prospects lead to more support for unemployment benefits
H1B:	Poor economic prospects lead to less support for unemployment benefits
H2:	Poor economic prospects lead to more support for unemployment benefits <i>for individuals with low-income</i>
H3:	Poor economic prospects lead to more support for unemployment benefits <i>if inequality is emphasized</i>
H4:	Left-wing partisans support unemployment benefits more if inequality is emphasized
H5:	Poor economic prospects lead to less support for unemployment benefits <i>if debt and deficit are emphasized.</i>
H6:	Right-wing partisans support unemployment benefits less if debt and deficit are emphasized
H7:	Independents respond more strongly to our treatments than partisans

contradict Durr's (1993) argument that inequality aversion is a luxury only affordable in good economic times. Also, we expect the prospect of more inequality, typical concerns of left parties, to resonate better with participants that identify with these parties. They should be more strongly activated than in the objective frame (H4).

Third, in the deficit frame, we add to the objective frame the sentence: 'Experts say that unemployment benefits need to be cut, because the costs will skyrocket and push the budget further into deficit. Otherwise debts will be passed on to future generations'. This frame reflects a welfare-critical rhetoric typically adopted by right-wing parties. By emphasizing debts and deficits, we seek to activate concerns for higher tax burdens because of excessive government spending and thereby reduce the effect of inequality aversion. Survey evidence demonstrates that citizens who perceive the welfare state as straining the economy discount redistributive goals (Giger and Nelson, 2013). Hence, we expect here that people choose to cut the unemployment programme for the sake of the budget, particularly if they have high incomes and pay more taxes (H5). Because this echoes – generally speaking – a message from a right-wing party, we expect participants

that identify with a right-wing party to be more in favour of retrenching the unemployment programme than in other treatments (H6).

So far, we have formulated expectations about income and partisanship. However, many people do not identify with a political party. Although partisans are very responsive to specific party cues or cues that resonate with their beliefs, they are less responsive to non-party cues (Taber and Lodge, 2006). This might have direct effects on how economic change is translated into political behaviour. It has been shown, for instance, that voters with strong party identification have a relatively weak tendency to adjust their voting intentions to the state of the economy. The frequently observed link between a poor economy and electoral punishment of incumbent governments (economic voting) is indeed mainly driven by independents. Therefore, the more partisans (less independents) in a polity, the less economic voting takes place (Kayser and Wlezién, 2011). We think a similar logic may apply to support for welfare state retrenchment. Partisans have relatively stable ideological commitments and might be less receptive to our (non-partisan) cues. Independents, however, should be more flexible in their ideological position and more receptive to arguments reflected in the different cues. Our last hypothesis hence is that independents respond stronger on our frames than partisans (H7). Concretely, because these independents carry less ideological baggage, we expect them to support the unemployment programme in the inequality treatment but support retrenchment in the deficit treatment.

The United Kingdom in a comparative perspective

Citizens from different countries vary in their support of retrenchment. Overall, retrenchment is more likely to take place in liberal welfare states such as the United Kingdom (Pierson, 2001). In line with this expectation, welfare state support is lower in this regime type compared with the conservative or social democratic type (e.g. Meier Jæger, 2009). Indeed, successive British governments have reduced the generosity of unemployment benefits, effectively converting the system into a single-tier

structure with low flat-rate benefits targeted at low incomes (Clasen, 2011). As a consequence, unemployment benefits are relatively unattractive for British middle-class citizens (Clasen and Koslowski, 2013). In this situation, one would expect welfare state support to be more polarized across income groups than in countries with less targeting (Korpi and Palme, 1998). Specifically, median to high incomes should be susceptible to arguments for retrenching a system that has little to offer for them.

At the time of our survey (December 2012), welfare state retrenchment had figured prominently in public debates for some time. Against the background of the Great Recession and growing budget deficits, the incumbent centre-right government had been exceptionally pro-retrenchment and had implemented relatively harsh cutbacks between 2010 and 2012 (Van Kersbergen et al., 2014). The underlying reform debate has potentially increased citizens' susceptibility to pro-retrenchment arguments. But the fact that far-reaching reforms had been implemented already also could have curbed enthusiasm for further retrenchment.

In sum, based on the institutional characteristics of the UK welfare state, there is reason to expect that the mean support for retrenchment, as well as income differences in this support, is relatively large. With starker differences between classes and parties, the United Kingdom may be a most-likely case for our hypotheses. However, since we still know little about framing effects in the field of social policy, this would still have to be verified by systematic cross-national research.

