

## TWO OF A KIND? AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF ANTI-WELFARISM AND ECONOMIC EGALITARIANISM

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**Abstract** The literature on welfare state legitimacy generally views economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state as closely related phenomena that can be measured by means of scales that are considered highly interchangeable. This research note argues that economic egalitarianism does not necessarily coincide with support for the welfare state. Moreover, our findings point out that, especially among those with the lowest levels of education, economic egalitarianism is related to anti-welfarism—a highly critical view of the welfare state. Based on an analysis of recent Dutch representative survey data (2006), this article aims to find out whether there are in fact two ideological dimensions—support for the welfare state and economic egalitarianism. Moreover, it is shown that both dimensions can be explained differently. Although both ideological dimensions are rooted in economic security, support for the welfare state also is rooted in feelings of anomie.

The international research literature generally understands economic egalitarianism, the traditional leftist quest for economic equality and redistributive policies, and support for the welfare state as two closely related phenomena that can be measured by highly interchangeable scales. Jaeger (2008, p. 372), for instance, simply equates support for the welfare state with support for an economic egalitarian redistribution (see also Svallfors 1999; Linos and West 2003).

Yet, from the 1980s onward, new-rightist populist parties started to emerge all over Europe (Ignazi 1992, 2003; Veugeliers 2000; Achterberg 2006), and

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support for the welfare state and economic egalitarianism increasingly appeared to drift apart. Although some new-rightist populist parties originated as anti-tax parties (Andersen 1992), these parties do not necessarily reject economic redistribution (Betz 1994; Derks 2006). Offering harsh critiques, these parties do not portray the welfare state as an instrument aimed at helping poor people who “really” need it, but view it as an effort to provide well-paid and comfortable jobs to self-interested civil servants who cater to a class of “welfare scroungers” that freeloads on the hard work of the common man (Andersen 1992). Not unlike socialism in the past, then, new-rightist populist parties like the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, Front National and Vlaams Belang in Belgium, and Wilders’ Freedom Party in the Netherlands make a bid for the status of the true advocate of economic egalitarianism and the interests of the “common man” (Papadopoulos 2001; see also Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Betz 1994; Di Tella 1995; Mény and Surel 2000). In effect, these parties represent an ideological profile that strikingly contradicts the notion that economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state are basically two of a kind.

Not surprisingly, the constituencies of these parties can differ markedly from those who vote for mainstream rightist or conservative political parties. In contrast to right-wing parties’ electorates, voters for new-rightist parties tend to have working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds (Lubbers and Scheepers 2001; Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers 2002) and low levels of education in particular (Derks 2002, 2006; Houtman, Achterberg, and Derks 2008). They also tend to differ ideologically from the constituencies of mainstream rightist parties, displaying an aversion to the welfare state while endorsing economic equality and redistribution (Houtman, Achterberg, and Derks 2008). This suggests that, among the lower educated, economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state are two ideologically distinct phenomena.

Therefore, while economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state logically are argued to be two of a kind, we nevertheless expect that these two factors are largely unrelated (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, an abundance of research has shown that elites’ ideological orientations tend to merge into a one-dimensional space (Ladd and Lipset 1975; Lipset 1982; Middendorp 1991; Achterberg and Houtman 2009). These studies show that, among lower-educated citizens, ideological orientations are far less constrained. Following this literature, we expect that those who are lower educated are less likely than those who are higher educated to translate economic egalitarianism into support for the welfare state (Hypothesis 2).

If economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state are indeed two distinct phenomena, it is likely that these two can be explained differently. Regarding economic egalitarianism, economically insecure positions generally stimulate a preference for economic redistribution, while a preference for economic laissez-faire values stems from privileged class positions (Wright 1985; Marshall et al. 1988; Svallfors 1991; De Witte 1997; Houtman 2001, 2003; Van

Oorschot 2007). This is fully consistent with class theory, which maintains that values pertaining to an equitable distribution of wealth and income are a direct reflection of class-based economic interests (Lipset 1981; Clark 1996). The basic correctness of this assumption is also underscored by the fact that the working class has traditionally been the principal channel for socialism (e.g., Alford 1967; Clark and Lipset 1991; Nieuwebeerta 1996).

