

Abstract

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Citizens in advanced industrial democracies frequently have personal experiences with public services and welfare state arrangements. They may have regular contact with public health care services, schools, public transportation, public libraries, and many other types of services. And at one life stage or another they may receive parts of their incomes in the form of pensions, student aid, unemployment insurance, and so on.

This study investigates the extent to which personal welfare state experiences affect general political orientations. What are the political effects when a person is discontent with some aspect of, say, the particular health services or the public kindergartens that she has been in personal contact with? Does she lose faith in the welfare state or in leftist ideas about large-scale state intervention in society? Does she take her negative experiences as a sign that the political system and its politicians are not functioning satisfactorily? Will her inclination to support the governing party drop?

Addressing these and other questions, this study develops a theoretical framework that incorporates insights from a multitude of research traditions, including research on voting behaviour, social psychology, rational choice theory, political psychology, and institutional theory. The framework is tested empirically using Swedish primary survey data collected under the auspices of the 1999 West Sweden SOM Survey, and the 1999 Swedish European Parliament Election Study.

The results indicate that personal welfare state experiences have substantively significant effects on political orientations. This is a somewhat different conclusion than the one found in much previous research – especially the “economic voting” literature. By and large, this research has reinforced the notion that *the personal is separate from the political*, in that it has usually found relatively weak statistical relationships between, on the one hand, political attitudes and behaviour, and personal economic hardship and personal unemployment on the other. Rather, the economic voting literature emphasises the political importance of mass media-driven “sociotropic perceptions” of societal events and trends, rather than personal experiences of events and trends.

Furthermore, personal welfare state experiences are not uni-dimensional events. Rather, the perspectives of self-interest, distributive justice, and voice opportunities all appear to capture different aspects of these experiences that are consequential for political orientations. Specifically, self-interest is influential mainly for political ideology, with those who gain personally from the welfare state being more likely to support state intervention and more likely to stand further to the left. In contrast, experienced distributive justice and experienced voice opportunities have an impact mainly on political trust, where those who have personally experienced injustice are less likely than others to be satisfied with the democratic system and to trust politicians. Finally, the effects of personal welfare state experiences appear systematically structured by “the institutional interface.” Customer institutions – where discretion is rare and exit-options frequent – are better at generating positive experiences, and in turn positive effects on welfare state support and political trust, than client institutions – where discretion is frequent and exit-options rare.

Key words: voting behaviour, public opinion, political behaviour, welfare state, institutional analysis, economic voting, personal experiences, social justice, self-interest, political trust, political ideology.

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