Design of the study

To evaluate these claims (see Table 1), we fielded an online survey experiment⁴ in the United Kingdom with ca. 3500 respondents 18 years or older in December 2012. The sample is drawn from the nationally representative YouGov panel. We randomly assigned respondents to one of three experimental conditions or the control group.

We discuss our results in three ways. First, we compare support for retrenchment by experimental condition. Second, we regress support for retrenchment on dummies for the experimental conditions, income group and an interaction term between

experimental condition and income. The three (annual household) income groups are low (<10,000 GBP), medium (10,000–34,999 GBP) and high. We include the following control variables: age, gender, a dummy for holding a university degree, political knowledge and partisanship (for descriptives and operationalization see appendix). Our dependent variable is a choice between two options; hence we use binary logistic regression. Third, we repeat the analysis with an interaction term between partisanship and treatments. Respondents feeling 'close' or 'very close' to a party are coded into left (Labour, 25.2%), right (Conservatives, 22.5%) or other partisans (21.1%). Given the unclear expectations, we do not show results for 'other' partisans. All remaining respondents are coded as independents (31.3%).

Do poor economic prospects drive support for unemployment benefits?

Figure 1 displays the proportion of respondents supporting retrenchment of unemployment benefits. In the control group, there is a majority in favour of retrenchment (58%). This is plausible given the political context at the time of the survey, in which the coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats strongly advocated reducing the budget deficit, not least by cutting unemployment benefits. We are, however, mostly interested in differences between experimental conditions. As predicted in H1A, the poor economic prospects in the objective frame push respondents on average to supporting unemployment benefits (49%) and thus bias them against retrenchment (significantly different with $p=0.001$). This supports H1A and rejects H1B.

Virtually the same proportion of respondents (49%) supports keeping the unemployment benefits in the inequality frame (significantly different from control group with $p=0.002$). This could be expected as well, because concerns about inequality and poverty should increase support for social protection. Both findings are statistically and substantially significant, as support drops by nine percentage points and more importantly, the median respondent swings from supporting retrenchment in the control group to supporting the benefits in both treatments.

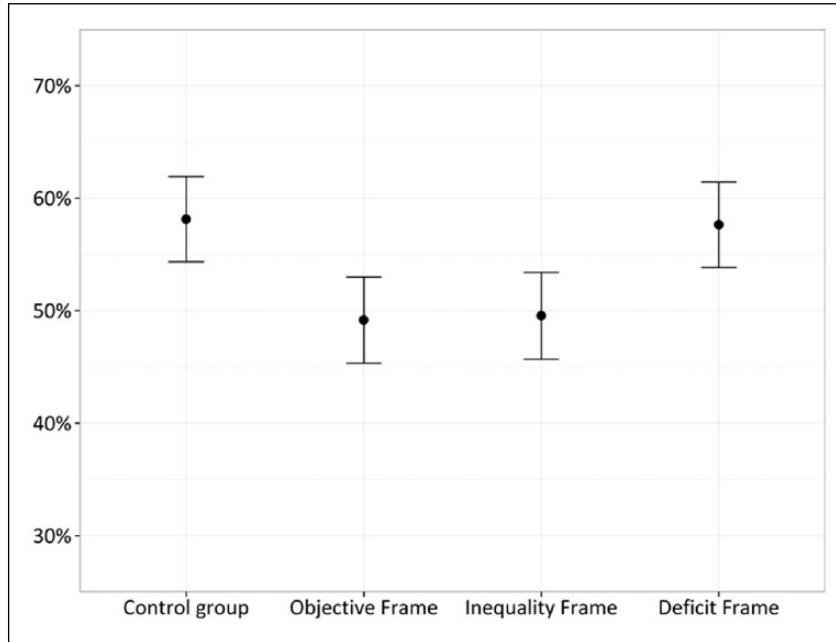


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents supporting cuts in unemployment benefits for different treatments (with 95% confidence intervals).

The group exposed to the deficit frame is more in support of retrenchment than the participants exposed to the objective frame or the inequality frame (significantly smaller at respectively $p=0.003$ and $p=0.002$). The average support in this condition resembles the control group. Given the effects of the previous treatments, this is not a null finding. By emphasizing debts and deficits rather than inequality, support swings to retrenchment of the programme. In other words, the deficit frame produces a rightward shift in favour of retrenchment which offsets the leftward shift induced by objective economic news. Hence, although the treatment does seem ineffective if compared with the control group, it does not if compared with the objective and inequality treatment. This supports H5.

Does income matter for supporting unemployment benefits?

We present the results of our logistic regression analyses graphically in Figure 2 (full tables in appendix).