If this is the case, support for the welfare state might be driven by class-based economic interests as well. It is likely that it is, but it is equally likely that support for the welfare state, unlike economic egalitarianism, is simultaneously discouraged and undermined by another factor. As Smith (1987, p. 79) shows, the word “welfare” may refer to “a wasteful program that encourages sloth and sponging,” which causes support for welfare to decline. Anomic people, who do not trust society, its institutions, or its members, may well distrust an institution such as the welfare state, as it endorses laziness among beneficiaries (Sefton 2003). Anomic people also may dislike the welfare state, as it caters to less deserving people such as ethnic minorities (Van der Waal et al. 2010) or blacks (Gilens 1995; Goren 2008). Feelings of anomie have always been found among the lower educated, and this anomie underlies authoritarianism and ethnocentrism (e.g., Roberts and Rokeach 1956; Srole 1956; McDill 1961; Lutterman and Middleton 1970; Eisinga and Scheepers 1989; Elchardus and Smits 2002; Blank 2003; Derks 2006). So, while economic insecurity is likely to stimulate both economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state, we expect feelings of anomie to lead to less support for the welfare state (Hypothesis 3).

## Data and Measures

In order to test the hypotheses, we used data that were collected in November 2006 in the Netherlands. The data collection was done using Centerdata’s panel (University of Tilburg), which is representative of the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Using a simple random sample from the panel, out of a total of 2,682 individuals in the panel, 1,972 respondents completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 73 percent. A comparison with official statistics from Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) showed that older people, higher income groups, and higher educational groups were overrepresented in the sample, which we corrected using a weighting factor.<sup>2</sup>

1. Two-stage stratified sampling was applied. The first stage was a quasi-random selection of 42 municipalities by region and urbanization, and the second stage was a random selection from the population registry. A total of 4,876 people were initially selected, out of which 2,682 people responded, yielding a response rate of 55 percent for the panel.

2. Not weighing the data does not yield any substantially different results as the ones presented in this research note.

We measured *economic egalitarianism* with five Likert-type items used previously (Houtman 2003) and *anti-welfarism* with seven items that voice negative and critical opinions about the welfare state (see table 1 for the actual questions). In both cases, we used response categories ranging from “totally agree” (1) to “totally disagree” (5) and treated “don’t knows” as missing.

We measured *education* as the number of years needed to attain one’s highest level of education, running from primary education (8 years) through a university degree (18 years) ( $M = 14.22$ ;  $SD = 2.99$ ).

*Anomie* was measured by means of a slightly altered version of Srole’s (1956) widely used scale. We deleted one item about “the usefulness of writing public officials” from the original scale designed by Srole because it seemed to tap into political cynicism and not into general feelings of distrust in society, its institutions, and its members. Instead, we asked the first listed item below covering one’s general trust in people. We asked respondents the degree with which they agreed with four items, using response categories that ranged from “totally agree” (1) to “totally disagree” (5) and treating “don’t know” answers as missing: 1) These days a person doesn’t really know whom he can count on; 2) Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself; 3) In spite of what some people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse, not better; and 4) It’s hardly fair to bring children into the world, the way things look for the future. Factor analysis of the responses to these four items yielded a first factor with an eigenvalue of 2.17, explaining 54 percent of the common variance. We therefore constructed a scale for anomie by standardizing and summing the items with higher scores indicating greater anomie ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

*Economic insecurity* was measured with three questions. First, we asked respondents whether or not it was hard to manage their household on the available household income. Response categories range from “very hard” (1) to “very easy” (6). Second, respondents were asked whether or not they were unemployed at the moment of the interview (“not unemployed” (1); “partially unemployed” (2); or “totally unemployed” (3)). Third, respondents were asked into which of four categories their monthly net household income fell: 1) €2,601 or more; 2) €1,801 to €2,600; 3) €1,151 to €1,800; and 4) €1,150 or less. Factor analysis of the three questions yielded a first factor with an eigenvalue of 1.57, explaining about 52 percent of the variance. The reliability of the resulting scale ( $\alpha = 0.55$ ) was modest, but given the limited number of items and its high face validity, we nevertheless standardized the three items and added them up. Higher scale scores indicate more economic insecurity.

Because ample research has shown that the young are less supportive of the welfare state and less economically egalitarian (e.g., Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003), we add age—measured in years—as a control variable. Also, since females are more supportive of the welfare state and economic egalitarian policies (Svallfors 1999; Edlund 2003) and less attracted to neo-populist

movements propagating harsh critiques on the welfare state (Norris 2005, p. 145), we add gender (females coded high) as a control variable.

## Results

To test the first hypothesis, we used confirmatory factor analysis to estimate two factor models—a first that allows for just one and a second that allows for two factors (table 1). Although the factor loadings for economic egalitarianism tend to be somewhat lower than those for anti-welfarism, the first model demonstrates that anti-welfarism (the lower seven items) goes together reasonably well with anti-egalitarianism (the first five items). Nonetheless, the second model, based on the assumption that two dimensions are needed to represent the data, fits the data much better. Although we lose twelve additional degrees of freedom in estimating the latter model, it results in a much smaller chi-square. Also, factor loadings for items tapping into anti-egalitarianism or anti-welfarism are higher in the two-dimensional model. This means that, among the public at large, economic egalitarianism and anti-welfarism constitute largely unrelated phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Two reliable scales (each with an alpha of .78) were construed: one measuring support for economic egalitarianism and one measuring anti-welfarism.