Figure 2 presents in the left panel the differences in support for retrenchment for different income groups between the control group and the three treatments (marginal effects of the interaction term between income and treatments). To make comparisons between the treatments, the right panel of Figure 2 presents the differences in support for retrenchment between the objective frame treatment and the other two treatments.

We find that the treatment effects differ by income group. In the objective frame, support for retrenchment is dramatically reduced among low incomes (significantly different from low incomes in the control group at $p=0.001$). This verifies H2. Interestingly, participants in the middle-income group were not more supportive of unemployment benefits in the objective frame compared with the control group. However, individuals in the high-income group were less in support of retrenchment in the objective frame (significantly different from high incomes in control group at $p=0.05$). In the inequality frame, the middle-income group is significantly more in support of maintaining unemployment benefits (significantly

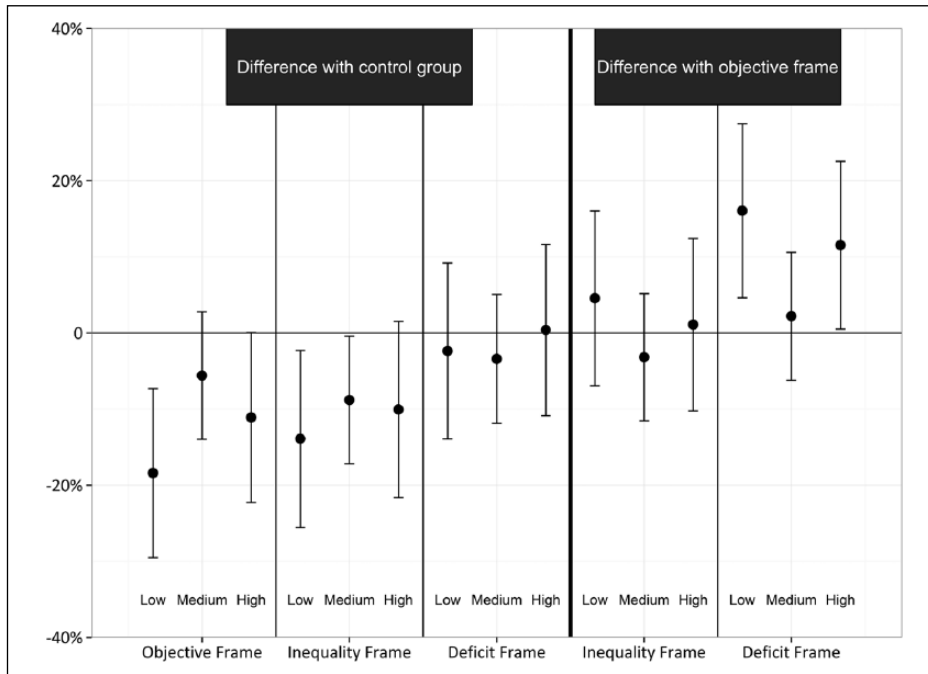


Figure 2. Differences in proportion of respondents supporting cuts in unemployment benefits by income group between control group and experimental conditions (left panel) and between objective frame and inequality and deficit frame (right panel).

Note: Points represent difference in proportions between a respective income category in the treatment and in the control group (left panel) and between an income category in the treatment and the objective frame treatment (right panel). Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

different from control group at $p=0.04$) just like the other two income groups. The differences between the objective frame and the inequality frame are however tiny and therefore inequality aversion does not seem to add to the objective information. Apparently, poor economic prospects already activate inequality concerns or demands for insurance among all income groups. Therefore, we reject H3.

In the deficit frame, we find that all three income groups do not differ from the control group, but the low ($p<0.01$) and high incomes ($p<0.05$) do support retrenchment more than in the objective condition. Especially for low incomes, it is striking that they are also susceptible to the right-wing message in the deficit frame and do not show stronger support for unemployment benefits as in the other conditions. Overall, we conclude that self-interest – based on income – has a limited moderating effect on our treatments.

Do partisans and independents respond differently to the same information?

It appears from our previous analysis that ideologically biased messages blur class differences. If this is the case, party identification as a heuristic capturing ideological variation should be an influential variable. Indeed, party identification is a powerful moderator of our treatments (Figure 3 – based on the logistic regression appendix Table 4). Along the lines of our theoretical argument, independents drive the results when exposed to the objective frame. While they exhibit a 20 percentage point difference to untreated independents, no significant effect can be found for partisans of either camp. This supports H7.