According to Hypothesis 2, less-educated citizens do not translate their economic egalitarianism into support for the welfare state, while the higher educated do. Supporting this hypothesis, figure 1 demonstrates just how large the differences are: While the relationship between the two is not significant among those with no more than primary education, its strength increases with level of education and is more sizable ( $-0.52$ ) among those with a university degree.<sup>4</sup>

The final question is whether anomie reduces support for the welfare state without undermining economic egalitarianism, as Hypothesis 3 predicts. To test this hypothesis, we estimated two regression equations, predicting economic egalitarianism and anti-welfarism from gender, age, education, anomie, and economic insecurity. Table 2 confirms that, on the one hand, economic insecurity produces both economic egalitarianism and support for the welfare state. On the other hand, anomie increases economic egalitarianism, yet decreases support for the welfare state. Anti-welfarism, in other words, is rooted not only in the secure economic positions that are more typical of the more educated than the less educated,<sup>5</sup> but also—and more strongly so—in feelings of anomie that are typical of the lower educated. Hypothesis 3 can therefore also be accepted.

3. See the appendix for the covariance matrix for the indicators in the confirmatory factor analysis.

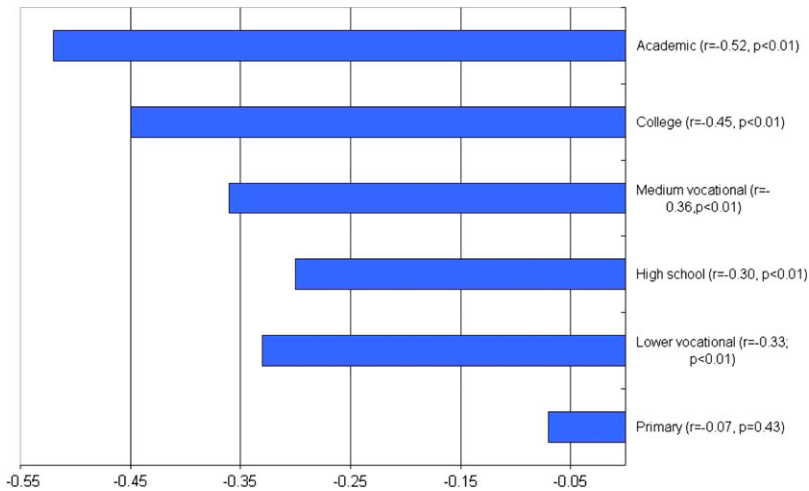
4. Tested in another way—with an ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis, not shown here—as an interaction effect between education (measured in years of schooling) and economic egalitarianism, the same conclusion can be drawn: The strength of the relationship between economic egalitarianism and anti-welfarism increases with education.

5. The correlation between anomie and education is  $0.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 1. Dimensionality of Economic Egalitarianism (Ega) and Anti-Welfarism (Aw)**

Likert items	Mean	Standard deviation	One-dimensional model	Two-dimensional model	
Ega 1 The state should raise social benefits.	3.00	1.03	-0.56	-0.31	0.54
Ega 2 There is no longer any real poverty in the Netherlands.	3.72	1.10	0.45	—	-0.46
Ega 3 Large income differences are unfair because everyone is essentially equal.	3.18	1.18	-0.52	—	0.80
Ega 4 The state should intervene to reduce income differences.	3.37	1.16	-0.52	—	0.90
Ega 5 Companies should be obliged to allow their employees to share in the profits.	3.51	1.07	-0.45	—	0.50
Aw1 The welfare state makes people lazy.	3.16	1.11	0.74	0.78	—
Aw2 The welfare state worsens the position of the Netherlands in relation to the other countries.	2.81	1.05	0.67	0.71	—
Aw3 Because of the welfare state, people no longer take care of themselves.	3.45	0.95	0.73	0.77	—
Aw4 Because of the welfare state, labor costs are becoming too high.	3.11	1.09	0.67	0.72	—
Aw5 Because of the welfare state, people don't take care of each other anymore.	3.13	0.99	0.63	0.71	—
Aw6 The welfare state causes economic recession.	3.00	1.08	0.57	0.63	—
Aw7 Because of the welfare state, unemployment rates are rising.	3.80	0.99	0.62	0.64	—
Eigenvalue			4.69	3.70	2.32
R <sup>2</sup>			0.39	0.31	0.19
Chi <sup>2</sup>			829.96	317.78	
Δdf			—	12	
Cronbach's $\alpha$				0.78	0.78

NOTE.—Confirmatory factor analysis, generalized least squares, Varimax-rotation in the two-dimensional model, factor loadings < 0.25 not shown,  $N = 1,773$ .