In the inequality condition, left partisans can be mobilized against retrenchment, too. As predicted in

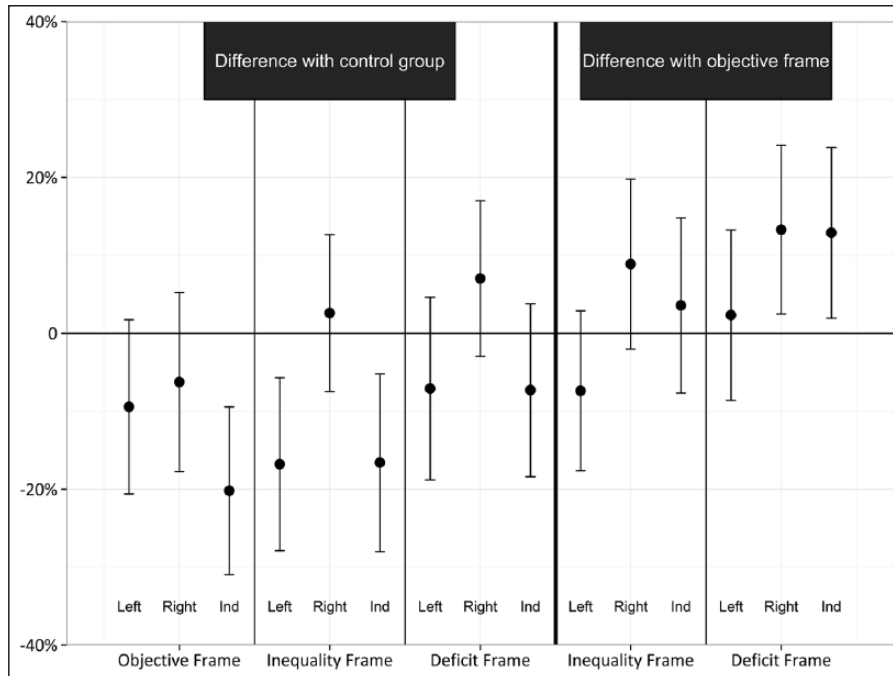


Figure 3. Differences in proportion of respondents supporting cuts in unemployment benefits by party identification between control group and experimental conditions (left panel) and between objective frame and inequality and deficit frame (right panel).

Note: Points represent difference in proportions between a respective income category in the treatment and in the control group (left panel) and between an income category in the treatment and the objective frame treatment (right panel). Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

H4, this group reacts stronger to the inequality frame than to objective information while the additional sentence makes hardly a difference for independents.

The deficit frame is interesting for three reasons. First, it has no effect on left partisans, who seem to ignore the ‘right-wing message’. This mirrors the behaviour of right partisans in the inequality condition. Second, it mobilizes support for retrenchment among right-wing partisans as predicted by H6. In this group, the treated individuals show a 13 percentage point increase of support ($p < 0.05$) compared with the objective condition. Third, the negative effect among the independents that we observed in the objective condition disappears. Their support for retrenchment is significantly stronger in the deficit condition compared with the objective condition ($p < 0.05$). Our interpretation is that independents have more ideological flexibility which makes them responsive to the deficit frame. In sum, the results

support our H4, H6 and H7. Party identification is a strong psychological mechanism filtering economic information with clear effects on support for welfare state retrenchment.

Discussion

The effect of economic fluctuation on social and economic policy preferences is disputed in the literature. This article demonstrates that poor economic prospects drive support for sustaining generous unemployment benefits rather than increasing support for retrenchment. On a general level, this supports observational studies finding a leftward shift in times of high unemployment and refutes the argument that welfare support is a luxury reserved for good economic times. However, we also showed that it matters crucially *how* elites frame poor economic prospects. We found that the objective

message as well as an emphasis on inequality increase support for unemployment benefits especially among independents and left-wing partisans. However, independents and right-wing partisans shift their support to retrenching unemployment benefits if the poor economic prospects are associated with government debt and budget deficit. Our treatments – in the form of small alterations to the text – even caused a preference shift of the mean respondent.

Our finding that independents do most of the preference shifting reinforces the model put forward by Kayser and Wlezien (2011) which demonstrates that only non-partisans engage in economic voting. This implies that partisans tend to ignore economic changes which could lead them to discount their own economic interest. Indeed, self-interest – based on income differences – had limited explanatory power in our experiment. However, we do acknowledge that self-interest could work through different mechanisms such as unemployment risk.

Party identification is an almost classical explanatory variable in studies of voting behaviour. While research into social policy preferences often ignores the concept, our results show that partisan bias is highly relevant. We thus recommend researchers to make use of questions on party identification in standard comparative data sets such as the European Social Survey.