**Figure 1. The Correlation Between Economic Egalitarianism and Anti-Welfarism by Education** (Pearson's  $r$  graphically shown,  $N = 1,768$ ).

## Conclusion

Our findings point out that it is a mistake to take economic egalitarianism as an indicator for support for the welfare state. Our factor analyses clearly produced two separate factors, and while anti-welfarism and economic egalitarianism are strongly and negatively related among the well educated, they are not related at all among those with the lowest levels of education. These citizens apparently do not translate their preference for economic redistributive policies into a more positive stance toward the welfare state. Also, the explanation of both dimensions differs markedly. Although both ideological dimensions are rooted in economic security, anti-welfarism is also rooted in feelings of anomie (see also Smith 1987). As anomie, which is prevalent among the lower educated, effectively wipes out support for the welfare state, lower-educated people might prefer to vote for anti-institutionalist neo-right-wing parties attacking the welfare state. They would do so even though they still endorse economic egalitarian policies. Future research should shed light on the electoral consequences of these findings.

Although our results concern the Dutch situation, and results similar to ours have been obtained for Belgium (Houtman, Achterberg, and Derks 2008), this still needs to be established in future research covering other western countries. It is likely that the relationship between support for the welfare state and economic egalitarianism among the lower educated has been stronger in the past. After all, the rise of new-rightist populism since the 1980s is part of a new political culture in which cultural issues pertaining to immigration,

**Table 2. Economic Egalitarianism and Anti-Welfarism Explained from Education, Anomie, and Economic Insecurity**

Independent variables	Economic egalitarianism				Anti-welfarism			
	B (s.e.)	Beta (p)	B (s.e.)	Beta (p)	B (s.e.)	Beta (p)	B (s.e.)	Beta (p)
Education	-0.05 (0.01)	-0.18**	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.05	-0.03 (0.01)	-0.11**	-0.03 (0.01)	-0.10**
Anomie	—	—	0.05 (0.03)	0.04	—	—	0.37 (0.02)	0.36**
Economic insecurity	—	—	0.64 (0.03)	0.51**	—	—	-0.32 (0.03)	-0.27**
Gender (= female)	0.16 (0.04)	0.10**	0.00 (0.00)	-0.05	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01	0.07 (0.04)	0.04
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.06**	0.03 (0.02)	0.02	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.06*	0.00 (0.00)	0.01
$R^2$ (adjusted)	0.05		0.28		0.01		0.16	
N	1,722				1,708			

NOTE.—OLS multiple regression analysis, method = ENTER, \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .



multiculturalism, crime-fighting, and the like have moved to center stage (Rempel and Clark 1997; Clark 2001; Hechter 2004). The debate about the welfare state has been affected by “culturalization of politics” and has become waged in terms of moral notions of deservingness (Van Oorschot 2007; Houtman, Achterberg, and Derks 2008) and of ethnicity (Goren 2008; Van der Waal et al. 2010). This process of political-cultural change demands a more careful distinction by social scientists involved in empirical research between support for the welfare state and economic egalitarianism than has been customary in the past.

## Appendix

**Table A. Covariance Matrix for the Twelve Items Used to Measure Economic Egalitarianism (Ega1–Ega5) and Anti-Welfarism (Aw1–Aw7)**

	Ega1	Ega2	Ega3	Ega4	Ega5	Aw1	Aw2	Aw3	Aw4	Aw5	Aw6	Aw7
Ega1	1.02											
Ega2	-0.49	1.24										
Ega3	0.53	-0.48	1.46									
Ega4	0.60	-0.57	1.05	1.46								
Ega5	0.32	-0.26	0.49	0.54	1.14							
Aw1	-0.44	0.33	-0.29	-0.28	-0.15	1.21						
Aw2	-0.31	0.27	-0.24	-0.27	-0.11	0.68	1.11					
Aw3	-0.41	0.40	-0.27	-0.29	-0.13	0.82	0.59	1.22				
Aw4	-0.29	0.26	-0.19	-0.20	-0.08	0.62	0.65	0.62	1.00			
Aw5	-0.30	0.25	-0.20	-0.19	-0.11	0.72	0.58	0.73	0.59	1.20		
Aw6	-0.20	0.18	-0.16	-0.16	-0.08	0.41	0.44	0.43	0.41	0.40	0.76	
Aw7	-0.34	0.25	-0.24	-0.24	-0.12	0.58	0.52	0.56	0.48	0.51	0.52	1.02

NOTE.—See table 1 for item wording.

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