By employing a survey experiment, our study solves the problem that observational studies cannot separate the effects of the objective and subjective economy on political preferences. Together with a small but emerging literature (Kangas et al., 2014; Malhotra and Margalit, 2010; Petersen et al., 2012; Wenzelburger, 2014), our study reaffirms the importance of elite framing of the economy and partisanship in shaping preferences for economic policy. Experiments and framing studies in particular offer important analytical tools for a wide array of research question related to social policy preferences.

Funding

This work was supported by the Danish Council for Independent Research [G.S.], the Carlsberg Foundation [2012_01_0494 P.M.] and the Reforming Welfare State Institutions Programme [G.S. and P.M.].

Notes

1. Type of crisis might matter. Erikson et al. (2002) find that unemployment drives public opinion to the left, but inflation drives public opinion to the right.
2. We chose unemployment as an economic indicator rather than gross domestic product (GDP) growth or inflation, because unemployment is a very salient and intuitive indicator which has been frequently used in the literature.
3. Accordingly, individuals are generally motivated by the desire to uphold ethical norms with regard to social equality and they are willing to discount material self-interest to do so. What these norms dictate exactly and how they are pursued should of course differ by cultural and political context.
4. We use a survey rather than a laboratory experiment, because it provides better comparability to existing research (which is pre-dominantly based on survey data) and greater external validity. Moreover, survey experiments are typically used in framing studies.

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Appendix I

For our operationalization of partisanship and income, see main text. For education we created a dummy differentiating between respondents that finished university education (1) or not (0). We asked respondents for their gender (0: female, 1: male).

Political knowledge is evaluated by means of three knowledge questions. First, who is the

current chancellor of Germany? Second, who is the secretary-general of the United Nations? Third, who is the prime minister of the United Kingdom? Respondents provided open answers, and we were lenient vis-à-vis accepting misspelled names as correct (up to four errors). We categorized whether respondents had 0, 1, 2 or 3 correct answers. Finally, we also asked respondents' age.

Table 2. Descriptives per variable (no. of respondents per category).

Policy choice (dv)	Keep benefits	Cut benefits		
	1269	989		
Treatment	Control	Objective	Inequality	Deficit
	558	575	565	560
Partisanship	Left	Right	Independent	Other
	617	675	920	46
Income	Low	Middle	High	
	637	1374	247	
Education	Not uni.	Uni		
	1242	1016		
Gender	Female	Male		
	1087	1171		
Political knowledge	0 q's correct	1 q correct	2 q's correct	3 q's correct
	69	459	1035	695
Age	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	45.68	15.43	18	91

Table 3. Regressions with interaction treatment × income.

	Model I	
	B	S.E.
Treatments (ref= control)		
Objective frame	-0.866*	0.272
Inequality frame	-0.647*	0.280
Deficit frame	-0.111	0.275
Income (ref= low)		
Middle	0.015	0.239
High	0.332	0.280
Treatment × Income		
Objective × middle	0.605	0.336
Objective × high	0.339	0.384
Inequality × middle	0.238	0.344
Inequality × high	0.171	0.396
Deficit × middle	-0.049	0.340
Deficit × high	0.130	0.394
University	-0.053	0.105

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

	Model 1	
	B	S.E.
Male	0.221*	0.103
Age	-0.010*	0.003
Partisanship (ref = left)		
Right	2.404*	0.163
Independent	1.028*	0.129
Other	0.916*	0.140
Political knowledge	0.009	0.056
Constant	-0.343	0.265
N	2258	
R2	0.114	

* $p < 0.05$.**Table 4.** Regressions with interaction treatment \times partisans.

	Model 2	
	B	SE
Treatments (ref = control)		
Objective frame	-0.430	0.262
Inequality frame	-0.829*	0.287
Deficit frame	-0.318	0.269
Income (ref = low)		
Middle	0.211	0.124
High	0.471*	0.146
Treatment \times partisanship		
Objective \times right	0.064	0.432
Objective \times ind.	-0.411	0.353
Objective \times other	0.333	0.380
Inequality \times right	1.008	0.454
Inequality \times ind.	0.133	0.379
Inequality \times other	0.499	0.401
Deficit \times right	0.859	0.481
Deficit \times ind.	0.004	0.364
Deficit \times other	0.377	0.384
University	-0.046	0.105
Male	0.227*	0.103
Age	-0.010*	0.003
Partisanship (ref = left)		
Right	1.933*	0.312
Independent	1.120*	0.256
Other	0.628*	0.267
Political knowledge	0.005	0.056
Constant	-0.347	0.262
N	2258	
R2	0.116	

* $p < 0.05$.